Inter-textual Indirection in *Heartbreak House*:
Disregarded Roundabouts and Failed Provocations
Abstract

L'utilisation étendue des allusions dans *Heartbreak House* de Bernard Shaw caractérise cette pièce par rapport aux autres œuvres de l'auteur. Les allusions, du second niveau de lecture, donnent à cette pièce cohérence et unité. À partir de la théorie poststructuraliste de Barthes, l'approche cherche par quels mécanismes Shaw insère dans le texte divers plans de signification. Après une brève revue de la réception générale et de la critique, l'analyse procède par l'examen d'allusions implicites référant à Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll et Sébastian Brandt. Ensuite, l'examen se tourne vers les allusions inconnues référant aux œuvres d'Oscar Wilde, de Thomas Carlyle, de Samuel Taylor Coleridge, de Walt Whitman, de Joseph Conrad, et de H. G. Wells. Finalement, l'analyse examine le décor en tant que symbole et allusion, fournissant une clef à la compréhension complète de l'œuvre.
Abstract

Shaw’s extensive use of allusion in *Heartbreak House* is arguably what distinguishes this play from most of his other works. They supply both coherence and unity to a play that many have seen as disjointed and rambling. Grounded by Barthes’s post-structuralist theory, I examine Shaw’s extended and repetitive use of literary allusions which allows for greater possibilities in how these texts are read and understood. After providing an analytical history of the general and critical reception of the play, I re-examine some of the allusions to Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll and Sebastian Brandt. Having established the precedent for this type of reading to *Heartbreak House*, I scrutinize heretofore undiscovered allusions to Oscar Wilde, Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walt Whitman, Joseph Conrad, and H. G. Wells. In the final chapter, I examine how the set as symbol and allusion supply an essential key in understanding this play.
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Introduction

“It is quite true that my plays are all talk, just as Raphael’s pictures are all paint, Michael Angelo’s statues are all marble, Beethoven’s symphonies are all noise . . . It is never safe to take my plays at their suburban face value: it ends in your finding in them only what you bring to them, and so getting nothing for your money.” (qtd. in Shaw and Weintraub Shaw: An Autobiography 147).

The implicit potential for multiple readings in any text is arguably what distinguishes ‘good’ literature from bad, something which neither denies authorial intent any more than it would diminish any inherent didactic purpose. It does allow, however, a text to exist independently of both the author’s intentions and purpose, enabling it to subsist within and without its own particular historical and cultural context. Heartbreak House immediately confronts its readers by an inherent promise to be more than simply another polemic. When allowed to do so, this play easily demonstrates its potential to speak beyond the confines of its world and a particular point of view and to converse with critical ideas both of its time and of today. It is something that is often tangential to what is actually said since this play’s potential lies in the readers recognizing and understanding the author’s challenge to look beyond any “suburban face value”, those obvious preconceived ideas about the author and his usual subject matter.

Truly, there is more here than meets the eye and it is Nurse Guinness who leads the way by claiming that “this house is full of surprises for them that don’t know our ways” (Shaw HH 51). Indeed, Heartbreak House is full of surprises; it is a densely woven tapestry of intertextuality and symbolism, more often than not disregarded in favour of a more traditional, Shavian ‘didactic’ interpretation. It is a play that leaves many first-time readers confused and perplexed when they fall short in taking up its particular taunt to go beyond the obvious. Undoubtedly it is such a failure to perceive that which lies hidden that prompted the London Times reviewer of 1921 to describe the play as a series of Shavian “crochets about love, crochets about capitalism, crochets about the cosmos [and] crochets about playwriting” all disguised as “rambling conversations” (“HH Mr. Shaw’s Play”). This is typical of the failure to recognize the play as something more than the usual Shaw. It is a challenge that few have taken up, leaving a lacuna in the literature and a welter of disjointed interpretations that have further obscured the play.
This play requires a systemic decoding, an analysis of the allusions and the symbolism as a coherent, interconnected whole uniting that which some critics have seen as disjointed and anarchic. Its scope extends beyond the typical Shavian dialectic, for with this play not only does Shaw attempt to gather and to clarify some of the ideas found in his previous plays, those Shavian "crochets" that exasperated the *Times*’ reviewer, he also endeavours to demonstrate possible consequences of failing to heed his warnings. The extensive use of allusions allows *Heartbreak House* to encompass more than the politics, economics, or inequalities of a pampered leisure class; it is arguably what distinguishes this play from most of his other works. Not only do the allusions support the central idea of a floundering ship of state, a world lost and without direction, they also provide a unity to the play of which plot and characterization have seemingly fallen short. The allusions help to transform this play into a metonym of a modern world equally lost and without direction and hence, create the imperative to respond to Shaw’s challenge, to go beyond the obvious and to “find the man under the pose” (Shaw *HH* 133), to bring to light as many of the allusions and symbols as possible.

While there has been some movement towards acknowledging the play’s overt references, initially by Frederick P. W. McDowell and more recently by A. M. Gibbs, the approach has been piecemeal, leaving an incomplete systemic analysis. The predisposition for the presence of the allusions in the play is usually perceived as surrogated naturalist elements lending authenticity to the play, a sort of continuation of Shaw’s perceived appropriation of Ibsen’s naturalist style. A case in point would be the set: a literal representation of a ship whose function is symbolic. While attributing their origins to different personal events of Shaw’s life – his acquaintances or friends, eloquent historical events, the minutiae of his everyday life – may lend them certain genuineness, it falls short of explaining their importance and abundance. Additionally, because they supposedly mirror ‘the real’, readers tend to accept them as such which further denies their power to create meaning. Exemplifying this is the infamous Zeppelin crash near Shaw’s home, a well-documented incident that obviously affected Shaw, as attested by his personal correspondence on the subject. While the crash has been used to explain the Zeppelin’s abrupt intrusion at the end of the play, and incidentally the War’s only actual infringement on the play, this sort of rationalization has had the effect of inadequately explaining the
import of a symbol which mirrors, with great fidelity, an actual event. Like the set, the Zeppelin needs to be adequately placed within the play's much larger symbolic universe.

Some critics (Nathan, Edgecombe, and Gahan) have started exploring some of the explicit allusions to works by authors such as Chekhov, Shakespeare, Dickens, Verdi, and Wagner. However, these remain limited to references explicitly recognized and stated by Shaw, directly acknowledged in the text of *Heartbreak House*, in its preface, or in his subsequent comments about the play. Few have gone beyond the explicit, which has left many of the implicit allusions overlooked. Critics such as James Woodfield and Sally Peters Vogt have probed deeper into the text, shedding light on other possible references to authors such as Lewis Carroll and Sebastian Brandt, and have thereby demonstrated that even though Shaw may never have mentioned an explicit connection with these works, it convincingly exists.

What follows is a look beyond those explicit allusions that have traditionally been the focus of critical studies of the play's intertextuality. It is an examination of how readers can refocus on the implicit allusions, those that have either been seen as curious asides or quite simply ignored and not considered integral to the play's core themes, to find new readings which refute the claims of disjointedness. When doing this, readers are quickly confronted with allusions to Shaw's contemporaries such as Wells, Conrad, Eliot, Carroll, Whitman, Wilde, and Kipling; to satirists and social commentators of preceding centuries, such as Coleridge, Shelly, and Blake; to Medieval and Renaissance writers such as Petrarch, Brandt, and Dante; and to Greek and Roman classical texts.

It is not my intent here to examine all of the allusions but to scrutinize certain of the more obvious implicit extended allusions. In the course of this thesis I will reassess several of the explicit allusions, notably to Shakespeare's *Othello*, in order to demonstrate that there are different ways to read these references. In addition, I will look at some of the more obvious implicit allusions to eventually branch off to allusions that have heretofore not been analysed. The final section of this thesis is devoted to a discussion of that important ship symbol which frames the play, exploring its import to the play's conceit as being much more than that of an anecdote or a weak attempt at drawing the play's discussions to a close.
As so clearly stated by Shaw in his preface to the play, *Heartbreak House* is a fantasia, something that the OED defines as “a free form based on some well known tunes” ("Fantasia, n" 554). Not merely an extended metaphor, it is the manner in which Shaw presents his argument. These tunes, or allusions, are introduced, appropriated, rephrased and developed finally to resolve into a coherent whole. Their familiarity evokes perspective while their reworking destabilizes an accepted understanding. By examining some of the better known ‘melodies’ and by discovering Shaw’s reworking of their themes, readers penetrate the text from new perspectives influenced by their own readings of both texts, which in turn allows the text to speak beyond only what is written in the text itself.

Shaw’s symbols and allusions seek to evoke a certain state of mind; they give depth to the play by evoking shared ideas found in a common body of literary experiences. With *Heartbreak House*, Shaw does not necessarily abandon the naturalism and realism inspired by Ibsen and to some degree Chekhov; they have, however, become elements, or if one prefers, melodies, to be reworked into something new. Shaw, with *Heartbreak House*, pulls together these evoked images formed of abstract ideas which he develops in turn into larger themes from a new perspective. With its form, language, and themes, *Heartbreak House* also establishes a sort of thematic kinship with works by Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and Joyce. The discussions in this play go beyond simple economics and Edwardian morality to examine alienation, disillusionment, despair, the embodiment of reality, and a lack of purpose to name but a few.

That this play echoes other literary works is generally known; what has yet to be examined is the pervasiveness of these other texts. In fact, the allusions form a conceit: Shaw’s attempted cleverness or even inspired deception through the use of “implicit references . . . to another work of literature or art, to a person or an event” (Cuddon 27). The result has been the creation of an overriding concept or thought which is sustained by “an elaborate figurative device . . . incorporate[ing] metaphor, simile, hyperbole or oxymoron and which is intended to surprise and delight by its wit and ingenuity” (165). Through a shared literary experience, allusions appeal to the reader to enrich and extend a work through the invocation of a body of common knowledge and by creating links to an
overriding concept. What for some may appear at first glance as disconnected and disparate are in fact linked through this conceit to form a coherent argument.

In order for this device to be successful, the conditional nature of allusions necessitates that the reader/audience be able to recognize and appreciate the references. Decoding these evoked images requires an “astute reader”, one who penetrates the text and who recognizes the allusions for what they are: referents with the potential to create meaning. Allan H. Pasco argues in Allusion: A Literary Graft that such an astute reader understands that the signs and symbols of the written word are converted into conceptual mental images “with a history, context, colour, depth, direction, weight, and velocity” of their own and unique to the individual reader.

The intent here is to become one of Shaw’s astute readers, one who not only understands and appreciates the parody, but who also recognizes that there is more here than simple, comic, drawing room banter or reflected Wildean epigrams; the allusions are an elaborate sustained figurative device that form his conceit and create a unity within the text. Such recognition engages readers to take up the author’s challenge and to play his game, seeking beyond the perceived realism to find the potential meanings that were left between the lines.

In our attempt to accomplish this, the play will be examined through two different lenses: theoretical and cultural. The first of these highlights how a text, through its manipulation of intertextuality, creates meanings often not intended by the author. The second lens serves to identify and decode many of the numerous allusions and symbols that populate Heartbreak House. In order to accomplish this, a common body of literary experiences will be mined for meaning to the references and the symbols used by Shaw. Setting the parameters of said experience will be established with the help of several sources: academic writings on both Shaw and the play, and what Shaw himself wrote not only about the play but about other concerns as well. Finally, as an attempt to become one of Shaw’s astute readers and borrowing Barthes’s metaphor of the soothsayer tracing an

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1 For the purpose of abridging this text the term “astute reader”, in many cases, will be shortened to “reader”.
imaginary rectangle in the sky in order to better consult the phenomena being examined, my own personal literary experiences will serve to delimit this rectangle, those zones of reading allowing for further elucidation of *Heartbreak House*: the allusions.

Unquestionably, these are the places in the text which either explicitly or implicitly echo other texts, forming a sort of ongoing literary conversation. While they may seem arbitrary and artificial, it is from within these delimitations, this imaginary rectangle, that pluralities and potentialities of this play appear for this particular reader. They are the portals, those places within the text where readers can “bring into the world something which has never existed at any other time or place before” (Iser *Reading* 18), allowing readers to take the text from “what it means to what it does” (Iser *Theory* 60). *Heartbreak House*’s intertextuality, those extended allusions that form the allusive conceit, invites precisely this type of reading because they rely heavily on a reader’s ability to piece together that which is missing, a form of continual re-writing of the text based on readers’ understandings of the referents.

Because this thesis specifically examines the allusions in *Heartbreak House* and their ability to open up the text, the focus has been adjusted through two theoretical lenses: Barthes’s notion of the writerly text and the implied or ideal reader of both Fish and Iser. *Heartbreak House* will be examined as a living text, a text that is still capable of producing meanings that are not limited by or to authorial intentions, but augmented by a reader’s reactions to the text through Shaw’s use of allusion. This theoretical basis demonstrates how readers produce meaning with the clues and keys that the author codified within the text, either consciously or not. This codification of texts leads readers to the potential pluralities inherent in texts such as *Heartbreak House*, one that Barthes would have identified as “writerly”. Indeed, he argues that the imposition of meaning closes a text off from discourse and places it outside that infinite network which is the grand narrative of humanity, an ongoing literary conversation. By imposing a singular system, a truth on a text, we stop the text from producing meaning or, in Barthes’s words, it becomes a

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2 For Jauss, Fish, and Iser, the astute reader would be known also as the implied or informed reader. In this document we will include all of them in the term reader.
“product without production” (S/Z 5), a readerly text. It is our intention to open up the
discourse, to explore both explicit and implicit allusions for coherence and unity through
what Barthes termed the semic, cultural, and symbolic codes by which readers are able to
“establish permutable, reversible connections, outside the constraints of time” (S/Z 30).

Examining Heartbreak House through Barthes’s symbolic and referential codes
allows readers to contravene the rigidity implied by authorial intent, hence the opening of
this play’s text to new possibilities of telling. Heartbreak House’s meaning can never be
finite; it alters constantly with the contribution of each reader’s understanding of the
allusions. To imply irrevocability to the text entails an authorial control over all possible
readings of the play’s symbolic and metaphoric language, a reductionism contrary to
accepted usage of said language. Truly didactic art, allowing little space for discovery
beyond the author’s stated parameters, tells his intended message. While Shaw is perhaps
notorious for his claim to being didactic, it is not something that he demonstrates,
disregarding the preface, with Heartbreak House; there is more of the suggesting here than
of the telling.

When we remove the author and his intentions from our reading of a text, we as
readers are forced to look beyond the apparent, to find meaning, unity and coherence not
only within the dimensions of the text itself but equally from within the multi-dimensional
union found between the reader’s and writer’s cultural references. In “The Death of the
Author” Barthes argues that this is precisely what makes literature “truly revolutionary
since to refuse to fix meaning is . . . to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science,
law” (Barthes Image, Music, Text 147). It is precisely this sort of refusal of an imposed
absolute that obliges readers to become free-thinkers and to find within themselves possible
explanations and ultimately, is this not the role of any good didactic, to show the
possibilities?

The cultural lens targets a common cultural canon of works assumedly recognizable
to an author’s audience on some level, the point of union between reader and author, the
point where unity and coherence can be found. To illustrate this point, Barthes uses the
image of a soothsayer who, according to certain principles, draws an imaginary rectangle
around a set of common cultural artefacts in order to observe “the migration of meanings,
the outcropping of codes, the passage of citations” (S/Z 14). It is a manner of delimiting the extent and impact of the possibilities of opening a text to pluralities of meaning. For example, with allusions, the more obscure the cultural reference the less likely it would be recognized, thereby diminishing its potential impact; however, its corollary is equally true. This creates a potential problem in finding coherence; readers must possess sufficient understanding of the literary culture into which the play was written in order to make the implied connections and to actively engage with the work. Pasco claims this is essential for an “allusion must be perceived; its metaphorical terms must be united in the mind of the reader. An allusion that is not recognized does not function” (18). The import of the allusions also relies on their repetitions; insistence by the author through different allusions to the same cultural artefact/idea increases their unifying importance in the overall structure.

The allusions themselves do not impose meaning; they suggest coherence, a way of fitting all the disjointed conversations together. The difficulty lies in perceiving how they engage to form a unity and continuity of thought and argument. This is what I propose to do in the following chapters: examine how the allusions interconnect and converse without imposing a fixed truth, that one right interpretation or reading of this equivocal text.

Chapter One lays a theoretical framework for the argument. Initially the discussion demonstrates Shaw’s viewpoint of playwriting and the theatre as a propitious environment for effecting social progress. Subsequently, a brief analysis of the distinction between allusion and plagiarism will be expounded upon to examine more specifically how, in fact, these are were closely related. The interest here lies in the implicit need for authors to improve on the borrowings, integrating them stylistically into their own work and how such integration creates a difficulty in perceiving and understanding the nature of an allusion that has been so incorporated. This chapter closes with an exploration of how Iser’s notions of the double reality of readers/authors, along with Barthes’s ideas on symbolic and cultural referents, facilitate our discernment of the allusions found in a text and hence our ability to create meaning from these referents.

In Chapter Two, Heartbreak House’s initial and subsequent critical reception will be examined. While it spans from the first reviews in both the New York and London
papers to recent publications, it remains focused on those aspects that deal with how the play has been read, more specifically maintaining a focus on the allusions. This inspection looks initially at the explicit allusions that Shaw himself mentions, either in his writings about the play or in the play itself, and how, for the most part, these have been tied back to biographical referents. Following this, our study proceeds by exploring what critics have thus far written about the implicit allusions.

In Chapter Three it is to the implicit allusions heretofore undiscussed that this thesis's focus turns. It is within this chapter that my particular rectangle is being drawn around the allusions to Oscar Wilde, Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walt Whitman, Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells, and Lena Ford. In addition to this, the explicit reference to Othello will be re-examined from within the proposed theoretical focus in order to demonstrate how further understandings can be extracted from a seemingly obvious and limited allusion.

Chapter Four considers the symbolic value of the two ships that frame the play's narrative as something more than a mirror of reality: they are symbolic elements that lend much in establishing coherence for Shaw's argument. Their symbolic importance issues from their ability to represent a verisimilous reality while suggesting more than the obvious. They allow the playwright to anchor his allegory in a recognizable reality. In order to do this, let us first explore theoretically how these different devices can come together to create a unity that has often been seen as lacking.
Chapter One

Making Sense out of Confusion: Some Thoughts on How to Read *Heartbreak House*

Misdirection in *Heartbreak House* starts with the opening lines of the preface wherein Shaw states that “when the play was begun not a shot had been fired; and only the professional diplomats and the very few amateurs whose hobby is foreign policy even knew that the guns were loaded” (*HH* 7). This statement appropriately sets the tone for what is to follow, and while for many this has provoked a discussion over the actual date of setting pen to paper, its purpose is quite another. It is certainly indicative of the type of misdirection that is to be found throughout the play, for instead of pointing readers towards a precise date of conception, it is more of a confirmation that the genesis of art is not to be and cannot be pinpointed. I would argue that it is a further confirmation of an aesthetic principle: a work of genius is the fruition of a cognitive effort with neither a precise timetable nor identifiable instant of conception. It unquestionably sets a fitting tone for the rest of the preface and play for it indicates to its readers to take nothing at face value.

These opening lines from the play’s preface stress that readers should “never trust the artist [but] trust the tale” (Lawrence 2), and as such are a pertinent prescription for a play such as *Heartbreak House*. Trusting the tale requires the ability to not only read what is written, but what has been purposely left out: to transcend the explicit in recognizing and in deciphering the implicit. This is very much what Shaw requires of his readers in this play. Following his instructions can be disconcerting, for readers are being asked to judge the text “in the light of what is absent” (Iser Theory 61), not only on the printed words.

Truly didactic art requires a necessary transparency in order for its readers to perceive the author’s intentions while allowing for self-discovery. When one teaches, for this is what to be didactic is, one shows the possibilities by way of informing without establishing an absolute. Furthermore, dissension and discussion are encouraged as ways of progressing towards a greater understanding of any given problem requiring resolution. However, and over time, the term ‘didactic’ has taken on more pejorative connotations of sermonizing, moralizing or sententiousness, and is often used to describe texts that are “overburdened with instructive or factual matter to the exclusion of graceful and pleasing
detail so that they are pompously dull and erudite” (“Didactic” Encyclopedia Britannica). Mistakenly or not, these types of texts tend to be taken at face value with little possibility, if any, of allowing for self-discovery. The text becomes an absolute. Unlike propaganda, didactic art does not require that readers accept prima facie the experts’, or the author’s, normative description – that trusting of the artist to the exclusion of the tale. Such conformity is an anathema to a free thinker or, for that matter, to anyone who believes that the discovery of truths comes through the individual’s understandings of a text’s inherent ambiguities, not through the imposition of one truth.

Trusting in only the author limits the potential interpretations to those that are explicitly stated, to that which has been written from within the confines of the author’s understanding at the moment of writing. The text becomes enclosed in a hermeneutic code knowable exclusively to the author at the instant of writing and denies any possibility of change. However, trusting the tale allows it to speak beyond these explicit confines, opening the text to new readings which are bounded by the tale, by each reader’s appropriation of the tale, and, in the case of highly intertextualized texts, by its conversation with other texts. While the former closes down the tale, the latter opens it up. Readers may share similar backgrounds but no two people would ever be identical nor would any two approach the text in a purely identical manner, which leaves the potential for an infinite number of readings. Even the author’s own interpretation of the text cannot be forcibly limited to that of its moment of conception for this denies the author the ability to reinterpret the same text, unless one accepts the idea that the author’s ideas and viewpoints are immutable over time. Disallowing the multiplicity of readings asserts an absolute and repudiates a fundamental force of humanity: the tension between the forces of change and the maintenance of the status quo which forces us to constantly evolve.

Calling on the author to explain his text certainly facilitates comprehension; however, the intrinsic danger lies in unknowingly restricting the text to this single ‘correct’ interpretation. This is an absolutist ideal, the imposition of an individual correct reading over the many different readings of individual readers. In other words, it is propaganda, the
dissemination of selected information promoting a particular viewpoint. It is the cult of the author par excellence wherein only the author can know the truth of what he/she has written, presupposing that there is only one truth. It implies that the closer the association between an author's writing and the general perception of reality, that which they see as 'fact', the more 'authentic' the author is. It is a form of reductionism of the human experience and perception to verifiable 'facts' issuing from overgeneralizations about the nature of truth. The problem is, however, that one cannot substantiate a “moral fact” or its corollary, a “moral truth”. To do so presupposes that morality exists independently of and is not subject to the human experience. Moreover, it assumes that both fact and truth, in their application to humanity, can exist, implying a fixity that is contrary to the inevitability of change, a most fundamental of human characteristics.

This examination of *Heartbreak House* is not a quest for the truth, for a definitive reading, but an examination of how the specific use of a literary device allows an author to create ambiguity that results in the potential for multiple readings. In turn, these allow for the coexistence of multiple truths tangential to authorial dictates of meaning, yet all coherently sustainable through and by the tale. Furthermore, drawing on Barthes's notion of the writerly text and the implied or theoretical ideal reader of Fish and Iser, this consideration of *Heartbreak House* demonstrates how a text, through its subversive use of intertextuality, has the potential to create variant meanings, possibly neither intended nor thought of by the author.

These particular theoretical bases validate the production of meaning from within a text, via the specific keys, those intertexts encoded by the author. As readers, we should take on the role of co-creators of meaning in opening the text to new perspectives, to new possibilities of retelling and insight. Probing *Heartbreak House* as a dynamic, living text, one that is still capable of producing meanings, allows it to speak, as not only a text limited to the confines of a particular period or of a particular authorial intention, but equally as a trans-historical and trans-contextual text that remains pertinent.

3 The OED defines 'propaganda' as "the systematic dissemination of doctrine, rumour, or selected information to propagate or promote a particular doctrine, view, practice, etc." which by its nature implies an insistence on absolutes leaving no room for interpretation.
Shaw and Playwriting

Unlike some of Shaw’s previous works, with *Heartbreak House* there is more of the suggesting than of the telling. It is a divergence in style that at first read is disconcerting, and while appearing to confirm the generally accepted public persona of Shaw as a sermonizing, moralizing, sententious didactic, it in fact takes great effort to do the opposite. It is a play that attempts to inform, to show how and why society has arrived at its current situation. Furthermore, the play goes further than some of his previous plays in exploring his theories on playwriting and theatre’s function within society.

In an 1896 review of the play *Donna Diana*, Shaw, alluding to the story of Alnaschar, states that “everybody knows perfectly well that the function of the theatre is to realize for the spectators certain pictures which their imagination craves. [N]ature is only brought in as an accomplice in the illusion” (*Shaw on Shakespeare* 261). The theatre is not to mirror reality; it should provide a surrogate, however unattainable it may seem. It is an alternative that spectators need to discover through their own interaction with the play. Theatre which allows for this, which mimics reality while providing a replacement, becomes the higher theatrical form. It is within this form, which Shaw called the ‘tragi-comedy’, that those downfalls which “are not soul-purifying convulsions of pity and horror, but reproaches, challenges criticisms addressed to society” (254) can be examined. Shaw explains this idea of the ‘tragi-comedy’ as the “tragedy with scraps of fun in it . . . a comedy without mirth in it” (252), something that is “neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring” (253). The fantasy or fantasia that is *Heartbreak House* does precisely this; it replaces the expected comedy of manners by a tragedy without tragedy’s “weak spot”, the irritating and uninteresting accident, those convulsions of horror and pity, while maintaining comedy’s strength, the ability to laugh at a recognizable self.

Shaw continues this argument in “The Quintessence of Ibsenism” where he states that the way to effect social progress is by “replacing old institutions with new ones” (17), by repudiating and denouncing that which has been outgrown, an outdated class system for example, and by proposing a replacement. Accordingly, what better way to accomplish this
than on stage, as an idea, where the old can be demolished and its replacement proposed through animated discussions? This, according to Shaw, is Ibsen’s strength. This idea of realism and naturalism, presenting humanity with all of its foibles, becomes the starting point for any of Shaw’s arguments. The intent, however, as can be seen with *Heartbreak House*, was never to portray any class or specific group of people accurately, but to use recognizable portrayals as an opportunity to instigate the discussion; after all, the debate is the thing. The verisimilitude of the portrayal merely requires probable identification to be effective whereas the debate’s efficacy lies in how close to home it hits. Shaw’s previous plays showed a reality, one that was perhaps too easily dissimulated behind Wildean epigrammatic comedy and too easily dismissed. With *Heartbreak House* the attempts to portray that “intellectual and moral complacency” (“Quintessence” 126) that he perceived as leading inevitably to the War and its aftermath struck a raw nerve with many early critics.

It is complicated to separate Shaw from his origins in the theatre as a critic, more specifically from his early writings on the functions of theatre to instruct and to entertain, the purpose of didactic art. This split is doubly complicated in light of his ardent desire to awaken society to its problems and to initiate change for the betterment of all humanity. It is perhaps even more difficult to see him as a part of avant-garde movements, a modernist attempting to break away from established, naturalistic theatrical traditions that he himself seemingly proselytized in “The Quintessence of Ibsenism”. Shaw saw staging discussions, opposing and differing points of view, as central in changing perceptions for the “play in which there is no argument and no case no longer counts as serious drama” (“Quintessence” 139). Good drama is born of the “conflict of unsettled ideals” (139) and not through melodramatic artifice void of moral significance. The playwright succeeds when “he can stab people to the heart by showing them the meanness or cruelty of something they did yesterday and intend to do tomorrow” (145). With *Heartbreak House*, he has dramatized a serious discussion about abdication and the laissez-faire attitudes that have led to self-destruction through stagnation, which he accomplishes without the

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4 Shaw attributes this strength equally to Wagner, Tolstoy, Strindberg, Gorki, Chekhov, and Brieux, the first of which is one of many allusions in *Heartbreak House*. 
artifice. Not only does he point out humanity’s past meanness, but equally what will be the result of their current direction. Change is desirable; the problem lies in the uncontrolled chaos that leads to laissez-faire attitudes and apathy.

Allusion or Plagiarism

The use of allusion as literary device is neither unique to this play nor to the period in which the play was written. Tilar J. Mazzeo in *Plagiarism and Literary Property in the Romantic Period* demonstrates how the use of allusion as a literary device was a well-established tradition in English letters. Furthermore, with examples from not only within the Romantic period but throughout all English literary periods and movements, she illustrates how through the different movements and periods, the use of allusion and borrowings is understood as a proper literary device in conveying and furthering meaning. The problem has always been, however, how to distinguish between allusion, borrowing and plagiarism.

Mazzeo argues that borrowings required “de facto transformation” (2), otherwise the author was seen nothing more than a contemptible plagiarist. Borrowed materials needed to improve on the original idea by extending it, by providing new examples or illustrations, and finally by being seamlessly integrated stylistically into their own work. Quoting from the collected writings of Thomas de Quincey, Mazzeo notes that borrowing inspiring lines from the great and well-known writers carried no stigma of plagiarism simply because the source was easily identifiable, hence impossible to ‘steal’. Such ideas or inspirational lines are a sort of “multiple-use property subject to the rights of the public domain and forage” (Mazzeo 20), a sort of communal, poetic identity. So when someone shouts out “Oh Captain, My Captain”, as literary readers who are inheritors of a communal identity, both the allusion and the borrowing from Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” are immediately recognizable as such and are thus, according to Mazzeo’s argument, not subject to charges of plagiarism.

The line between literary allusion as an aesthetic device, plagiarism, and originality blurs as the referential material becomes more extensive and seamlessly integrated into the text. When studying the use of allusion, one continually needs to question how much is
ventriloquism—a mimetic sort of mishmash of what others have had to say—and how much is original, drawing on interpretations to fuel a literary conversation that has been ongoing for centuries. In order to make the distinction, readers need to have read and understood how the referents impact the text being read. In addition, they need to recognize the original as well as the copy, along with the tensions that are inherently created between the two by the author's appropriation of the original.

According to Mazzeo, such commandeering necessarily requires translation, a dominating of the original into something new and novel on its own merits which she identifies as improvements, into a new, distinctive poetic voice. Moreover, for such appropriation to function correctly, readers need to be able to distinguish between copying and mastery over the discursive structure. The former is what Shaw saw as "a failed and fragmentary aesthetic" (Shaw HH 30), whereas the latter creates something new from the old.

In his book Allusion: A Literary Graft, Allan H. Pasco argues the premise that allusions are "metaphorical relationships created when an alluding text evokes and uses another, independent text. Neither the reference nor the referent, [they consist] in the image produced by the metamorphic combination that occurs in the reader's mind" (11). This evocation can be borrowed either literally, as in a direct quotation of the referent, or figuratively, as in the calling forth of the argument or idea implicitly associated with the referent. Additionally, he contends that two essential criteria are required for the allusion to be successful: it must be perceived, otherwise it fails to have any effect; and it must constantly maintain a sort of aesthetic redundancy as proof of the allusion's existence and its importance as a stylistic element.

Historically, authors would be considered hackneyed—or if one prefers, plagiarists—if the borrowed material was recognizable; the more extensive the borrowings, the greater was the possibility of this happening. Allusions provide meaning without explicitly stating, suggesting rather than asserting. Accordingly, allusions gain "life only as [they] occur within the relationship that exists between a reader and the relevant texts" (Pasco 11). Furthermore, astute readers understand that an allusion is more than the sum of its parts; it is a relationship of parallels or oppositions which "creates a new entity greater than any of
its constituent parts” (13). An author’s use of allusion, whether consciously or not, enables the reader’s generation of new meaning through suggestion, a sort of “outgrowth” from “its constituent terms” (55).

Exemplifying Pasco’s argument, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* contains many implicit allusions which buttress the poem’s argument. It is an argument that remains relatively impenetrable for many readers as long as the allusions remain unrecognizable. With *Heartbreak House*, Shaw exploits a similarly extensive rhetorical device wherein he repeatedly evokes or echoes other works or ideas to bolster his arguments. Shaw’s allusions are not simple passing echoes, mentioned once and then forgotten; they are entwined with the text, and as with Eliot, should be seen as an essential part of the discussion. Correspondingly, the complexity in decoding the text lies in the implicitness of the allusions where the failure to readily recognize them divests them of any significance. While Eliot provided his readers with a key in the form of explicatory notes, Shaw was not as overtly forthcoming.

The obvious difficulty when using such a literary device, as any student of Eliot well knows, lies in the implicit nature of the allusion: the more obscure, the more complicated to decode. Difficulties arise if the allusion is too obscure, for it fails to elicit a response from readers and thereby fails in its potential to create further meaning. When Shaw explicitly mentions the title of a well-known play, novel, poem, author, or composer (Shakespeare, for example) the referent is easily understood; however, this is not always the case. Additionally, when the link is not apparent, the level of complexity increases, which is compounded when the effect would seem to be at odds with the generally accepted understanding of the referent, a problem that arises when the author’s reading is at variance with one that is commonly accepted. Such a problem develops with the difference between normally accepted Victorian readings of Shakespeare, which were largely at odds with Shaw’s.  

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5 This argument will be developed further in a subsequent chapter, more specifically on the heretofore undiscussed allusions.
Using an allusion is more than simply borrowing an idea from another and should not be confused with or dismissed as plagiarism. This becomes a too facile dismissal of, in the case of Heartbreak House, a central device supporting much of Shaw’s argument. The power of a well-placed allusion lies in its ability to elicit from readers a fleshed-out image from a single word or phrase. Herein lies its very effectiveness, providing a sort of ready-made summary that is complete with “history, context, colour, depth, direction, weight and velocity” (Pasco 6). Alluding provides meaning, a sort of literary graft and debt to the original, while it is also an economical means of creating a standard image which can then be used for the author’s own purposes. In any text, the mere mention of Romeo and Juliet usually provokes well-worn images of star-crossed lovers and personal sacrifice for love. While a commonly, though not the only, accepted reading of the play, such a reading cannot be assured and constitutes an intrinsic gamble for the author who relies uniquely on this interpretation of the work. The astute reader may, as argued, have different readings or associations with the text, which inevitably influence their perceptions of the allusion and ultimately their interpretation of the text. This risk could be reduced by multiplying the number of allusions to different texts with similar themes; still, it can never be completely eliminated because the more allusive the language, the less control an author can have over a reader’s interpretation.

Pasco defines an allusive conceit as an overriding concept or idea via an inspired act of deception with the help of accommodating allusions. Furthermore, he contends that the act of deception occurs in the “relationship that exists between a reader” (11) and the text, a relationship that comes to life when the reader acts upon the correlation. It is something which requires a reader, who penetrates the text beyond the explicit to the implicit. Pasco’s definition of the astute reader is similar to Jauss’ and Iser’s implied reader who:

embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader (Iser Reading 163).
In either case, this idea of the reader who actively and sagaciously penetrates the text is important in understanding the creation of meaning in a play such as *Heartbreak House*.

It is insufficient for Pasco that readers understand and integrate the allusions as an internal process in decoding the text; allusions equally require complete assimilation into the text as a whole and not as disjointed interruptions or anecdotes. In an allusive conceit, the “allusions serve as the primary device for communicating the central meaning” (Pasco 20). Meaning is not found uniquely in the primary text or in the referent, it is found in the metaphoric integration created by readers between the two texts. Pasco contends that “it is a relationship between a minimum of two terms that, through varying degrees of parallel or oppositions, creates a new entity greater than any of its constituent parts” (13). Therefore, the more extensive the use of or frequent the referencing to a source text is, however obliquely, the more significant becomes the new entity that results from the allusions. Hence, what might appear at first glance as a mistake is more likely a purposeful inconsistency; an authorial attempt “designed to take readers beyond the surface” (105) of the text.

**Reader Response and Reception Theory**

According to Wolfgang Iser, if readers want to penetrate the surface of a text, and by extension this play, they “have to bear in mind that literary texts do not relate to contingent reality as such but to systems through which the contingencies and complexities of reality are reduced to meaningful structures” (qtd. in Iser *Theory* 60). In explicating Virginia Woolf’s “enduring form of life,” that which “is not manifested on the printed page [but the] product arising out of the interaction between text and reader” (*Theory* 64), Iser justifies his reading between the explicit and the implicit; readers “actualize the unexpressed” (*Theory* 18). It is the author’s rearranging of meaningful structures into recognizable systems that brings them into focus as points of observations thereby creating a discrepancy between a reader’s expected reality and the one provided by the author. From this double reality, what is within the text and the readers who are outside it, the inherent ambiguities are brought into focus and in turn create a tension between reader and text that requires resolution. Such texts demand their readers undertake a more sustained
examination. It is insufficient to simply read what was written; readers need similarly to perceive the implicit in what was written. Moreover, the more ambiguities, in both number and depth, the less control an author has over the possible interpretations. While such diminished authorial control over the message received by readers might result in a reduced efficacy of any intended didacticism, it opens the text to a freedom of individual thought, in turn allowing its readers to come to their own conclusions.

Attempts to reconcile a text as an absolute with its tropes and figures concede the supremacy of authorial intention. As has been the contention from the outset, reading a literary text in this fashion is limitative and reductive, disallowing the text the ability to speak outside of its particular context. With a play such as Heartbreak House, this type of restraint increases the problematic in understanding the text, for the play partakes in a literary conversation that was both of and beyond its time. Readers must examine the power the allusions have to create ambiguities and tensions within the text, which in turn thereby enables meanings that may or may not be intentional. If we accept the premise that the function of any good educator, as opposed to that of a predicator, is to challenge preconceptions and allow for divergent conclusions, then with this play, Shaw challenges us to think beyond the boundaries of any implied specific intentions. As readers, we need to examine how the play and its inherent discussion elicit new possibilities derived from the existing circumstances.

In the above discussion, the point has been argued that efficient allusions require recognition. Additionally, readers must have an understanding of the source text, however limited, to appreciate an allusion's inherent potential to further an author's argument. When turning to Iser and other reception theorists, discussions about meaning shift the focus from what a texts means to what it does, that is to say, creating meaningful structures for its recipient. Meaning, Iser argues, is arrived at when literature "disrupts [a system's] structure and semantics by transplanting dislocated social and cultural fragments into the text" (Iser Theory 60) from which readers recreate significance. Moreover, literary texts are systems wherein the intricate eventualities of a reality are distilled into something perceptible and meaningful. Authors break up and rearrange a perceived reality by bringing into focus specific ideas. When these ideas remain within an expected framework of reality, they are
taken for reality and remain unobserved. However, these ideas become objects for observation when they no longer fit into that expected reality. In other words, and borrowing from Shaw’s extended musical metaphor that he introduces with the subtitle to the play “a fantasia in the Russian manner on English themes”, when these ideas become intended ‘false notes’, slightly disharmonious within the presented environment, they draw attention to themselves by their very presence, refusing to be disregarded.

These jarring notes spotlight not only the authors’ observations but more importantly what they have left out. These breaks in the expected—that created, ordered reality of the text—are where readers turn when trying to fully understand a literary text. Moreover, Iser maintains that these “structured blanks . . . function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves, because they stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text” (Iser Theory 64). This then is the reader’s participation in the creation of meaning: by examining the blanks in the text, readers fashion, within the confines of the system set out by the author, specific views of what the author is proposing. Herein lies the potential of a text to instruct, for no instantaneous solution is provided, it must be arrived at by the reader by filling in the blanks.

While authors, through their texts, attempt to set certain limits on this process, these limits are constantly challenged by readers’ perceptions and experiences. Authors create what Iser has termed “the primary code” a schemata that gives directions for understanding “the secondary code” which is the aesthetic object, variable to the social and cultural code of each individual reader (Iser Reading 93). When authors create the text they are forcibly writing into a specific context with its own social realities. When readers read, regardless of how hard they try not to, they remove the text from that specific context, reading the text against their specific context. Despite how closely related either by time or circumstances these two unique contexts are, new meanings will be created based on each reader’s unique perceptions. While Iser applies his theory to reading whole texts, it applies equally when reading parts of texts, those allusions within a text. Placing them against backgrounds other than those into which they were initially set by the original author allows for the creation of something new and perhaps unintended by either author.
Symbolic and Cultural Referents

In his “A Note on S/Z”, Richard Howard argues that Roland Barthes with *S/Z* continues to expose the myth of the “instinctive enjoyment of literature,” one that “is acculturated, determined, [and] in bondage” (ix). Accordingly, in this mediation of Barthes, Howard elucidates the necessity for readers to understand that this natural ‘instinct’ is in fact an imposition of ‘culture’. In what would appear a repudiation of both New Historicism and New Criticism and other similar formalistic theoretical approaches, Howard declares that reading in such an acculturated way is repressive. It fences in and closes off readers, whereas readers should be looking towards the “open text,” one that embraces “the plurality of signification, the suspension of meaning” (xi). What Barthes calls writerly texts do just this: they open the text by embracing their inherent plurality requiring readers to follow not only the author’s but equally their own divagations for a more complete appreciation.

Barthes contends that it is the unusual figures or alliances between words found in paradoxes that set in motion narrative transgressions which make for truly ‘writerly’ texts. When authors deliberately allude to known texts, reworking them in their own style and for their own rhetorical purposes, they either knowingly or inadvertently create a new reading paradigm. This in turn requires of readers a new mediation, a different way of penetrating the text. When ironic tension is created between text and referent through explicit paternity, Barthes claims that the expected multivalence of the discourse is destroyed, for “a multivalent text can carry out its basic duplicity only if it subverts the opposition between true and false” (*S/Z* 44) where the referent becomes organic to the text.

It is through the symbols and cultural referents that the necessary multiple entrances into the text are provided thereby opening up the text and creating a network of potential meanings. The voices of the symbols are what Barthes refers to as the Cultural/Referential Code and the Symbolic Code. Accordingly, this cultural and symbolic codification leads readers to the potential pluralities inherent in all “writerly texts” which in turn allows these codes to contribute to the text in developing both meaning and a richer understanding of a text’s “potential truths”.

Conversely, Barthes argues that the imposition on a text of a singular system, an absolute, creates a “readerly text” which inhibits it from producing meaning or what Barthes calls a “product without production” (S/Z 5); it is a text which has been closed off from further discourse. This is an inherent problem of most, if not all, propaganda which nominally tells without any allowance for readerly discovery: a consumable product used once and thrown away, where rereading generally fails to reveal further possibilities of rewriting. While readers may admire authorial technique, or appreciate the subject matter, the message itself remains translucent and is closed to further discussion as immutable fact. Such proairetic and hermeneutic readings close down a literary text, imposing a truth, an absolute meaning. Respectively identified as the “result of an artifice of reading” and the formal terms through which enigmas are disclosed, Barthes argues that these are the tools of an “acculturated” and “determined” bounding of the text, an imposition of “terms according to an irreversible order” (30) providing a knowable and immutable absolute, a problem found in exegetic interpretations.

When readers attribute to allusions and symbols a ‘true’ genetic or biographical origin, a genus or “proairetic essence”, they summarily dismiss the device’s power to elicit meaning beyond this essence (104). This furthers the idea that literature is knowable, definable and that one true interpretation can exist. Such an idea of empirical or absolute truth blocks the plurality of a text, according to Barthes. Conversely, multivalent texts are duplicitous, they are “a transgression of ownership” (45) and unknowable. The denser the metaphorical language, the less perceptible is the ‘truth’ which in turn requires greater transgressions of any denotative aspect of the text on the readers’ part in their quest for understanding. This metaphorical language becomes a sort of index that “points but does not tell” (62), indicating a way to the truth, but not the truth itself.

There is an inherent conundrum in reading any text in this way: if there is no absolute, arguably an author can never be fully assured of transmitting his message in a literary text. It would seem that the more literary (that is to say, the greater the use of literary devices and metaphorical language) a text is, the more open it becomes to divagations. If the point is to incite change, how effective can the invitation be if there is no consensual meaning as to the problem that has been presented as requiring change? It is a
problem for any text, but a particular one for *Heartbreak House*, written by a man known mostly through the public persona of a polemicist, a possessor of the truth. As we will see in the next chapter, this public persona became one of the problems that has plagued *Heartbreak House* from the time of its first publication and arguably still exists.
Chapter Two

Reading *Heartbreak House*: A Historical Overview of its Reception and Readings

Any literature review of the reception of *Heartbreak House* faces the task of trying to find a middle ground between two general tendencies in the critical reception of the play: either outrightly dismissing it as bad playwriting, or wholeheartedly embracing the novelty of the play and seeing in it Shaw's attempt to break away from his previous work. Either way, it leaves its readers perplexed and anything but indifferent, an idea confirmed by perusing the last ninety years of critical writings where a common denominator has been the search for understanding and coherence.

Three paragraphs appeared in the London Times on the day following *Heartbreak House*’s New York premiere on November 11, 1920; three paragraphs that boil down to two adjectives: “perplexing” and “verbose” (“HH in New York”). This review is typical of the play’s reception which has run either hot or cold since its initial publication and performance. Reviewing for The Reporter a 1959 revival in New York, Gore Vidal writes “it is improvised work” in which “Shaw’s improvisatory genius breaks down” (97). He claims that it resembles more J. M. Barrie, Chekhov or even Oscar Wilde than Shaw and notes that at the end of the play he found himself “entirely confused as to what Shaw intended” (100). More recently, in a review for Variety of a 2006 Broadway revival, David Rooney calls the play “hard to pin down... unruly material... [a] rambunctious enigma of a play”.

Generally speaking, readers, playgoers and critics alike are disconcerted by this play, perhaps because it does not align with the expected Shaw of previous plays. Shaw himself considered *Heartbreak House* his greatest play, claiming it as his Lear and, only in part tongue in cheek, challenging Shakespeare to do better. Some thirty odd years after the play’s first publication and performances, Frederick P. W. McDowell argues the need to “disregard the surface inconsistencies of the play and to apprehend it as a vital and unique

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See Shaw’s puppet play “Shakes Versus Shav” written and performed in 1949 and Stanley Weintraub’s discussion in “Shaw’s Lear” for a more detailed discussion.
organism” (“Technique” 335). It is a challenge that goes largely unheeded for it is only during the last couple of decades that a handful of critics have started to look beyond the explicit to the implicit references which seemingly confused more than elucidated Gore Vidal.

Nearly forty years would pass again before the challenge was taken up once more. In 1987 with his article “Apocalypse and After: Recent Interpretations of Heartbreak House” McDowell acknowledged the work of the critics in the intervening years who had worked on extending the interpretations of the play. The following decade saw the publication of A. M. Gibbs’s article “Heartbreak House: Chamber of Echoes” and later his book Heartbreak House: Preludes of Apocalypse which pursued a similar track taken by McDowell. Gibbs’s reading, like the others, stays very much within traditional parameters, mining Shaw’s writings and personal experiences looking for meaning. These critics tend to focus on the explicit references in the play and its preface, illustrating how these allusions have the potential to produce a better understanding of the play. Moreover, Gibbs furthers his examination of many of the allusions by demonstrating how the “echoes ... reflect an intricate intertwining” (“Chamber” 113) of Shaw’s own experiences and his responses to that larger narrative of the first decades of the twentieth century: themes of individualism, the rejection of conventions, the arbitrariness of life, and the absence of absolutes.

Concurrently and subsequently to Gibbs, other critics such as James Woodfield, Rhoda B. Nathan, and Sally Vogt Peters also expanded the work done by McDowell, looking beyond the explicit to the implicit allusions and references. While they expanded the play’s frame of reference, the lacunae integrating these allusions to the play’s arguments has not been filled. Such piecemeal approaches have left the play still somewhat disjointed, almost justifying those initial criticisms of it being nothing more than rambling conversations leading nowhere.

Initial Reception and Critical Readings

Along with several playlets, Heartbreak House was first published in book form in 1919, two years before it was performed. The initial reaction in London to its publication
could be qualified as ambiguous at best, and as downright hostile at worst. In the Nation, H. W. Massingham set the tone that many other reviewers would adopt and maintain for many years to follow. Massingham’s argument is largely based in the preface’s arguments, not from the play itself and accordingly, for St. John Ervine, explains much of the polemic. By placing his focus on the preface, Massingham spotlights the author’s controversial position on the War instead of on any of the actual ideologies presented in the play. While intellectually he appears to agree with Shaw, he rather emotionally condemns Shaw’s very public position on the War, a subject never discussed in the play itself. In her doctoral dissertation on Heartbreak House’s critical reception, Janice Catherine Miller claims that for Massingham, while acknowledging that common sense obviously dictates a general indictment of war, where “war will always seem a monster” (qtd. in Miller 21), the arguments set forth in the preface are simply a continuation of Shaw’s earlier pamphleteering. Moreover, he continues, in times of war it is not always common sense that needs to prevail; under certain circumstances common sense needs to take a back seat to patriotism. Accordingly, for Massingham, the situation during the War and its immediate aftermath was such a time, and at these moments most men, unlike the Shaws and Voltaires of this world, do not have the luxury of being the ‘artist philosopher’ and of seeing life as an image of perfection. Debatably, this is precisely the sort of discussion Shaw initiates with Heartbreak House: blindly following such accepted ideas of ‘common sense’ and not knowing one’s business has led the modern world to its current position.

Only after having set his own ideological agenda does Massingham discuss the play itself. He claims that one of the major problems with the play rests with the fact that the characters are merely types, “essentially ... symbols [whose] purpose is to exhibit an embarrassment of society rather than of the soul” (qtd. in Miller 22). This complaint, that the characters are merely types and not ‘real’, becomes a recurring critique. Consequently, as Massingham notes, these characters have nothing of the “physical courage and energy, and their moral equivalent, devotion to the national life when in peril from foreign violence” (qtd. in Miller 22). This would be the type of required heroic model whose qualities Massingham deemed were requisite to temper the horrors that were coming to light as ‘the truth’ about World War I started to filter through the censors, but would seem to be types that Shaw did not recognize as real. In his conclusion to the “Preface” to Plays
Pleasant, written in 1898 some twenty years before Heartbreak House, Shaw states that "the tragedy and comedy of life lie in the consequences, sometimes terrible, sometimes ludicrous, of our persistent attempts to found our institutions on the ideals suggested to our imaginations by our half-satisfied passions, instead of on a genuinely scientific natural history" (Plays Pleasant 16), one of the precise points he argues in Arms and the Man when he juxtaposes the model heroism of a Sergius to the anti-romantic realism of a Bluntschli.

This review in the Nation was the first and it established a tone that haunted the play for more than a decade. Within a couple of weeks of this review, the Times wrote that Heartbreak House is "made of well-known fibres," sardonically implying its Shavian typicality. While the characters, or in T. F. Evan's words the "embodied arguments" (qtd. in Miller 26), appear to be the focus of much of the criticism, it remains nonetheless Shaw's socio-political positions on the War that are taken to task, becoming the play's Achilles' heel. To compensate for this lack of a direct target, that of an actual anti-war intent or message inherent to the play, Miller argues that these reviews take umbrage more with Shaw's style as being wordy and didactic and overlook the essential qualities of any debate: differing points of view.

It becomes clear that the reviewers either failed or refused to see the play as something new: a disquisitory play written in what St. John Ervine describes as "a shape and style that was unfamiliar to playgoers everywhere" (Bernard Shaw 475) in which the usual devices of plot, character and narrative are secondary to the discussion. The point is none of the play's conversations were to provide plot or character information any more than they were to advance the narrative; their sole rationale was rhetorical. Furthermore, they are a direct application of Shaw's theory of the well-written play as discussed previously.

In its edition of November 12, 1920 on the New York premiere of Heartbreak House, the London Times summed up their brief review by saying that "Mr. Shaw on this occasion has more than usual to say and takes twice as long as usual to say it" ("HH in New York" 11). According to the Times' correspondent, "the audience and the critics indulged in amusing speculations" as to the play's meaning while they alternated between "boredom and interest" ("HH in New York"). The review for the London opening of 1921 suggested
renaming the play to Scatterbrain House for the play was simply a collection of Shaw's "crotchets". In the reviewer's considered opinion, the play is simply a "rambling conversation at large" and "about an hour too long" ("HH Mr. Shaw's Play" 8). Moreover, while it may be entertaining and able to provide "some profitable reflection", the play demonstrates on the whole a lack of "unity dominated and shaped by one idea or ordered group of ideas" (8). To Shaw's credit, ostensibly this is what he set out to do in writing disquisitory plays and reflects his stated purpose from "Quintessence" to provide that which is recognizable, ensuring probable identification while supplying argument and case born of the "conflict of unsettled ideas" ("Quintessence" 139). Undeniably, this is what gave cause for some of the critics comments, the ideas were no longer neatly packaged for consumption, they were being required to contemplate the ideas in order to extract some sort of significance.

*Heartbreak House*'s run in London was sixty-three performances, half as many as the New York premiere of the previous November (Miller 146). In and of themselves, the number of performances might appear satisfactory, especially given that most of the New York performances were sold out. However, when compared to the commercial and critical success of many of his plays prior to the war, it becomes apparent that something had happened. For example, when *Fanny's First Play* opened in London, it ran for 622 consecutive performances, and was seen as both a critical and commercial success testifying to Shaw's immense popularity as a witty, comedic writer. Granted, not everything a writer produces is necessarily good nor can reputation alone guarantee success. It would seem that in the eyes of both the critics and the general public, with *Heartbreak House*, Shaw had either written a bad play, or their perception of him had altered sufficiently to warrant such declining returns. The former is refuted by both current critical reception and the playwright's own opinion of the play; the latter would seem more likely.

It would appear that the reviewers and the general public alike did not fully grasp the play, perhaps because it was too different from what he had done previously. For St. John Ervine, this unexpectedness explains why "the London audience was a failure" (475). While he claims that the reasons for the play's lack of success are multiple, he equally
denotes that any blame is neither the author's nor the play's. Accordingly, miscasting is partly culpable and is entirely in line with Shaw's opinion who had in fact qualified the London casting as "a disgraceful failure" (477). This latter comment certainly helps in elucidating some of the play's reception; however, miscasting is rectifiable and certainly more interpretative than essential to the play's arguments. Furthermore, such an excuse fails to satisfactorily explain the perceived failure.

Ervine argues that London's West End audiences generally lacked what was needed to understand not only Heartbreak House but Shaw's other disquisitory plays such as Misalliance and Getting Married. While perhaps true, it would scarcely explain the ninety percent reduction in the houses from before the war, nor does it explain the play's reception upon publication. Furthermore, it would seem insufficient to claim that the general London audience was not yet ready for these disquisitory plays that did not follow traditional, 'classical' lines, for it is hardly conclusive and implies that the New York audiences were more receptive to Shaw's 'new drama'. While entirely possible, as cultural differences play into reception of style as much as content, I would argue that the difference between the play's reception in London and New York lies more in its content hitting closer to home in London than in any aesthetic differences due to casting or to form, as can be seen when the reviews for the two productions are compared. Initially, the New York premiere was planned for October, not November. Shaw refused the earlier date insisting that the premiere take place after the elections, suggesting even that if need be, it would be preferable to "produce Heartbreak House with the first cast you could pick out of the gutter on Nov. 15" than to produce it earlier, even if an earlier production allowed for an ubercast with the likes of Sarah Bernhardt or the Guitrys ("Shaw vs. The Theatre Guild" X1). Visibly, casting with unknowns was preferable to casting well-knowns who did not fit the character types, seemingly supporting Ervine's argument that the London failure was due to miscasting.

Typically, the reviews of the play's premiere in both New York and London reflect much of the polemic created with its initial publication two years earlier. Simply put, it was more of the usual Shaw: one reviewer claimed the play is "overlong ... with too much detail in those areas [finance and socialism] where Shaw is an expert and insufficient in those he
is not,” such as love and relationships (“HH Mr. Shaw’s Play”). As with its publication, it is unsurprising that the play’s performance provoked the reactions that it did. Generally speaking, even though it amused the audiences, it left them speculating as to the meaning of an overlong play. Alexander Woollcott, writing for The New York Times, stated that the play “is quite the larkiest and most amusing one that Shaw has written in many a year” and this “despite the doldrums of tedium” of its second act (“The Play” 20), the most ‘conversational’ of the play. As seen previously, this is the typical reaction: tedious bits enveloped in amusing banter. Woollcott explained that perhaps the tedium is due to a “habit and disposition to a lunch counter tempo” (20) of the typical New York theatregoer. The cadences of the more reflected and measured conversation that Shaw presented would seem lengthy in comparison. Revisiting the play ten days later, Woollcott attributed the perceived tedium to opening night nerves of the performers. He continued by noting: “Heartbreak House is as lofty and austere a play as Shaw has written,” maintaining his initial opinion (“Second Thoughts” 78).

In a word, the play was amusing but too ‘talky’. It is an opinion that is reflected in the play’s other reviews. For example in The New York Clipper, the play is described as “without a plot or a story. It’s just a number of persons gathered at an English country house for no ostensible purpose” (“HH Shaw Humour” 32), and while it is interesting to listen to, it remains a play that is too full of talk. Additionally, The Brooklyn Daily Eagle states that while the playgoers thoroughly enjoyed the play, they left the theatre in silence, apparently not wishing to demonstrate their lack of understanding at the “wittily written play” without “a simply, obvious and rather silly ‘message’. It does not strive for open meanings openly arrived at” (“Heartbreak House” 6). These reviewers identify what is conceivably the play’s greatest attribute and undoing: Shaw requires his audience to work, to partake in the discussion because meanings have not been handed down in neat packages.

Three years later, at a revival of the play in 1923 by the Oxford Repertory Theatre, the English critics had yet to mellow sufficiently to change their perceptions. Persisting in their initial reactions to the productions in both New York and London, the critics declared the Oxford performance remained “witty,” but “irritating” (“Oxford Repertory”). In fact,
The Times reviewer stated that it is “so excessively Shavian that it descends into downright obscurity” (“Oxford Repertory”). It would take some twelve years after its debut for any perceptible changes to occur in its reception. Arguably, Shaw was a victim of his own successes or, perhaps more appropriately, his infamy. Even though Shaw very carefully keeps any explicit discussion of the War out of most of the play, only allowing it to intrude via a few cursory remarks about weaponry of destruction as well as at the very end with the Zeppelin attack, the wounds caused by the war and his particular attitude towards it were too deep, too intimate to allow for any immediate rehabilitation of the playwright and his anti-war opinions.

Reading these reviews, one starts to wonder how much of Shaw’s public persona – the bombastic sermonizer for whom the theatre was perceived to be simply another forum in which he could expound his cause of social reform – obstructed the possibilities of other more germane readings. Shaw’s own outspokenness towards the sensitive issue of the War surely did not garner favours with either the general public or the critics, allowing them to dismiss Heartbreak House as yet another diatribe by a cantankerous polemicist. While Shaw’s position on the War could account for some of the reasons for Heartbreak House’s reception, they do not explain it entirely.

When the play was first published, its preface “immediately provoked great anger by what seemed to be wanton levity” (Ervine 474). By the time of its first production, the great anger had subsided somewhat to be replaced with the idea of verbosity. Nearly a hundred years later, for many the play remains an overly verbose enigma that needs “taming” by cutting to be appreciated (Rooney). Arguably, then, Shaw’s public persona is not the hurdle to overcome in piercing Heartbreak House’s alleged mystery, for while the persona and the War polemic have long since faded, the disquisitional hurdle persists.

It took several turbulent decades before critics started to look at Heartbreak House from a different perspective. Frederick P. W. McDowell argues in his article on symbol and theme in Heartbreak House, published in 1953, that “a symbolic drama [...] need only conform to the realities of the pattern imposed by the artist” (“Technique” 335). Drawing on the critical response both contemporary to the play’s initial publication and critical writings during the ensuing three decades, McDowell illustrates how the play was received
by many with assured mistrust, for it seemed “obscure, fumbling and confused” (335); it was unexpected Shaw. Such comments evolved into ideas that the play is “crude and contrived when compared to the plenitude of Chekhov” or too “mechanically elaborated, too packed with paradox, too brilliant in its rhetoric to be quite human in its appeal” (335).

*Heartbreak House* “holds in embryo Shaw’s departures in doctrine and technique” (335) and this departure would become a hallmark of his later plays. McDowell does not see Shaw’s approach with *Heartbreak House* as a rejection of Ibsenite or Chekhovian ideals; it is a modulation, a ‘fantasia’ on those Russian themes wherein he presents altered motifs replayed in a manner reminiscent of an original. Moreover, McDowell argues that this play initiates for Shaw a transition from the local to the general, or, if one prefers, from England to the world. Furthermore, he contends that this fantasia is not only a reflection of a rapidly changing world; it became the new background for Shaw’s particular polemics.

More importantly for our purposes, McDowell argues that the inter-connectivity between symbol, allusion, and theme form a series of patterns which once recognized must guide the reader towards a more profound understanding of the play as they form an essential part of the discussion. To demonstrate his point, McDowell refutes Massingham’s arguments of the problems created by the ‘character types’. McDowell demonstrates how the reader needs to draw on the patterns formed by the literary devices to overcome the characters’ apparent flat one-dimensionality. Accordingly, when Shaw “makes of them recognizable literary types or associates them with myth and legend” (340), he provides his characters with a depth that would otherwise be lost. For McDowell, the incisiveness of the drama is to be found in the characters’ implicitness, not in their explicitness or verisimilitude. He further argues that, for Shaw, the “symbolic purport of a character does not obscure his existence as a human being.” If anything, because his “characters are ...

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7 It is an argument whose essence is repeated by C. D. Innes in *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* in 1992.

8 In this case, the original is both the model for the well-written play as well as those ‘real’ characters which he ‘adapts’ to his own purpose.
degree closer to the allegorical,” they “are less tentative, less creatures of whim, and less passive” (339); it makes them more tangible than mere shadows of ‘actual’ persons.

Allegorical characters are normally static, based on easily recognizable, well-known types. McDowell contends, however, that this does not hold true for *Heartbreak House*. He claims that they “are receptive to experience and assimilate it eagerly” (339), a dynamism which precisely makes them ‘real’ and inherently interchangeable with those ‘real types’ sought by the proponents of realism. McDowell further argues that even though they have the capacity to grow, any development they achieve is both debatable and irrelevant. Its relevancy is in their appearing to be stagnant, undermining the expected cathartic release. Moreover, denying the re-establishment of a previous order ascertains the figurative and literal inherent chaos of the play, replicating the chaos of the War and the post-war zeitgeist.

McDowell’s article provides a pivotal break from the ‘traditional’ readings of the play establishing that the play requires the reader to recognize that the typical elements of the well-wrought play, such as plot and character development, have been subverted to further Shaw’s discussion. Breaking from generic convention and expectation is typical of Shaw’s early career (one only has to think of plays such as *Mrs. Warren’s Profession, Arms and the Man, The Devil’s Disciple*) and cognizance of this requires the reader to look beyond a character’s seeming verisimilitude to seek their intrinsic, symbolic value, to respond to the challenge to read beyond the suburban. The characters are not actual people so much as they are embodied ideas, symbols which on the surface appear to be static, but in fact are like real people with the capacity to develop. In Shaw’s opinion “there is only one way of dramatizing an idea; and that is by putting on the stage a human being possessed of that idea, yet none the less a human being with all the human impulses which make him akin and interesting to us” (Shaw “The Perfect Wagnerite” 188). The characters’ authenticity lies in their coherence as recognizable types and not in a reader’s preconceived ideas as to how one should behave.

In line with McDowell’s demonstration, Sylvan Barnet, in “Bernard Shaw on Tragedy”, argues that with *Heartbreak House* “we are reading a new kind of play” embodying “new (for Shaw) ideas and techniques” (895). Barnet demonstrates how the
play should be seen as a paradox, both “a comedy of sparkling dialogue” and a tragedy “filled with things cursed and condemned, pitched in the mood of a doomed society” (895); this ‘tragic-comedy’ is a paradox created from the opposition of ideas embodied in each character. All, from their individual viewpoints, are both right and not right. No single character possesses or expresses an absolute truth; each one possesses and expresses an individual truth gleaned from within their unique perspective.

Representative of the diverging opinions that this play engenders, J. I. M. Stewart’s *Eight Modern Writers*, published in 1963, reiterates the traditional interpretations of *Heartbreak House*. Drawing on Sir Desmond MacCarthy’s writings, Stewart argues the failure of the play lies in its lack of verisimilitude of both the times and the people that it attempts to portray. While acknowledging that perhaps the situation was ‘true’ before the war when the play was ostensibly “begun in 1913” (169), by its end this was no longer the case. He invokes the circumstances under which the play was written to argue that it results in being “probably undesigned confusion ... neither clearly peace nor war” which limits both the author and the play to a specific place in time. Accordingly, he claims: “*Heartbreak House* must be received as a pre-war play and the air raid ... as symbolical adumbration” (170). This denies the play its ability to speak outside of that particular circumstance, making both the author and the play anecdotal. Apart from a fleeting reference to tanks early in the play and the bombs that fall at the end, World War I is never specifically discussed, which prompts Stewart’s claim of this being a “pre-war play”. Yet the discussion that does take place begs readers to consider more than the particular situation of England before World War I. Readers are being asked to examine how they have arrived at their current position, consistently failing to learn anything from the past, to seek out and know that which lies hidden in plain sight. It was a discussion that was pertinent prior to 1914, in 1918 and is equally applicable today, just as it has been many other times throughout history.
Even if, as Steward claims, the moment of putting pen to paper was 1913, the ideas had been formulating for a much longer time. For example, he recognizes the similarities between *Heartbreak House*, *Man and Superman* and *Major Barbara* as well as the influence of Chekhov, which he claims “is substantial but not radical” (170). Nonetheless, Stewart acknowledges that “what is ramshackle in it is a matter of deliberate effect” (169) and is “in intention, or impulsion, radically different from almost all the rest of his work” (171). He fails, however, unlike McDowell, to identify the nature of the departure other than the despair he sees lying just beneath the surface. In fact, Stewart denies the allusions, metaphors and symbols much of their power to influence how the reader interprets the discussions. In his analyses of the critical scenes found towards the end of Act III wherein Shaw ties together the allusions, metaphors, and symbols, Stewart arrives at the conclusion that they are ineffectual. Moreover, he argues that Shaw is “casting about for some means of continuing and concluding the play” (174). Stewart neglects to perceive Shaw’s wrapping of the arguments together into a coherent whole, claiming that there can be no means to continue or conclude.

Robert Brustein in *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama* took up the idea that *Heartbreak House* is new in the Shavian canon again in 1965. Brustein argues that the work “seems peculiarly unplanned” and that it is “highly charged dramatic poetry” (222). The expected has been replaced by the unexpected, with an atmosphere that is “mystical, even phantasmagoric” (Brustein 222). It is neither ‘real’ nor does it attempt to recreate the ‘real’ where the characters also “possess a dreamlike quality,” losing “their individuality in allegory” (222). It is an argument strikingly similar to McDowell’s wherein Brustein attempts to explain *Heartbreak House* from a different perspective. As in a fantasia, where form is subservient to fancy, the constraints of the well-made play have been rejected in favour of the discussion, and the fantasia is not a replication of the original theme but rather a variation on the theme. Like Chekhov, Shaw’s variation would have the

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9 In the preface to *Heartbreak House* Shaw states that the ideas for this play had been formulating much earlier, an idea that is further underscored by the links that Stewart makes to Shaw’s earlier plays. Later, in his personal letters, Shaw claims that the actual date was 1916. This raises an interesting question about the conception of any play: is it when pen is set to paper, or is it when the first seed of an idea is planted? Regardless, the comments demonstrate the problem in trusting implicitly and uniquely what the author has to say about his own work.
reader focus on the group and not on the individual hero. Yet, paradoxically, he would have
the reader also understand that the characters are not a collective, but individuals with
individual responsibilities. Michael W. Kaufman, drawing on what he claims are the
inherent dialectical properties of any musical fantasia, argues in his 1970 article “The
Dissonance of Dialectic: Shaw’s Heartbreak House” that this ‘individuality’ is in fact itself
highly symbolic, for the characters “embody merely variations of the paralytic decadence”
of society (3).

Quoting from Shaw’s The Perfect Wagnerite, McDowell demonstrates that by too
easily dismissing the characters that inhabit Heartbreak House as flat, we too effortlessly
disallow the entire play. After all, these characters are symbolic representations of ideas,
not mere types, and as symbolic characters they have the ability to “move about within the
confines of an elusive and complex symbol of social England and ... Heartbreak House
itself” (“Technique” 340-41), something that purely allegorical characters would be unable
to do. Furthermore, they allow Shaw to demonstrate that “there is no final truth. [T]ruth is
tentative, relative, unfolding itself in time”; moreover, it “is not fixed or constricted;
inflexible and water tight categories represent but partial views” (349). It is a disconcerting
idea for many and understandably undermines the solidity of a specific world view. This is
precisely what Shaw stated in “Quintessence” that he was setting out to do: present a
particular ‘realistic’ world view, engender debate on its merits and shortfalls and then
propose its replacement with something better.

Explicit Allusions and Biographical Referents

After McDowell’s 1953 article, critical response coalesces into two parallel general
tendencies. On the one hand, a form of biographical criticism that looks to Shaw’s personal
life and readings for explications; on the other hand, there are the isolated attempts at
looking towards the play’s intertextuality for meaning. The former is led by Stanley
Weintraub in his book Journey to Heartbreak: The Crucible Years of Bernard Shaw 1914-
1918, published in 1971, and taken up again in 1994 in A. M. Gibbs’ Heartbreak House:
Preludes to Apocalypse. Both men have combed much of Shaw’s life looking for those
‘real’ elements that would assist in illuminating the play. Weintraub argues that much of the play and its characters are based on people or events from Shaw’s life: Ellie was based on an actress named Ellen O’Malley; Hesione was inspired by Mrs. Campbell; Hector was “compounded out of flamboyant adventurers Shaw knew” (“Curtains Speech” 499) blended with Hubert Bland and a bit of Shaw himself; the Utterwords were based on Virginia and Leonard Woolf; and Captain Shotover was modelled on a certain Captain Pocock. Equally, Weintraub argues in favour of the verisimilitude of the setting being based in part on a country house that Shaw rented.

A. M. Gibbs also writes of the biographical matrix that forms an important part of the play’s genesis. These arguments are based largely on his perusal of Shaw’s prolific non-dramatic writings, specifically his personal letters and diaries. Gibbs argues that much of the play is a reiteration of the Shavian polemic finding a voice in not only Shotover but equally in Hector, Randal and Mangan.

This combing of Shaw’s life tends towards the anecdotal on occasion and ultimately it distracts from the import of the play, diminishing its complexity in their attempts at illumination. A case in point is the Zeppelin’s appearance and its explanation by critics. Taking up the argument from Arthur H. Nethercot’s 1966 article “Zeppelins over Heartbreak House”, Weintraub contends that Shaw found inspiration for this deus ex machina in the downing of a Zeppelin near Shaw’s home in 1916. Quoting from a letter Shaw wrote to the Webbs a couple of days after the experience, Weintraub maintains that with this incident “the seeds of the last scene had been sown in his subconscious” (“Curtains Speech” 497). While the seeds may have been sown, readers are still left with a perplexing symbol that is disjointed from the rest of the play, an intrusion that seemingly contradicts Shaw’s own arguments against the facile use of artifice and device in lieu of the pervasive discussion in the rest of the play.

This is perhaps where the usual readings of the play have failed to take up Shaw’s challenge to look beyond the everyday. In “Zeppelin Fictions and the British Home Front”, published in 2004, Ariela Freedman, breaking with traditional readings, argues that the Zeppelin allows Shaw to use “an art that notices the war only to reject it” (Freedman 60). It is the “hyperaesthesia, an excessive or morbid sensibility that produces a wild and fanatical
turn of public thought and destroys the conditions ... for serious theatre in favour of farce and pure entertainment” (60). The Zeppelin is the failure to see the danger for what it is; war has been mediated “through the phantasmagoria of propaganda” (60). Ultimately, this failure to understand not only underscores the entire play;ironically, it seems to underscore much of the critical response.

Another trend in the readings of this play has been to examine its explicit references, something that was suggested by McDowell in 1956 but was never really taken up until Stanley Weintraub published “Shaw’s Lear” in 1970, an analysis of Shaw’s 1949 short puppet play entitled Shakes vs. Shav. With typical tongue in cheek, Shaw asks the question: could Shaw write a King Lear? His answer was an emphatic yes; it is a play called Heartbreak House and therewith provides an essential key in decoding the play, for neither within the play nor in its preface is there any overt mention of King Lear. It is Shaw’s further acknowledgement that there is more to the play than the explicit. This “Lear-dimension” (“Shaw's Lear” 62) is what Stewart sees as lying “just beneath the play’s surface” (Stewart 171) that brings to light the potential for further intertextual readings. More importantly, by exposing this implicit connection Weintraub and others have created a precedent by acknowledging a need to pursue further that which is not explicitly stated.

This reference to King Lear is perhaps the unstated allusion that has drawn the most commentary, most recently by Sonya Freeman Loftis in her 2009 article “Shakespeare, Shotover, Surrogation: ‘Blaming the Bard’ in Heartbreak House”. Like Weintraub, Loftis acknowledges the allusion based on Shaw’s own admission of his subrogation of the Shakespearean play. She also argues the thematic link where both plays try to find what Weintraub identifies as the “meaning for existence in an irrational world” (“Shaw's Lear” 65). Loftis draws on Weintraub’s article to claim that Shaw’s adjusting of Shakespeare’s ideas (a further fantasia) is a way of doing away with the old and replacing it with the new. In what is an approximation to both Iser and Barthes’s approach of open texts that embrace pluralities of signification, for both Weintraub and Loftis, Shaw surrogates traditional, easily recognized long-standing readings of Lear to a novel perspective. This sort of divagation of traditional readings allows for both a fuller understanding of both Lear and Heartbreak House.
By replacing the traditional male "impractical nobility" ("Shaw's Lear" 64) found in Lear with the different perspective of a female's half-formed, sardonic hope for the destruction of that which is known and safe, Shaw creates a new tension in telling a traditional tale. After all, this is how the play ends with Hesione's "But what a glorious experience! I hope they'll [sic] come again tomorrow night" echoed by Ellie's "Oh, I hope so" (HH 160). For Weintraub, herein lies the paradox of the allusion: hope for the future rests with a female ability to endure male aggression. More importantly, it establishes that Shaw, with Heartbreak House, appropriates 'traditional tales' to make them new. This type of translocation of social and cultural fragments is what Iser argues as creating meaning.

It is back to McDowell that we turn in our attempts to understand the extraordinary. With the resurgence of interest in this play during the late 1970s and early 1980s, he attempted once again to take up the challenge of explicating Heartbreak House in 1986 in his article "Apocalypse and After: Recent Interpretations of Heartbreak House". Herein he argues that a great work of literature is known by its seeming "inexhaustibility to interpretation" ("Apocalypse" 3). As in his previous seminal work that sparked a reassessment of the play, this article challenges critics to look carefully at the play once again. Acknowledging that Heartbreak House is probably the most pessimistic of Shaw's plays, McDowell questions whether the narrow reading which limits the argument to that cultured and leisured class suffices, or should the readings be expanded to include all of "contemporary civilization [which] is absolutely doomed" (6). This definitely extends the boundaries of the allegory beyond those set by its initial critical interpretation and would appear to be a question that has yet to be answered.

A. M. Gibbs states in his article "Heartbreak House: Chamber of Echoes" that the play "reflects an intricate intertwining" ("Chamber" 113) of Shaw's own experiences and his responses to that larger narrative of the first decades of the twentieth century. Discussing the play's relation to other "texts and the literary motifs that they echo" ("Chamber" 116), Gibbs identifies numerous explicit allusions: both the explicit references to Othello and King Lear as well as echoes of others, mentioning Dickens, Chekhov, and Homer. The ideas that Gibbs presents in his article are further developed in his book Heartbreak House: Preludes of Apocalypse in which he illuminates many of the explicit
echoes to expand our understanding of the play. However, without equally explicating the implicit allusions, something remains incomplete.

Along the lines of Stanley Weintraub, A. M. Gibbs demonstrates how the King Lear reference “take[s] the form of a kaleidoscopic series of refracted images, motifs, and character portraits”; it is not “some botched attempt ... at writing a Shakespearean ... tragedy” but something that is more “parodie than imitative” (“Chamber” 120). Furthermore, he argues that the relation between Heartbreak House and King Lear is similar to the relation between The Cherry Orchard and Heartbreak House, “a kind of discords concors” (125), a discordant conversation. He demonstrates that in both the Shakespearean and Chekhovian echoes, the reader should see a motif of “a cultivated intelligentsia that has lost control of its destiny and plays dangerous and foolish games of love as civilization drifts towards self-destruction” (129).

This idea of ‘echoes’ or ‘refracted images’ is critical in understanding Heartbreak House which Gibbs further demonstrates with the set. He expounds on how the set is an allusion to other houses-as-ships by providing examples such as the Peggotty’s house of Dickens’s David Copperfield, or Captain Harville’s in Jane Austen’s Persuasion. Moreover, he argues that these houses-as-ships are a “category” of a larger recurring “topos” of literary houses in English nondramatic literature (116) and are perceived as safe havens, a sort of ark or bulwark against the impending storm of modernity. For Gibbs, this is almost a Shavian foray into modernism: a seeming exploitation of the country/city dichotomy, where safe havens from the rigours of modern life were to be found in the country. As noted by Gibbs, with Heartbreak House Shaw reverses the paradigm. Country house/safe havens are no longer safe: like the rest of civilization, they are outdated, outmoded, and on the verge of being destroyed. Gibbs demonstrates that while Shaw draws on Dickens to illustrate the idea of a safe haven, it is only to knock it down by drawing on the “satirical novels of Thomas Love Peacock” where these types of quaint country houses-as-ships-sanctuaries are perceived as “madhouse[s] where there is a bee in every bonnet, but every bonnet has style” (118). Arguably, the foray is more extensive than Gibbs argues; he seemingly overlooks the important symbolic value of the set, preferring to
remain with the tangible and stated. The implications of the set as symbol will be explored in detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

The Homeric legend is another important echo which Gibbs demonstrates through Shaw’s onomastics. Gibbs argues that Shaw’s deliberate choice of names creates an ironic tension between the fall of the Troy of the classical world and the fall of the Heartbreak House of the modern world. Hector, Hesione and Ariadne all have names that are either directly pulled from the legend or are at least similar enough to support the suggestion. Gibbs argues that the changes, for example from the Hecuba of legend to the Hesione of the play, help to create the mood of despair and helplessness of a society drifting and on the verge of self-destruction. It is an argument subsequently taken up by Rhoda Nathan in 1987 and later by Kay Li in 1998.

Using the Homeric legend as a starting point, Rhoda Nathan, in her article “The “Daimons” of Heartbreak House”, discusses the play’s irrational nature. Nathan claims that Shaw’s “underlying intention was clearly to draw allusions from the names of the sisters to the disaster of World War I, a ‘catastrophe of a magnitude so appalling and a scope so unpredictable’ that it caused otherwise rational people to hedge themselves about with enchantment to shut out the terrifying world of reality” (“Daimons” 255). She argues that Shaw’s deliberate onomastics create an echo between mythical stories and the imagined reality of the play. Furthermore, she contends that it is the oxymoronic nature of Shotover’s daughters’ names that leads the unsuspecting reader into a facile acceptance of first impressions: that of “comic silliness” (254), “a combined alliterative effect ... obviously calculated to provoke amusement” (257). This, she maintains, is misdirection; their names are “clues to a higher function in the play” (254), further supporting McDowell’s argument on the significance of the character types.

For Nathan, these mythological names associate the daughters to the enchanters, the sirens or ‘demons’ whose recognizable function was to lure unwary ships/sailors onto the rocks. Both of these are important recurring motifs in the play. There is nothing real about Shaw’s sirens: from their false hair to their false charms, all is deception, demonic attributes recognized by their father and attributed to their mother. These charms also ensnare the unsuspecting. For Nathan, the echoes combine in the madness to which the
world had succumbed over a self-interested division of world power, an obvious echo of the themes of *King Lear* as argued by Weintraub.

Implicit Allusions

The preceding allusions are amongst the more overt and, as stated in the beginning of this chapter, openly acknowledged by Shaw within the text of the play, its preface and his comments about the play. Curiously, the actual stated allusion to Shakespeare's *Othello* has never been fully examined by the critics. If, as Loftis argues, the reason that the implied allusion to *Lear* resonates so strongly is because it draws on readings that allow further interpretations of *Heartbreak House*, why would the same not hold true for *Othello*? Or what of the symbolic relation between Gibbs' ideas on the country safe house versus the idea of the floundering ship, a literary motif traceable from the Ancient Greeks through Christian philosophy to very contemporary ideas of spaceship Earth? What of the other implicit allusions to works by Wilde, Coleridge, Whitman and others that have yet to be examined? If we accept, based on this idea of an integration of themes, the consequences of an allusion to *King Lear*, or to Homer, Dickens, Ibsen or Chekhov, we then need to look to the other implicit allusions and how their thematic integration also affects our reading of the play.

Critics such as Sally Peters Vogt and James Woodfield examine some of the allusions that were never explicitly mentioned in the play, its preface nor in Shaw's subsequent writings on *Heartbreak House*. However, these allusions become particularly cogent in helping to unearth a more profound understanding of the play's argument. In her 1978 article "Heartbreak House: Shaw's Ship of Fools", Peters Vogt contends that *Heartbreak House* intriguingly echoes Sebastian Brandt's *Das Narrenschiff*, and in fact is Shaw's version of Brandt's ship of fools set adrift, aimlessly wandering in search of paradise (269-70). For Peters Vogt, understanding the relationship of the double tropes of the ship of state and the ship of fools "lays bare the play's principle of coherence" (267) which for many has been lacking. Accordingly, this coherence can only be found in the allegorical, allusive nature of the play requiring the reader to examine carefully not only what is written, but also what has been left out.
Peters Vogt's argument illustrates how in both Shaw's play and Brandt's story, readers find amours, sensual pleasure, useless riches, idle talk, indolence and sloth, falsity and deception, insolence towards God, and a failure to prepare for death (270). Brandt’s ship is high-pooped as is Heartbreak House; Brandt’s fool is identified by a foolscap with bells and while Shaw’s captain may not wear a foolscap, he is certainly “a wild-looking old gentleman” (Shaw HH 51) acting the fool with his own version of bell—his omnipresent whistle. In much the same way that Brandt’s does, Shotover’s ship would wander aimlessly were it not landlocked. Instead, it searches hopelessly for the fool’s paradise, guided by a man hoping to obtain a “seventh degree of concentration” (HH 52) with the help of a Mahatma. Failure to do so is compensated for by rum, which is merely another facet of a mind-numbed state such as blindly trusting to fate or providence, and which is no less than the abdication of the responsibility of choice. The typed characters of both works are all bound together in the same vessel and set adrift. Furthermore, as Peters Vogt claims, because Heartbreak House “is didactically ordered” Shaw sets forth a “simple statement on the future of England” (Peters Vogt 267), a reiteration of the play’s allegorical nature.

Peters Vogt contends that coherence appears in the idiosyncratic and the irregular, which are not deviations in form, as is generally held true, but are the “necessary instruments of Shaw’s intentions executed with precisely defined limits” (268) as set out in his writings. Moreover, she explains that the non-standard forms used in Heartbreak House are not the beast fables of traditional allegory but an apologue where the complex attitudes of the characters are fashioned to alter the reader’s attitudes of the world in which they live. These attitudes are based on an aesthetic response to a given narrative. Accordingly, Peters Vogt states that attempts to understand Heartbreak House should not be looked for in plot action, revealing dialogue, or our concern for the fate of the characters. In fact, she claims that these are all “subservient to Shaw’s thematic statement” (268); consequently, we need to look to the metaphors to find coherence. As shown previously by McDowell, truth is to be found not in the singular or individual, but in the ensemble. Hence, Peters Vogt contends this is why the play seemingly has no protagonist, for there is no one particular story that takes precedence. She, like Gibbs, identifies the play as an intertwining of many stories, a sort of episodic recounting of human situations. However, Peters Vogt maintains that the play’s principle of coherence lies in uncovering the relations between these stories or
"venerable tropes" (267) and the surface action of the play, something that initial critics recognized yet failed to accomplish.

James Woodfield equally finds that not all the allusions in this play are explicitly stated. He identifies in his 1985 article "Ellie in Wonderland" specific parallels between Shaw's play and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. He ascertains that in both there is something of a world of mistaken identities, of frenzied madness and of "worlds that are clearly fantasy, though nonetheless real to the dreamer" (334-35). The first people we encounter in this wonderland are our guides, Ellie and Nurse Guinness, who request that we suspend belief and leave behind the real, effectively framing the play in a symbolic dream. Nurse Guinness provides the first clue that there is more here than meets the eye, for, as she claims, "this house is full of surprises for them that dont [sic] know our ways" (*HH* 51). It is another explicit request to go beyond the obvious, to play the game and "to find out the man under the pose" (*HH* 133). Like Alice, our only way out is to find the key to decode the symbols and understand the allusions.

Woodfield examines the potential allusions between these seemingly disparate works, establishing striking similarities not only between the literary dream worlds but equally the theatrical dream world. Woodfield contends that theatre itself is but a delusion, a fantasy where "the audience enters the 'dream' world of the play when the curtain goes up, and is woken to 'reality' by the sound of their own applause at the end" (Woodfield 343). Quoting William Irvine, who argued that the dream and sleep motifs that pervade the play are what give it an "amorphous and essentially un-dramatic structure," Woodfield establishes Irvine's claim that for many, this was one of the play's essential weaknesses. Responding to Irvine some sixty years later, Woodfield contends that this is precisely what gives the play its strength. "The dream allows the fusion—or even inversion—of forms, and permits a comic character or incident to modulate into a tragic one without offending an audience’s expectations or jarring their sense of form, it provides Shaw with a fluidity of form that enables him to reconcile the contradictions of tragedy and comedy and of sanity and madness" (343) and likewise to respect his own definition of a tragi-comedy.

By accepting the author at face value and linking our readings to only the overt signals in the play and its preface, it is possible to argue that Shaw has with *Heartbreak*
House, in his own way, faithfully tried to reproduce a certain leisured class of society. Superficially, it could appear to be but a pale reflection of Chekhovian plays such as The Cherry Orchard or Uncle Vanya, and as such, seen as a failure, whose typed characters could never reflect the reality of either Ibsen or Chekhov. However, such readings tend to leave the play flat, lifeless, and overly verbose. Conversely, there are other ways to read this play and require appreciating that the implicit/covert allusions and symbolisms are not merely accessory, secondary embellishments without substance but an integral part of the argument.

The end of the twentieth century starts to see critics probe Shaw’s perceived persona of the naturalist/realist sermonizer to discover a Shaw who was exploring form and aesthetic structure like the modernists of his era. When discussing Shaw’s latter plays, C. D. Innes demonstrates that the plays such as Heartbreak House, while appearing to be “straightforward social satire” (9) along the lines of Oscar Wilde, are fundamentally unique. Such a change in direction on the author’s part would certainly account for much of the critical reaction to the play; and if nothing else, it certainly explains many of the reviewers’ perceptions as to the play’s lack of unity. Arguably, with Heartbreak House, Shaw was finally doing what he had said should be done: creating a play wherein the introduction and development of the discussion have so overspread and interpenetrated the action that this latter has been so assimilated as to make it identical to the discussion (“Quintessence” 146).

It is to this, my particular rectangle drawn around a common literary culture, that we turn in the following chapter, an examination of those allusions that have yet to be discussed and that form a lacuna in the critical readings of Heartbreak House. It is in looking at some of the heretofore unacknowledged allusions to Oscar Wilde, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Walt Whitman, and in re-examining those references to Shakespeare that I will elucidate and tie together these “random conversations” into a coherent whole that speaks to more than a specific class or generation long since gone. Understanding Shaw’s musical metaphor embedded in the subtitle to the play allows readers to see how these seemingly disjointed allusions may indeed be joined through their individual repetitions of common themes. These melodies may be recalled
individually yet when examined from a larger perspective, they form a much larger whole. There is consistency to this play, and in order to be seen, it requires of its readers the ability to dissociate the persona of the author from his work, which in turn allows a new perspective. These are the limits to my imaginary rectangle that permit it to live and to speak beyond the confines of its particular context or period.
Chapter Three

Hidden Allusions: Heartbreak House and the Literary Conversation

There are those for whom this play has been seen as a confusing collection of disjointed conversations; others have facilely dismissed this play as a comedy of manners mocking a particular class or society. Such superficial rejections disserve both the play and its author. A more thorough and sustained examination of the play’s explicit allusions demonstrates that *Heartbreak House* is considerably more complex than it might appear at first glance. Both Iser’s and Pasco’s astute readers discern the play’s more allusive nature when they take up Shaw’s challenge to look beyond the obvious, and disjointed, rambling conversations coalesce into coherent discussions. To borrow from Shaw’s musical metaphor of the fantasia, the allusions become recognizable snippets of well-known tunes that are both hauntingly familiar and slightly incongruous. Sometimes difficult to identify and often seemingly innocuous, these allusions appear at first glance to be almost anecdotal, often fleeting references quickly lost in the surrounding text. Pasco argues that our interest should lie in their repetitions, regardless of how implicit the reference is, for there is nothing ephemeral about their raison d’être. With recognition of both the original and its echoes comes insight. Continuing Shaw’s metaphor, these brief references are, in fact, a recalling of tunes and melodies introduced at the play’s outset. They create meaning by calling readers to delve deeper into the play’s complex rhetorical structure. Furthermore, they serve to link *Heartbreak House* to the literary conversation and aesthetic movements of the first decades of the twentieth century.

Oscar Wilde

The author’s musical metaphor is rather both appropriate and unavoidable when discussing this play. It persistently suggests itself as the reader perceives certain key words or phrases in the discussions which leave them with a jarring feeling similar to that of hearing an instrument that is indistinctly out of tune, setting it apart from its surroundings, thereby making it instantly the focus of their attention. A prime example of this sort of discord is the explanation of Hector’s being “found in an antique chest” (Shaw *HH* 69). As such, it adds little to either plot or character development other than perhaps underscoring
Ellie’s perceived inexperience. Arguably, its import lies elsewhere. Anyone familiar with Oscar Wilde would immediately recognize this reference to *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Jack Worthing’s origins, who was found in a handbag. Indeed Rhoda B. Nathan states that *Heartbreak House* could be seen “as a sour parody” (“House with no Exit” 35) of Wilde’s play. While she thus acknowledges the connection, she does not develop it, dismissing its significance based on her claim that “Shaw deplored [the play] for its unabashed triviality” (35). This is somewhat problematic. Such summary disallowance based on Shaw’s claim of trivialness would appear to be contradicted by his dramatic use of a popular song as the final voice in the play. Arguably, it is this very triviality that lends the allusion its importance. Debatably, Shaw was responding to what he perceived as the “hyperaesthesia in which all theatrical values were altered. Trivial things gained intensity and stale things novelty” (Shaw *HH* 38). This very triviality and commonality of Wilde’s play provides an easily identifiable referent, one that Shaw can later take apart and rework to his own purposes.

While Shaw’s parallel revelation is a seemingly isolated comment, insignificant and easily lost in the rapid flow of conversation, it proves to be much more than a passing nod towards Wilde. When Wilde discloses Jack Worthing’s origins, it not only establishes Worthing’s true identity, it elucidates the ultimate irony of the play: pretence has become reality and reality pretence. This one-off comment becomes more than Shaw’s elaboration on Hector Hushabye’s particular form of “bunburying” (Wilde 6). When, as Barthes suggests, it is allowed to take shape, astute readers perceive Shaw’s discussion on the dichotomy of country/city realities, an interpretation that aligns with Gibbs argument about the implied safety of country houses. There is also another that can be extrapolated from Shaw’s reference to Wilde.

From the falsehood that is Hector’s lie and its subsequent revelation as such by Hesione, Shaw has subtextually linked both plays. When Wilde reveals the true identity of Jack/Ernest, he reveals the speciousness of an idealised country, a line of reasoning made earlier in *Earnest* through Algernon’s discussion of bunburying. In fact, the point should not be lost that this perceived ideal life is nothing more or less than dissimulation and escapism; it is the same point that Shaw makes when he gives a dual persona to Hector
Hushabye. His urban ego, Marcus Darnley, is fiction, an invention of Hushabye’s overactive imagination and desire to be more than another faceless, aimless country squire. Ellie is drawn to this false persona, believing it to be real and quickly withdraws her advances once she hears Hesione’s truth about Darnley. As the play progresses, readers discover that both versions (Darnley/Hushabye) are equally false and true. Hector “never boasts about anything he really did” (Shaw HH 72) only about things he imagined he did, whereas the fictional Marcus boasts only about the things that he has actually done. It is never their bravery that is brought to question; it is our perceptions of truth, honesty, and reality which need to be scrutinized.

If, as Shaw stated, the trivial is intensified and novelty can be gained from the stale, snippets such as this one should trigger larger meanings. Granted Wilde’s play is only referenced in this particular passage of Heartbreak House and on the surface seems somewhat inconsequential to the play’s grander allegory. However, what appears at first glance to be an innocuous echo starts to take on a larger importance when the play’s allusions are examined systemically. Debatably, texts are like people, they “do not have their virtues and vices in sets: they have them anyhow: all mixed up” (Shaw HH 72). In Heartbreak House, the allusions form a significant network of virtues and vices, becoming interconnected, intertextual references, which need to be fit together in order to come to terms with this play. They bind together the seemingly disparate conversations into what the 1921 London Times reviewer was looking for: an “ordered group of ideas”.

The echo of Oscar Wilde is no simple nod, and like many of the other implicit allusions, it has a definitive purpose. Through a relatively simple device and without ever actually mentioning it, alluding to an easily recognizable element from a source text forges a thematic link which Shaw further exploits for his own purposes. These allusions enable him to draw on his public’s understanding of these source texts without lengthy explanations as to the initial idea. From this simple echo of The Importance of Being Earnest, a pattern starts to emerge where slight changes in tone or phrasing, seemingly unrelated to the surrounding conversations, either serve to signal new borrowings or to substantiate previous echoes, advancing their argumentation. What Nathan sees as the “isolation and drift, the special torment of Existential hell [which] are the ongoing states of
HH's residents" ("House with no Exit" 38) is the same for Jack and Algernon. The difference between the two plays is that Wilde can resolve his particular hell and marries everyone off, re-establishing a proper order to the universe. Shaw cannot succumb to this form of triviality; Hector is already married, which denies any possibility of resolution of the situation between himself and Ellie. In fact, this situation simply serves to exacerbate the existing tension between the real and the ideal. It is this inability to succumb to triviality that for Nathan "anticipates Eliot's Waste Land in tone and its analysis of the problem of civilization undermined by triviality and nihilism"10 (39). The discussion has been voided of apparent meaning and substituted by fragmented distractions in an effort to assuage the horrors of reality. The heroic Danley has neither future nor life and, unlike Earnest, he cannot simply be discarded.

Shakespeare

The most evident allusions in Heartbreak House are Shakespearean. Curiously, for all the discussion the Shakespearean references have generated, only two are explicitly mentioned in the play: the first to Othello and the second to Romeo and Juliet. All the other Shakespearean echoes, for example King Lear, stem from what Shaw wrote about the play and are conspicuously absent from within the text of the play itself. The fact that the author of the play acknowledges the reference is perhaps what tends to lend it particular credit. More importantly, however, is the fact that this implicit reference to King Lear has become generally accepted. By conceding the implicit reference, the author and critics have created the precedent for further implicit readings that challenge readers to look beyond the obvious. More specifically, it is a call to examine more closely those allusions that are implied yet never explicitly referenced.

When Shaw provides a direct allusion to the 'romantic tragedies' of Othello and Romeo and Juliet by naming them, he challenges the generic expectations of less careful readers. There is a facile comprehension of an immediately accessible reading that

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10 For a more complete discussion of this idea, see Colin Wilson's book Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment (1969).
associates *Heartbreak House* with what Shaw perceived as certain types of melodrama,\(^{11}\) romantic and impossible love that inevitably end in heartbreak. It is seeming misdirection further re-enforced by the play’s title. More importantly, however, this sort of misdirection lends itself to an immediate association between Ellie and romantic ingénue archetypes, specifically Desdemona and Juliet. This becomes more than a simple challenge to the readers; in this instance, blithely following the expected creates dissonance between perception and reality. Ellie is anything but the romantic heroine and attempts to read her as such deny the play much of its import as Shaw himself points out in his comments St. John Ervine about the play’s reception in London.

Associating Ellie with the romantic ingénue is, arguably, a misreading. In fact, Ellie is much closer to Shaw’s archetype of the new woman than the ingénue. She understands the true nature of marriage and is able to calculate her advantages in any such match. Like a good businesswoman, she is out to make the best deal possible given her circumstances. When Ellie is sardonically accused of being promiscuous by Hesione when she declares how “wonderful what you good girls can do without anyone saying a word” Ellie replies: “If I didn’t make acquaintances that way I shouldn’t have any at all” (Shaw *HH* 68). Not only does Ellie demonstrate a clear understanding of the workings of the world, she portrays a pragmatic, businesslike attitude having little to do with the artless, unworldly ingénue. In this fashion, she is much closer to a Mrs. Warren than she is to a Desdemona.

Shaw’s intentions as to Ellie are quite clear. In a letter to St John Ervine about how the play was to be cast, Shaw emphatically claimed that the part was written for Ellen O’Malley, even though “she got taken up as an ingénue because she had golden hair, delicate hands and so forth”, but who “as an ingénue ... was about as interesting as a steam hammer closing licked envelopes” (Ervine 476). Nigel Playfair and Arnold Bennett, who were initially to produce the play in London, saw the role of Ellie as that of an ingénue, “a sweet little sexual attraction” (476), and they refused to cast Ellen O’Malley, who for them

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\(^{11}\) While we may not consider these plays melodrama, Shaw did, as attested by his reviews of these plays published in *Shaw on Shakespeare: An Anthology of Bernard Shaw’s Writings on the Plays and Productions of Shakespeare.*
was “too old to play” (475) such a part. It became a point of contention between the producers and Shaw, and ultimately persuaded Shaw to give the play to Fagan to produce, on the condition that Fagan use O’Malley. This was in direct contradiction to the author’s intentions for the character and the spirit of the play which Shaw claimed as the reason for his not allowing Playfair and Bennett produce the play.

It is unlikely that Ellen O’Malley’s playing the part explains sufficiently the failure of the London production, yet for Shaw “it had become a point of honour with Nigel Playfair and Arnold Bennett to maintain that I [Shaw] had ruined it by my [his] casting” (476). What is clear is that none of them anticipated the probable cause having anything to do with a disparity between the audience’s expectations and the play’s reality. The audience wanted the familiar romantic lead of a comedy of manners, Shaw gave them a play which was too unfamiliar and unanticipated and for which the audiences in London were apparently unready. Ervine claims that “the play was a failure in London, partly because of miscasting, but chiefly because the London audience was a failure” (477). I would add that the audience was not a failure, but that Shaw had transgressed their expectations for here the expected stale and trivial had been replaced by the unexpected and novel.

The above digression about the play’s casting and initial reception in London reveals much about Shaw’s intentions as to Ellie’s character type; they were patently clear and are supported by how the character is written. Any straightforward examination of her character shows the difficulty in aligning Ellie as ingénue with the spirit of the work and attempts to do so reveal what those initial critics argued, a disjointed play that lacks coherence. When the play opens, Ellie is sitting in the window seat, ostensibly in a reverie and admiring the view. While this is suggestive of the reverie of the ingénue, there is a disconcerting paradox about her that is found in her body language. She is clothed for the outdoors with her “body twisted to enable her to look out at the view” and a finger marking her place in a copy of the “Temple Shakespeare” (Shaw HH 50). Her twisted body suggests awkwardness and discomfort while her finger marking her place in the book reenforces this idea of being caught between two worlds, neither here nor there. This unstated idea derives from a closer examination of the symbolic nature of both her attitude and her costume.
When the curtain rises, the audience would know that she is reading Shakespeare from the specific edition that Shaw wrote in the stage instructions, but the specific play would have been unknown. Sir Israel Gollancz edited and published The Temple Shakespeare in the early 1900s, which, as claimed by *The New York Times*, was, "with its intelligent notes and glossary and the excellent Cambridge text," the "best way" of getting to know and understand Shakespeare ("Reading Shakespeare"). These editions were bound in red with gold lettering on the spine, and were portable, inexpensive, and readily available. Moreover, for Shaw’s purposes, they had the advantage of being easily and immediately recognizable, upon which Shaw draws, indicating certain aspects of Ellie’s character.

It is left to Hesione to reveal the precise play that Ellie had been reading, and when she flings down Ellie’s copy, she creates a certain ironic tension between readers’ perception and the play’s reality. Ellie, the presumed ingénue has apparently had her dreams dashed to the floor by the worldly Hesione, yet as the play progresses readers understand that this is not entirely accurate. After questioning Ellie about her ‘romance’ with Mangan, Hesione comes to the conclusion that there must be someone else, for “why else should [she] be reading *Othello*?” Hesione’s implication is that young girls do not read *Othello* for entertainment or for the love of the text itself; they read it for the romance. Hesione reinforces the superficiality of the association between Ellie and the typed ingénue, misdirecting the unsuspecting towards an incomplete understanding of the allusion.

Shaw’s 1897 review of *Othello* described the Victorian interpretation as “pure melodrama” (Brown 159), furthermore claiming that it had little to redeem it but superficial characterizations, with the exception of the character of Iago. Shaw claimed that Iago was a “true villain” motivated only by the “sheer love of evil” (157); moreover, he argued that there was little to recommend the play in general. When Ellie informs the readers that “all

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12 These Shakespeare editions sold over a quarter of a million copies per year and their demand was such that they are often seen as the forerunners of both the Everyman’s Library and the subsequent Penguin Classics Series. Mumby and Norrie (277)
the part about jealousy is horrible” (Shaw HH 66), she indicates that her interest lies not in romance and jealousy, but in the potential of the stories. Whether they are true or not is irrelevant; it is sufficient to believe them true for the stories to become valuable life-lessons. Not only does Shaw shift the argument from perceived truths and reality to one’s, in this case Desdemona’s, ability to see past pretence and falsehood to reality, similarly, he also demonstrates his reasoning behind the disquisitory plays.

The corollary of the association between Ellie and Desdemona created by the allusion to Othello would logically be an association between Mangan and Othello, the older man who is the love interest of a younger woman. But what if the association is intended with Iago instead? Shaw described Iago as a man who “has a steady eye to the main chance, and tries to combine money-gain and promotion with the luxury of mischief” (Wilson 157), a fitting description of Mangan, the “Napoleon of industry” (Shaw HH 63) who never loses sight of money. “He thinks of nothing else” (HH 102) with little or no regard to those he uses along the way who are no more to him “than a heap of squeezed lemons” (HH 95).

Alluding to Othello allows Shaw to draw on the received readings of the play, creating certain expectations in his playgoers, expectations he subsequently refashions to his own purposes, which Iser would argue is Shaw’s rearranging of meaningful structures to bring them more clearly into focus for the purposes of his argument. Drawing on Othello allows him to ostensibly set in place the necessary elements for a melodramatic, romantic tragedy, something he announces with the title of the play. More importantly, it also allows him to suggest other readings as potential sources for understanding the current situation. For example, blind acceptance of seemingly altruistic advice, specifically when that advice issues from false councils/councillors, leads to disaster. Othello’s most life-changing decision in the play is based on Iago’s interested reading of a situation and the subsequent false advice he gives to Othello. Arguably, it is Othello’s inability to determine truth from falsehood that brings about his downfall.

Under a guise of altruism, Mangan advises and helps Ellie’s father in his business by securing the necessary capital, supposedly for its expansion but understanding full well
the implications of his gesture. When Ellie introduces Mangan to Hesione, she claims that
Mangan neither invested nor lent her father the wanted capital, "he just simply made him a
present of it" (HH 63). Mangan's self-interests come before those of his fellows; like Iago,
Mangan is fully cognizant of what he did and self-interest forms the basis of a sound
business creed. Remorselessly, he informs Ellie that his "kind heart is all rot" (HH 95),
after all "business is business" (HH 93) and it was but a matter-of-fact situation to ruin her
father. Mazzini is blinded by or refuses to see the truth about Mangan. Yet Ellie the
businesswoman is fully cognizant of Mangan's true nature, and lacking any pretext of
ingeniousness she knowingly attempts to enter into a relationship with him as business
equal.

Mangan is not the only Iagoesque character in Heartbreak House; Hesione also
takes on a somewhat similar role. Initially, she appears to have only Ellie's best interests at
heart when she advises Ellie not to persist in her arrangement with Boss Mangan. However,
as the play progresses the reader realizes that her motives may not be as disinterested as
they first appear. Unlike the falsity of her hair, these motives are never revealed, for, as
Ellie says, Hesione is "enigmatic ... a sphinx" (HH 67), her motives and intentions are
shrouded. In fact, there is little necessity for them to be revealed other than through her
actions. She claims her intentions are of the best, stating that "it's not honourable or
grateful to marry a man you don't love" (HH 65). Such a statement clearly marks Hesione
more as the romantic than has any statement of Ellie's. Hesione's apparent goal is for Ellie
to live out Hesione's supposed 'fairy-tale' romance and marry for love, not money.
Hesione, the older married woman becomes, however unexpectedly, the required ingénue
and foil to the practical businesswoman. Ellie, who Hesione has infantilized throughout the
play, understands that a good marriage is like any other good business deal in that it is
calculated and advantageous for all parties involved, for after all "a woman's business is
marriage" (HH 97). The role reversal is unexpected yet effective. Outdated, outmoded false
ideals, such as Hesione's about romance, lead to heartbreak whereas Ellie's ideas cannot
because the heart is never involved. Here is the counter-argument to Wilde's romantic
resolution.
Reading Shakespeare is important, or at least so it appears to Mazzini Dunn, who reasons that it has provided his daughter with “remarkable strength of character” (Shaw HH 101), further affirming that Ellie’s reading of Othello is more insightful than expected. This learned strength of character provides Ellie with conscious choice: be the ingénue and perish like Desdemona or develop into a pragmatic woman of the world, one who understands its practical, pedestrian nature. Her desire to marry Mangan has little to do with romance and everything with avoiding exchanging one father for another, even if her father is “a very good man ... the soul of goodness” (HH 95). Ellie is no Desdemona; she is “hard – hard as nails” (HH 107) and a “matrimonial adventurer” (HH 106) with very particular pecuniary concerns. Ellie is not an ingénue and reading her as such undermines a basic premise of the play. Furthermore, conceiving her as the archetypal romantic lead fails to create the required tension between type and character and undermines the validity of subsequent changes in character.

The importance of the second explicit Shakespearean reference would appear limited in that it recalls the initial theme of romance created by the allusion to Othello. By specifically mentioning an easily recognizable play such as Romeo and Juliet, Shaw subtly continues to misdirect and challenge the unwary by once more evoking those ideas of romance and heartbreak that were played out in the opening scenes. Moreover, while seemingly pointing the audience towards an association of Ellie with the romantic ingénue, it serves instead to further dissolve the association. The conversation between Ellie and Mangan that follows the allusion has little if anything at all to do with romance and impossible loves: there is no tragic all or nothing, no impossible obstacles to overcome, no betrayal or misunderstanding to set ‘the plot’ in motion. In point of fact, it illustrates Ellie’s strength of character and her sensibilities as a businessperson who understands the concept of mutually beneficial contractual negotiations. As she says: “there is really no use in pretending that we are Romeo and Juliet” (HH 93), once more pointing out that love and romance are no guarantors for a successful marriage; however, sensibility, or if one prefers, knowing one’s business, is.

An alternative reading of Romeo and Juliet, of fate and chance, can provide another way to interpret Heartbreak House and the significance of this other Shakespearean
allusion. In Act III, Scene I, Romeo, after learning of Mercutio’s death, exits saying, “O, I am fortune’s fool!” (Romeo and Juliet line 141). The chain of events that set into motion the tragic ending of the play are arguably happenstance and not attributable to the hero’s hubris. In fact, during this pivotal scene, it is Tybalt who delivers the fatal blow “under Romeo’s arm” (94) that kills Mercutio. It is unclear whether Tybalt’s intended victim is Mercutio or Romeo. What is clear, however, is that Tybalt’s behaviour launches the sequence of incidents that leads to the play’s conclusion. In the context of Shaw’s play, Ellie’s reference to Romeo and Juliet can be seen as initiating the ensuing discussion about the consequences of one’s choices. As cogent beings there is a certain amount of control exercised over ‘fate’, where in her words “we can get on very well together if we choose to make the best of it” (HH 93). It is arguably an important notion within the play and hints towards the play’s final scene and closing argument. The inhabitants of Heartbreak House seem to have little, if any, control or direction over what is about to happen as they sit there “talking, and leave everything to Mangan and to chance and to the devil” (HH 154). Moreover, it is after all but by chance that the bombs fell in the gravel pit killing Dunn and Mangan; they could have just as easily fallen on the house and would certainly have provided a more definitive ending to the play.

The preceding are but two different ways of reading the echoing of Othello and Romeo and Juliet within Heartbreak House, easily overlooked, perhaps even anecdotal for some. However, these readings are consistent with the overriding conceit and if nothing else, aide in supporting the idea that they are not simply random acts, but a part of an interconnected whole.

Thomas Carlyle

These particular readings of the two explicitly stated Shakespearean allusions are possible when readers read beyond what Iser calls the “primary code” to the “secondary code”, and what Barthes terms a cultural and symbolic codification, the variable social and cultural codes of each individual reader (Reading 93) from which the allusions can generate meaning beyond the suburban. Here is where the allusions evoke complete, unique ideas based readers’ relationships with the texts being evoked. Once this happens, for both Iser
and Barthes, authors start to lose control over how their text will be read. Moreover, such loss of control forcibly shifts a moralistic text from the truly telling, or in Barthes terminology the ‘readerly’ to the presentation of possibilities and the ‘writerly’.

An example of this can be seen when Hesione refers to Mangan as “a Napoleon of industry” (HH 63). Superficially, it would appear to link Mangan and Napoleon, two great leaders one likes to hate but secretly admires for their apparent abilities. In 1843, Thomas Carlyle wrote an essay entitled “Past and Present” wherein he posits that the “Leaders of Industry ... are virtually the Captains of the World” (1917). Granted, Carlyle never used the specific term ‘Napoleon of industry’ nor does Shaw ever mention the connection between his play and Carlyle’s essay, and if the entire echo were merely Mangan’s sobriquet it would, in effect, be somewhat thin and could theoretically evoke any text about Napoleon. However, looking beyond the superficial, readers should notice parallels forming between the intrinsic messages of Heartbreak House and Carlyle’s essay.

True to the chosen form of a fantasia, this allusion, like the others, progresses through several variations and derivations stemming from an original theme. The first of these is the stated association between Napoleon and Mangan, an association not based on physicality but on character. Mangan is physically dull, colourless and lacks lustre, so “entirely commonplace that it is impossible to describe him” (HH 73). Hesione’s description is more telling, calling him a “perfect hog of a millionaire” (HH 59) and later stating that Mangan’s “soul lives on pig’s food” (HH 126). While these are not the usual descriptions one expects for a Napoleon, who was far from lacking in lustre, they certainly do describe a man driven by ambition to use any means for his ends. Linking Mangan to Napoleon, Hesione plants the needed idea that Mangan, too, is a man driven, one who is ready to sacrifice all in his attempts to attain his goals, something Mangan later confirms and which bolsters his connection to Iago.

When Hesione’s calls Mangan a pig, she creates a definite impression in the minds of the readers. According to Hans Biedermann, the pig is “a symbol of ignorance and voracious appetite” (265) and an equally apt description for Carlyle’s “Bucaniers [and] Chactaw [sic] Indians” (1918). None of these has ever been immediately identified with
either restraint or erudition, but rather the opposite. Carlyle claims that the “supreme aim in fighting” for the buccaneers and these Chactaws is to “amass scalps and money” (1918), not in an indifferent and uninterested manner, but as rapaciously as possible. The particular counter of success that is both scalps and money has become the new mammon, wealth supplied by the deity of the captains of industry. Their tally of success lies not in the beneficent life they lead, but is accounted for with the wealth they amass. This is precisely the tally that Mangan makes of himself and his aspirations. It is an aristocracy of money, not of nobility and chivalry, in a world-order that has lost its way and is adrift.

While Mazzini Dunn’s description of Mangan as “a baby ... really the most helpless of mortals” seemingly infantilizes him, its purpose is otherwise. When supplemented with Hesione’s description, Shaw types him as one of those miserly men of limited humanity who will voraciously “sit up all night thinking how to save sixpence” (Shaw HH 102). Mangan, like the other characters in this play, is a type, and while Shaw never made the direct reference, he is easily recognizable as a type, that Shakespearean Shylock, Dickensian Scrooge, or as an incarnation of Carlyle’s buccaneers and Chactaw Indians. Mangan typifies the new nobility of money and it is to these that Shaw counsels: learn your business or be doomed.

A further example linking Heartbreak House to Carlyle’s essay can be seen in Shotover’s apparent confusion between Billy Dunn, his former boatswain, and Ellie’s father Mazzini Dunn. When Shotover recognized the name Dunn, he mistakenly assumes Ellie’s father is the piratical Billy. It is a confusion that allows Shaw to create the association between businessmen and pirates, for Billy Dunn “was originally a pirate in China” (HH 52) who subsequently turned businessman. This Dunn’s appearance later in the play as a thief, con artist, and would-be entrepreneur reiterates this recurring theme associating certain types of businessmen with pirates, or in Carlyle’s term, “bucaniers,” savage men without nobility.

This twining – Shotover/Billy Dunn and Mazzini Dunn/Boss Mangan – allows Shaw to juxtapose spiritual insight and pecuniary blindness. It is a binary through which Shaw shows that not all businessmen are necessarily cut from the same cloth: not all
businessmen are pirates or necessarily evil. It is to their motives that readers must turn to distinguish between them. On the one hand, there are the leaders such as Mangan, whose unique measure of success in life is money, regardless of who is ruined in the process. On the other hand, the nobler, poetic types such as Mazzini Dunn are derided by the Mangans because, in the opinion of the latter, the former have failed; the Mazzini Dunns of the world have failed to amass the 'necessary' tokens of success and are therefore easily dismissed. While Mangan has firmly started towards success and seemingly knows his way, he has not yet arrived, for when he meets “a man that makes a hundred thousand a year, [he] takes off [his] hat to that man ... and call[s] him brother” (HH 75). This is a typical gesture of respect, not for the man but for his station, which in this case is determined by his wealth, not his nobility of spirit.

Carlyle’s true Captains of Industry are the “Fighters against Chaos, Necessity and the Devils and Jôtuns” (1917) who are the inevitable outcome of Mangan’s approach to business. The true captain of industry would “be a noble Master, among noble Workers” (1917) whereas the Mangans will lead to the sort of savagery that led to the reign of terror during the French Revolution. Failure to heed the warnings of the exploited can only lead to other reigns of terror until the “Laws of nature have themselves fulfilled” (1919). These true captains of industry will “lead on Mankind in that great, and alone true, and universal warfare; the stars in their courses fighting for them” (1917). When Shotover first meets Mangan, he echoes this same phrase, “the stars in their courses” (HH 74) as a justification for his interfering in Mangan’s plan to marry Ellie. As a reformed pirate, Shotover becomes one of Carlyle’s fighters against chaos, against devils and Jotuns such as the Mangans of this world. Ostensibly, the business under discussion here is the impending marriage between Ellie and Mangan, but the link’s import lies elsewhere. It serves to advance a major theme of the play, that of knowing one’s business. If one knows one’s business, the reigns of terror can be avoided whereas blindly following the devils and Jotuns only leaves one in the dark, floundering or adrift and facing a reign of terror.

While the duo Mangan/Billy Dunn are associated with Carlyle’s buccaneer and savages, the opposing duo of Shotover/Mazzini Dunn are the redeeming models of the nobler, chivalric businessmen prized by Carlyle; they are men who have learned their
business. In Hesione’s description of Mazzini, readers find an idealized businessman fighting against chaos. Echoing Carlyle’s text, Mazzini is “a soldier born for freedom ... [who] has been fighting for freedom in his quiet way” (HH 60) since birth. Such a description provides Hesione with a facile explanation as to why Mazzini is such a poor, failed businessman when compared to the acceptable success of Mangan. This link between the two ideas is furthered by Ellie’s explanation that Mazzini’s “parents were poets” (HH 63), providing him with the “noblest ideas” (HH 63) in lieu of a profession, something which was beyond his parent’s means. Noble ideas do not put food on the table and necessity forces Mazzini to become a businessman, the argued antithesis and anathema to the noble, artistic soul. This is an outcome that Hesione imagines has his parents’ “eyes in fine frenzy rolling” (HH 63), indicative of the imagined madness of those out of step with accepted ideas. Yet with Mazzini, Shaw presents a model of a businessman who knows his business and whose ambitions are limited to his needs, preferring the nobility of integrity and honesty over accumulating wealth.

Like his pair Mazzini, Captain Shotover has with time and effort become one of the chivalric, noble businessmen whose current goal is spiritual enlightenment. Shotover attributes his change from pirate to a noble fighter for freedom to his having escaped his demon wife and, to his search for spiritual enlightenment, that “seventh degree of concentration” (HH 53), with the help of a mahatma. By so doing, he has become a sort of enlightened entrepreneur. Unlike the piratical Dunn/Mangan, Shotover’s measure of success is not numerable in either money or scalps; it is his ability to transcend reality to the truth. Money is pedestrian, a means to an end, a way of providing sustenance and shelter. Shotover’s experience should make him the voice of experience, the sage from whom all can learn. Yet, his wisdom is ignored by the occupants of Heartbreak House. Their short sightedness does not allow them to see beyond the supposed madness any more than the supposed devilry and sorcery.

Carlyle’s essay discusses the latent potential for deliverance that exists within humanity and that needs to be called upon in order to avoid another “reign of terror”. It is a call to arms wherein he challenges the noble workers to “Awake ... in the one true war ... to shake off your enchanted sleep, and live wholly ... [for] there is in you a sleepless dauntless
energy, the prime-matter of all nobleness in man ... [where] the future Epic of the World rests not with those that are near dead, but with those that are alive, and those that are coming into life” (1919). The sleepless bliss that is ignorance can no longer continue; blind trust has brought humanity to anarchy and “chaotic desolation” (1919). This is Mazzini’s “expected revolution ... [and the] frightful smash-up” (HH 156) that is heralded by Beethoven and Wagner at the end of the play. It is a call that the inhabitants of Heartbreak House fail to heed. The slumber into which Ellie falls at the curtain’s rise is echoed by Shotover’s going to sleep with the curtain’s fall with the exclamation that “the ship is safe” (HH 160), unaware that the danger has not yet passed.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Much has been made of Shotover’s madness; indeed, “mad” is the adjective most often used to describe and to typify his character. Hesione describes him as being as “mad as a hatter,” but in the same breath as being “quite harmless, and extremely clever” (HH 61), neither of which would describe Lewis Carroll’s Mad Hatter. Ariadne’s description is much the same in that her “father is a very clever man,” and however old and forgetful he may seem, “it is sometimes very hard to feel quite sure that he really forgets” (HH 58). Shotover’s perceptible madness lies in the fact that he is out of step with the world around him. His own explanation for the madness is in the encroaching sleep of both age and death, for “the dreams are conquering” and all that is left is madness, that “happiness of yielding and dreaming instead of resisting and doing” (HH 130). In this yielding comes madness, that loss of control over an apparently rational world by succumbing to the irrational and uncontrollable worlds of dreams. It is death, both metaphorical and literal. Perhaps the madness comes from having attained a certain enlightenment, of having learned his business, only to realize he is alone in his cognizance.

The above paradoxical descriptions make it somewhat difficult to accept Shotover’s madness at face value. In fact, as he demonstrates from the very beginning of the play, he is the least self-deluded and most self-aware of all the characters. If anything, his pretence of madness points out his inconsistent self-portrayal. Moreover, this observable changeability underlines another facet of the dichotomy between reality and pretence argued earlier with
Hector’s particular form of bunburying. Shaw through Shotover continues to create doubt, leading the reader to question the difference between reality and fantasy. So when Hector good-humouredly calls Shotover “the Ancient Mariner” (HH 131), he ostensibly underscores Shotover’s seeming madness while alluding to Samuel Coleridge’s well-known ballad, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” first published in 1798. Incidental in appearance and said only in passing, it would appear to have no further consequence on the reading of the play; however, Shaw throws a new light onto the fabricated madness with this passing remark: Shotover’s madness is pretence and readers need to recognize it as such. A more tangible purpose of the pretence would be misdirection and a plea to readers’ intellect.

By shifting focus through different cultural codes and by looking back to the play’s opening stage directions and Shaw’s initial description of Captain Shotover, readers should realize that Hector’s sobriquet for Shotover is far from incidental. Shaw describes Shotover as “a wild-looking old gentleman”, “an ancient but still hardy man with an immense white beard” (HH 51). Granted, it is not an exact echoing of Coleridge’s description of his mariner, who is described initially as a “grey-beard loon”13 with the “glittering eye” (line 3), and neither of these descriptions creates a relation between the characters and madness. Quite the contrary, they create the impression of intelligence, an understanding and quickness of spirit that has yet to be tempered by age. That both are past their physical prime is obvious as seen in the whiteness of their beards; but it is also a colour quality often attributed to wise old men whose passions have been tempered by time. Herein lies the paradox of these characters: while the other characters deceive readers into perceiving Shotover and the Mariner as ‘mad’ based on the ‘glitter’ or ‘wildness’ of their regard, it in fact makes them both curiosities. These are men who are out of step with the perceived reality but who have gained wisdom by virtue of their age, a wisdom dismissed as madness hence easily disregarded.

13 According to the OED, Coleridge’s use of ‘loon’ in this sense is that of a boor, a lout, an ill-bred unmannered and untaught person and aligns more closely with Shotover’s general character than with more contemporary ideas associating madness with being ‘loony’ or lunatic (“loon”).
Hesione’s description of Shotover, to say the least, is ambiguous. By saying that “he is as mad as a hatter ... but quite harmless,” she reinforces what both Nurse Guinness and Ariadne have already implied about Shotover. More interestingly, in the same breath Hesione also tells the reader that Shotover is “extremely clever" (HH 61). There is no indication here of diminished capacity, of someone whose “mind wanders from one thing to another” (HH 54) out of senility as implied by Guinness. There is, however, the implication of a certain mental dexterity unaligned with the physical hardiness, once again someone who is out of step with the expected type. Shotover’s actions are not those of a frenzied madman but of someone who demonstrates strength of will and understanding beyond the immediate. In this regard, he is not unlike Coleridge’s Mariner, whose mesmerizing glitter in the eye enables him to hold in thrall the wedding guests “like a three years’ child” (line 15). In both their cases, it is strength of will attributable to that which is outside the known realm, an otherworldly intelligence explained as devilry, demons or witchcraft.

This is where superficial differences in their physical aspects become less important in establishing the link between the two. It is no coincidence that both captains “stood on the bridge for eighteen hours in a typhoon” (HH 124) and that for both, their most profound life experiences are based in the mysticism and otherworldliness that they found, not at home, but in the South Seas, where the distinctions between reality and fantasy are revealed under the mystical light of the moon. Both Coleridge and Shaw employ the same extended metaphor, that of a ship adrift, to discuss, from within the confines of a hauntingly similar microcosm to that of the drawing-room, binaries such as right and wrong, night and day, truth and falsehood, and reality and fantasy.

The Mariner and Shotover both claim witchcraft as the cause for their current situations of enlightenment. Moreover, both Shaw’s play and Coleridge’s poem rely heavily on trances and sleep, dream states or shifted realities to reveal unconscious truths that would otherwise remain unknown. Additionally edifying of the connection between the two is the fact that in both, death and destruction fall from the sky. For Coleridge such ruin comes where “a roaring wind” and “the lightning fell” and “the dead men gave a groan” (308-30). It is only “a lonely flute” or “an angel’s song” which can make “the heavens be
mute” (364-66). All of these are echoed in Shaw’s “heaven’s threatening growl of disgust” 
(HH 140) culminating in that “terrific explosion” that kills both Billy Dunn and Alfred 
Mangan and is followed by Randall’s final success “in keeping the home fires burning on 
his flute” (HH 160), Shaw’s angel’s song.

It is in Act III, shortly after Hector baptizes Shotover the Ancient Mariner that one 
finds the most revealing of the echoes to Coleridge’s poem. Shotover, in a conversation 
with Mazzini and Ariadne, claims that “at sea, nothing ever happens to the sea” (HH 155) 
implying that if something were to happen it would be to the passengers aboard, to those 
who do nothing. By the same token, the Mariner’s problems do not stem from the sea, but 
from his inability to guide and lead his men to safety, from his not knowing his business as 
a captain. When the Mariner destroys his guide, the albatross, without replacing it, his ship 
falters, languishes, and all is eventually lost. The Mariner is only able to save himself once 
he understands the truth of his situation; he needs to learn to navigate, something Shotover 
repeats several times. It is a thematic link that Shaw draws attention to repeatedly, an 
insistence that both informs about the tenor of his argument and links together these 
seemingly random conversations. For example, when Shotover describes the moon as 
growing “from sickle to arc lamp” (HH 155) he echoes Coleridge’s “horned moon, with 
one bright star” (210), a light which reveals reality. A further example is found in the 
manner this light illuminates the after-effects of typhoons and the “flying-fish [that] glitter 
in the sunshine like birds” (HH 155) echoing Coleridge’s “water-snakes ... in tracks of 
shining white” (274-75).

In much the same way that the reference to Romeo and Juliet serves as a recalling of 
an initial theme introduced by Othello, so does Hector’s calling Shotover the Ancient 
Mariner. Ellie, as seen in the opening stage directions, “slumbers” at the helm of her life 
without parents or friends for direction to warn her against the dangers that lie ahead in 
Heartbreak House. Shaw, with this allusion to the “The Ancient Mariner”, takes up this 
theme of not heeding guidance, developing it further, playing on the ideas that were 
previously embedded.
When in the final moments of the play Ellie asks Shotover what it is that happens at sea that is not worth mentioning, she addresses him as “O Captain! My Captain!” (HH 156). With this simple phrase she creates a link between the play and Whitman’s poem of the same name, written in 1865, and recalls a motif introduced earlier in the play. There is similarly a new twist, a reworking of a theme to Walt Whitman’s: the problems inherent in naive trust in Providence and the failure in one’s duty to pilot with the safety of one’s passengers in mind. Whitman’s poem serves as a foil to the ideas that Shaw creates with the allusion to Coleridge’s poem, a distinction that lies in the comparison of three captains: Whitman’s, Coleridge’s and Shaw’s. Like the initial allusion to Coleridge and with this allusion to Whitman’s poem, Shaw recalls his reader’s attention to an important discussion: that of not knowing one’s business.

Contrarily to the pragmatic, businesslike strong woman, in an almost perverse character flaw, Ellie naively thinks that security and prosperity can only be found by attaching oneself to the correct captain/father. After having given up Mangan she places her confidence in Shotover, the providential “drifting skipper” who, regardless of his age and apparent decrepitude, is still searching for the correct course to steer via his seventh degree of concentration. Unfortunately, by his own admission, the captain is failing and with the weariness and rotting of age comes heartbreak, a result of “yielding and dreaming instead of resisting and doing” (HH 130). Ellie’s search for a safe haven with the captain creates a conundrum; she has yet to learn her business and it would appear to indicate regression on her part instead of growth. Through the course of the play, Ellie replaces one father with another. It is a course of action that contradicts the idea of Ellie as one of Shaw’s new women, an independent, free thinker who has learnt her business. Instead, Ellie disconcertingly has become influenced by the atmosphere of Heartbreak House - as if along the way she has become as lost as everyone else. This doubly underscores the pessimism and loss that is inherent in this house. Ellie, symbolizing the only hope for renewal, allies herself with Shotover, symbolizing the past. Whatever hope there is, whatever lesson is to be learned, cannot be found in the present any more than it can be
found in the past. Dissimilar to Wilde’s, Shaw’s resolution can hold little or no promise as there seems nowhere to turn.

Unlike Whitman’s captain who, even though he has “fallen cold and dead” (line 8), resists and manages successfully to navigate the storm, sacrificing himself to save his fellow travellers, Coleridge’s and Shaw’s captains are unable or unwilling to do this. Whitman argues that placing one’s trust in the right “captain” / “father” should ensure the moral victory, and “from fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won” (20). Coleridge’s captain yields to the dreams and loses all; Shotover is losing the battle and realizes that he too will finally yield, but not without a final warning that there is “nothing but the smash of the drunken skipper’s ship on the rocks” (HH 155); he has reached a point of no return. Ellie too has abdicated, blindly placing her trust in Providence embodied by a seeming madman.

There can be little doubt as to the outcome, for he who trusts to Providence is incapable of knowing his own business, that of navigating; this is Shotover’s final warning. While Shotover may have known his business, and tried to heed Coleridge’s epigraph of being “watchful for the truth” and to “distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night” (line 430), he has failed. Even though the Ancient Mariner is delirious and Whitman’s captain dies, they at least could prevail on Providence to find a partial safe haven. Shotover would seem to be saying that this is no longer possible for the occupants of Heartbreak House. They have gone too far and are where they are because “one of the ways of Providence with drunken skippers is to run them on the rocks” (HH 155). Enter the deus ex machina in the form of a Zeppelin dropping bombs to the repeating refrain of explosions, disaster, and a resounding “breakers ahead” (HH 156). Death and destruction rain down from the sky and those claiming to know the truth are destroyed: the captains of industry represented by Mangan and Billy Dunn are blown to pieces in the gravel pit, a fate similar to that of the established worldly church, as denoted by the destruction of the rectory, yet not the church suggesting a potential for spiritual renewal.
Joseph Conrad

It is not only the ability to recognize the difference between dream and reality, but also what happens when one yields to the siren call of the dreams which brings to mind another famous captain who has succumbed, losing his way, his life, his very humanity. Joseph Conrad’s voyage into the *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1902, tells the story of a ‘civilized’ and ‘enlightened’ European who embarks on a rescue mission, only to discover that he is the one who needs saving. Conrad draws on the trope of a boat at rest to frame the narrative of his book, starting and ending his tale from within its confines on the Thames estuary, “waiting for the turn of the tide” (3). It is an imagery that Shaw also draws upon in *Heartbreak House* as witnessed by the importance of the set, something that will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis. The allusion seems perhaps coincidental, and while there is no explicit mention of Conrad’s novel in the play, the implicit parallels in their imagery and respective themes are too important to be summarily dismissed.

The most apparent parallel between these two works centres on those magic spells that both Shaw and Conrad associate with the darkness which comes from economic exploitation. Kurtz is consumed by his materialism and covetousness in a fashion that has “sealed his soul ... by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation” (Conrad 72); Shotover too had “sold himself to the devil” (*HH* 54). For both men, it was a devil of greed and corruption encountered in distant, foreboding places filled with unknown darkness. Kurtz found his devil in the Congo, Shotover in Zanzibar. Granted these are not the same place; they are, however, closely related by imperial and economic conflicts where England and Germany were indirect belligerents in an economic war waged through colonized third parties. Moreover, Africa and Zanzibar were easily confused as the latter was term liberally used in newspapers such as *The London Times* when referring to much of the East African coastal areas. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that these ‘dark places’ become the location for demonry and witchcraft especially given the publications and public conferences given on the explorations of Dr. David Livingston and Sir Henry Morton Stanley during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Collectively they did
much to perpetuate images of Africa as the ‘Dark Continent’ a land of evil and foreboding places filled with brutes in need of civilizing, Christian influences.\textsuperscript{14}

Kurtz’s ‘witch-wife’, a dominant black woman warrior, embodies his lust for treasure in the form of ivory. Her mastery over Kurtz was so complete that she was able to replace any noble ideals he may have had into a “withered” and “consumed” thing (Conrad 72). A similar infertile and deadly fate awaited many of the Europeans who looked to possess the riches of Africa. Shotover’s attempt at possession of similar riches resulted in his siring two demon daughters, Hesione and Ariadne, squarely placing him as both father and captain to the evils of empire: Ariadne as Britannia abroad exploiting native populations and Hesione as Britannia at home, reaping the unearned benefits of said exploitation. With this, Shaw blames the squandering of the wealth of indigenous populations on a “pampered, leisure class,” a class that is blithely ignorant of what they have done. Moreover, Shotover’s request to “give me deeper darkness [for] Money is not made in the light” (HH 91) starkly recalls the darkness that envelopes Conrad’s story of descent into madness in the pursuit of financial gain through exploitation.\

Voicing perhaps a general perception of the times, Conrad has an unnamed travelling companion of Marlow’s claim that the only reason for a white man to go to Africa is “to make money of course” (29). It was certainly the piratical Shotover’s reason to travel to the dark places where money is made. Conversely, Shotover and Ellie’s alliance formed at the end of the play cannot call forth the same possibility; it can be nothing other than fruitless. Shotover, “the mummy” (HH 148) who is “half dead,” is Ellie’s “natural captain, spiritual husband and second father” (HH 149) and would appear to indicate that nothing good could arise from such a union. He is asleep, passively being led into this ‘incestuous’ relationship that bears no good.

\textsuperscript{14} Accounts of Stanley’s search for Dr. Livingstone were widely published in papers such as The London Times and The New York Times as were his lecture tours in both the United Kingdom and the United States during the last decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.
Hesione provides another parallel between the two worlds of Conrad and Shaw. When in the final act she tells us of a “splendid drumming” that she can hear: “It came from a distance and then died away” (HH 140). Conrad used the image of distant drumming in the night to create foreboding and tension, not only to underscore both Marlow’s descent into Kurtz’s world and Kurtz’s final downfall, but also as a tocsin to be heeded. Through Marlow’s perception, Conrad attributes “the tremor of far-off drums ... a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild” with “a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country” (Conrad 29). Shaw uses the same aural image, turning the drums that Hesione hears into a “presentiment” for Mangan, a vague recognition of impending doom. By thus connecting Kurtz and Mangan, Shaw reenforces the link between the financial exploiters, both those at home in Heartbreak House and those abroad and in the darkest corners of the empire. Shaw introduces this very same idea at the beginning of the play with the introduction of Shotover the merchant captain, the arrival of his daughter Ariadne, mistress of government house, the lacquered Chinese tea tray and the ensuing discussion of the merits of both Chinese and Indian teas. These all symbolically link Heartbreak House and its inhabitants not only to the extended British Empire, but to its exploitation of indigenous populations.

Hector further attributes the “splendid drumming” to “heaven’s threatening growl of disgust at useless futile creatures” (HH 140). By so doing, he not only reinforces the initial link between Shaw and Conrad created by the end of the first act, he also admonishes readers to learn their business or suffer the consequences, for “out of that darkness some new creation will come to supplant us as we have supplanted the animals or the heavens will fall in thunder and destroy us” (HH 140). There is to be no “peace for the old and hope for the young” (HH 139) found in the darkness of night. Henceforward, instead of bringing sleep and refreshment, darkness brings death and destruction.

Associating Heart of Darkness and Heartbreak House allows Shaw to expand the trope of the boat and the voyage into an expanded metaphor. The imperialistic and capitalistic exploitations of indigenous populations for the maintenance of a pampered leisured class so recklessly oblivious and adrift have come to a standstill, like the boats that frame both narratives. Failure to know one’s business and to recognize the difference
between reality and fantasy have, as it does Kurtz and as predicted by Carlyle, rained destruction on the profiteers of exploitation. Furthermore, the failure to see and understand this, to awake and to distinguish reality from fantasy has only precipitated the inevitable demise of a fruitless marriage.

H. G. Wells

Furthering his arguments of dereliction, Shaw draws on H. G. Wells’s 1910 novel *The Sleeper Awakes* wherein readers are presented with these same motifs of sleep and dreams intertwined with the arguments against domestic and international economic exploitation. Wells’s novel finds a man who has been asleep for over two hundred years abruptly brought back to consciousness during a worker’s revolt only to discover that while he was asleep, he had become the proprietor of the world through the machinations of his bankers. It is a world in chaos where the workers have been manifestly enslaved for the benefit of a small, pampered leisured class, all on the supposed dictates of a man who had been asleep for over two hundred years. Shortly after his awakening in this foreign world, the Sleeper realizes this is not a dream and this mysterious England that is his is under attack by outside forces. The aims of the attackers are ostensibly altruistic, to preserve the sleeper’s life as owner of the world, but in reality it is a police force known as the “Senegalese Division of our African Agricultural Police” (Wells Sleeper 186) which has been brought by the financiers to suppress the revolt and to maintain the status-quo. It is the same threat that Shaw brandishes twice in *Heartbreak House*: first with the “millions of blacks over the water for them to train and let loose on us” (*HH* 87), and second with those new creatures who “out of the darkness” (140) must inevitably come to supplant the inhabitants of Heartbreak House. The threat is not internal; it is external and comes from the exploited and enslaved.

Like Shotover the “ancient mariner”, Wells’s sleeper is “an anachronism . . . a man out of the past—an accident” (*Sleeper* 225). The reader is led to believe they are both incapable of comprehending the forces at work in the world in which they find themselves. Intriguingly, neither is nearly as incapable as readers are told. Shaw and Wells use these anachronistic voices from the past as voices of reason and warning, as if to ask us to listen
to history. But nobody listens, nobody sees. Shotover’s dream-induced world has reached a
turning point where he now needs alcohol to enhance his ability to see clearly and to
provide the necessary guidance. However, this imagined prescience fails as well for his
warning can be no more than an ineffectual shout of “breakers ahead” (HH 157) that goes
unheeded. Wells’s sleeper is even less capable; his voice has been silenced by time and
evolution, those immediate consequences of blissful sleep and the incapacity to distinguish
reality from fantasy.

In both Shaw’s play and Wells’s novel, the threat to peace and stability comes from
without in the form of droning Zeppelins flying over from France, a judicious coincidence
perhaps. Nevertheless, it allows Shotover to echo Wells’s sleeper when he discusses the
importance of a destructive power as the only way to win from the likes of the Mangans,
Randalls, Dunns and “all the rest of the parasites and blackmailers” (HH 87), what Carlyle
called buccaneers and ‘chactaws’, and would seem to include most of the inhabitants of
Heartbreak House. It is through Shotover that we learn that there can be no hope for these
parasites and blackmailers; they cannot be spared for they have the power to kill those who
oppose them. Eerily recalling Wells’s Senegalese soldiers, Shotover confirms the privilege
of force to dictate right from wrong and to maintain their entitlement to the exploitable
resources, “theyre [sic] going to do it. Theyre [sic] doing it already” (HH 87).

In order to establish and maintain the dichotomy between fantasy and reality, sleep
becomes a crucial metaphor that is introduced in the opening stage directions. Shaw
informs his reader that Ellie is dozing “into a slumber” (HH 50). Obviously not of the
household, as indicated by her position and dress, she ironically sits quite at her ease, in a
somnolent state, having suspended her reading. As noted by James Woodfield, this
introduction into the world of Heartbreak House is the reader’s first indication that, like in
a dream, this reality may not be all that it appears to be, and it sets the tone for that
dreamlike state that configures the forthcoming pseudo action. Furthermore, he argues that
in breaking with convention, where normally the reader expects an initiating action to set
the plot in motion, Shaw confronts them with a curious void, a deliberate inaction.
Woodfield explains that the action that does confront the reader is Ellie, in her lethargic
state, letting fall that most recognizable of cultural icons, the Temple Shakespeare that she
had been reading before slipping into her dreamlike state. This unintended crashing of a
cultural symbol is what sets the action in motion, for not only does it awaken Ellie, but it
‘awakens’ Nurse Guinness, who drops her tray of rum bottles. Echoing Alice’s fall down
the rabbit hole and startling the white rabbit, the reader is plunged into this shifted reality.  

Within the first pages of the play, the reader is introduced to two other characters
that are also awakened into this altered world. Though arguably a world of their own
reality, it is as unrecognizable to them as it is to the reader. Upon her arrival home after
some twenty-three years, Ariadne Utterword is surprised that there is no one to greet her,
asking “is everybody asleep?” (HH 54). She neither is recognized nor recognizes her
family: Nurse Guinness mistakes Ariadne for a younger version of herself, Ariadne
mistakes Ellie for a niece, and Shotover denies knowing her, claiming that his daughter is
“upstairs asleep” (HH 56). Hesione ‘awakes’ after having found a comfortable armchair in
which she “went off to sleep” (HH 58) to find that her reality too has shifted.

This critical motif of sleep is restated in Act II. Ostensibly it is used to elucidate the
character of Boss Mangan. Mangan is hypnotized by Ellie, which allows her to discuss his
attributes and worth as husband, man, and captain of industry with both Hesione and
Mazzini. It permits Mangan, from a dream-like state, to hear the ensuing conversation on
the merits of a romantic versus a pecuniary marriage. Knowingly undertaken, marriage is a
business contract where neither party should harbour false ideals about romantic love.
Because he is supposedly asleep, the conversation can be held without the usual constraints
between suitors.

Mangan’s awakening reveals much: he is without volition both in sleep and while
awake as demonstrated by the ease and care with which Hesione “the siren” dismisses
reality to Mangan’s full acceptance wherein he is reduced to “only a Boss: just that and
nothing else” (HH 112). Paradoxically, it is his dogged “I believe in dreams” which
displays the inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. His ‘dreams’ have shown

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15 For a more detailed analysis of the allusion to Lewis Carroll’s story, see James Woodfield’s “Ellie in
Wonderland: Dream and Madness in Heartbreak House".
him the reality of the relationship between himself and Ellie, yet when confronted with this reality he refuses to see it for what it is, preferring the artificial 'reality' he perceives when he is ‘awake’, an echoing of Shaw’s warnings at the beginning of the play not to accept things for what they seem. If the reader still has not understood, Shaw, through Hesione, injects a further warning that dreams “go by contraries”.

Cognizance of reality comes with awakening as do the moments of epiphany in the play, those moments of revelation of the truths about one’s self. This is further established in Act II in the exchange between Ellie and Captain Shotover. Ellie the matrimonial predator has set her sights on Captain Shotover. Minimally eccentric, this ‘mad’, gruff, ancient mariner, like his namesake, has in his dotage come to the knowledge and understanding about what is real and what is false. With age comes understanding but also the blurring between reality and dream. In a relatively clear description of the degeneration that many people suffer due to ageing, Shotover is forced to “go in and out”, where “the dreams come by themselves”. With age, one “will never be free from dozing and dreams: the dreams will steal upon your work every ten minutes unless you can awaken yourself with rum” (HH 129-30), which only provides a different sort of dream. Freudian dream interpretation would have us believe that dreams are unknown realities requiring a key to decode. Shotover is fully cognizant of this; with age has come imperfect understanding and the drive to more fully understand, hence his quest for his seventh degree of concentration – his attempt to learn his business.

Wells’s novel also ends with an epiphanic awakening while bombs and airships fall from the sky. Wells writes: “The vision had a quality of utter unreality. Who was he? Why was he holding so tightly with his hands? Why could he not let go? In such a fall as this countless dreams have ended. But in a moment he would wake” (Wells Sleeper 256). Shaw’s play, however, does not end with an awakening; the reader is left with the impression that the characters want the dream to continue, that the passengers on the ship of fools are languorously looking forward to another “glorious experience”. There has been no epiphany, no realization that the reality they have desperately been holding onto has been destroyed. This ship of fools will continue to drift, never to find safety because they
have failed to learn their business. And even though the beacons are metaphorically lit to show the way home, there is no one to see them.

The dream that frames Heartbreak House also seemingly ends with falling bombs, judgement and angelic music, and questions whether we have yet learnt our business. The difference between Wells’s novel and Shaw’s play is that the latter ends with the realization that the dream is not yet over. The way of life that has been tightly held onto has not yet been destroyed. God may be homeless and reduced to an errant beggar, but for the moment “the ship is safe” (HH 160). However, the question is begged, just how safe and for how long? The passengers on Shaw’s ship of fools who have survived return to their somnolent, dreamlike state and look forward to another “glorious experience”; after all, nothing has really changed, nothing has been learned.

Lena Ford

As the ship of state flounders on the rocks, its passengers asleep, blindly trusting to Providence, the play ends with a final twining between allusion and symbol, a joining of failed hopes for that lost generation who will never make it home. Shaw places in the hands of Randall a flute with the symbolic ability to produce angel song and to silence the heavens. The flute not only serves as another thematic link to Coleridge’s ballad, it is equally the musical counterpoint to Hesione’s “splendid drumming in the sky”, “heaven’s threatening growl” (HH 140). Randall’s first attempt is silenced by Lady Utterword, who dismisses the attempt as vulgar and misplaced. Paradoxically, like Randall the failed diplomat, this voice of the Empire is equally unable to silence the heavens. When the heavens explode with judgement, Randall “cant [sic] get a sound” out (HH 158). It is not until the danger has passed and the “two practical men of business” (HH 160) have been destroyed that he is able to produce a sound. Shaw gives to this flute, the angelic voice of the heavens, the final word. For when the final curtain falls, “Randall at last succeeds in keeping the home fires burning on his flute” (HH 160), by playing a well-known war song composed in 1914 by Ivor Novello with lyrics by Lena Ford, an obscure American poet who was killed during a Zeppelin raid on London in March of 1918 (Lamb).
The splendid drumming has become a mournful tribute to the lost. In what is the ultimate paradox of the play, Randall, despite his best efforts, has been unable to get his flute to ‘speak’, and it is only at the last, when all else has failed, that he is finally able to play down the curtain. The reference embeds a call for the infamous stiff upper lip, the stereotypical British composure in the face of peril, what Massingham would have called the “physical courage and energy, and their moral equivalent, devotion to the national life when in peril from foreign violence” (qtd. in Miller 22). Yet in the heat of the action Randall was unable to play due to his “trembling” lips and only once the danger has passed can he find his voice. Whether his success is tremulous or whole-hearted we know not for on this point the author is silent. However, the irony of the entire situation suggests the former, especially given that this finale is in counterpoint to the jubilation and anticipation of Ellie and Hesione.

According to Christopher Innes and Brigitte Bogart, the song is a call to arms, a patriotic recruiting song easily recognizable by all (Innes and Bogart 147). When Randall, the stereotypical parasitic aristocrat and dilettante (147) of foreign affairs, finally gets his flute to speak by playing the song, we have reached the end of the play. The call to war goes unheeded because the danger apparently has passed. Yet in typical Shavian fashion, the ending has not been so neatly tied up. Nothing has really changed, there has been no real catharsis, no great outpouring of emotions, no great message, only the single voice calling the boys home. Is the end to be that “silver lining / Through the dark clouds shining, / Turn the dark cloud inside out / ‘Til the boys come home” (Ford line 13-16)? The fact that the play was published and produced after the war was over, that the horror of the trenches was known and that hundreds of thousands never did make it home, coupled with Shaw’s refusal to change anything about the play, suggests something more. This call to that proverbial stiff upper lip, to blindly do one’s duty and comply, failed to show the way home. In Shaw’s hands, the home fires become a beacon, and like the splendid drumming in the sky that so stirs both Ellie and Hesione, it attempts to shed some light on how to “Help a nation in distress” (18). The irony is that these beacons only serve to illuminate the fact that many of those who heeded the call never made it home.
In this chapter, an attempt has been made to demonstrate how some of the more obvious allusions come together to support, and in some cases present, Shaw's argument. This happens when we take up Shaw's challenge to look beyond that "suburban face value". Looking beyond their immediate significance to those secondary codes, both cultural and symbolic, astute readers recognize how these allusions are important to understanding and piecing together this complex play. Arguably there are other allusions, some perhaps more obscure than others, but each in their own way contributing to creating meaning for play and its conceit. Fully appreciating how these allusions work together requires that readers of this play open up to its possibilities. It is insufficient to simply hear the conversations; readers need to actively listen and to participate in the conversation by filling in the blanks that this allusive text creates. In the following chapter I will examine how Shaw's use of a crucial symbol in the play, the ships, brings together many of the disparate allusions, forming a possible coherent whole to his conceit.
Chapter Four

Ship Ahoy: Consolidating the Allusions through the Framing Symbols

As we have seen, taking up Shaw's challenge of surreptitious reading requires of readers to rise above the pedestrian suburban and to delve into the clandestine. The challenge has been to not explicitly trust the author and his words but to trust in ourselves as readers to transcend the author. Our attempts to follow Nurse Guinness's advice have led us to look past the obvious and to review some of the previously documented explicit allusions. This re-examination of how these allusions contain the potential to elicit complimentary readings of the play establishes a precedent for scrutinizing further some implicit and seemingly innocuous allusions and their effect on possible readings of the play. These latter allusions have oftentimes been occulted in Shaw's perceived verbosity, however, and as argued, these are not disjointed, random conversations. The allusions, both explicit and implicit, facilitate the formation of a coherent whole, an allusive conceit built upon an extended metaphor supported by the play's internal and external echoing of texts and ideas. For this particular reader, here is where unity, which for some has been seen as lacking in both plot and characterization, can be found in the joining of the allusions to this individual's particular literary experience. The commonly accepted and read allegory of England can expand into a larger world view dealing with the zeitgeist of the first decades of the twentieth century, that confrontation between an alienating Modernity and a more comprehensive humanism, a world seemingly adrift. Thus far we have attempted to demonstrate how the allegory coalesces and expands through the allusive conceit that Shaw builds with Heartbreak House. What follows is an attempt to consolidate further the argument through the meta-symbolism that frames the play's narrative: the ships.

Shaw's challenge to look beyond the obvious, one that was taken up in studying the allusions, influences how one approaches other embedded elements of the play. Through a judicious examination of one of the play's important symbols and its two incarnations, the first to be found with the opening stage directions and the second to be found within the final scene of the play, I will endeavour to demonstrate how they serve, along with the set, to augment Shaw's overall conceit through their implicit intertwining with the allusions. It is from within this intricate weaving together of allusion and symbol that Shaw establishes
a synecdoche of an increasingly ‘modern’ world, one that is fragmented, disjointed, and without direction. This world adrift, which is embodied in Heartbreak House, has been lured to its own destruction, forever locked in stasis, powerless to move beyond its carnal and sensual immediate self-gratifications.

The obvious place to begin our analysis is with the very first entwining between allusion and symbol which is found with the set. Its symbolic importance cannot be understated, yet few, if any, have discussed the set beyond its inspiration as suggested by Stanley Weintraub. Citing Shaw’s correspondence with the Webb’s, he claims that Lena Ashwell’s grandfather, Shaw’s grandfather, and Shaw’s reading of Thomas Carlyle were the starting place for the ship-set and the character of Captain Shotover (Journey 163). Sally Peters Vogt recognizes in the set the metaphorical allusion to Sebastian Brandt’s Ship of Fools and to Plato’s allegory of the ship of state, metaphors which she argues merge into what has become a commonly acknowledged allegorical reading of Heartbreak House as the ship of state (269-71). A.M. Gibbs argues that the ship-set is “a travesty” that it is more in line with satirists such as Thomas Love Peacock or the country safe house topos found in the English literary tradition of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen (“Chamber” 117). The set is not anecdotal; it is no mere gesturing towards an obvious allegory anymore than it is simply a pastiche of Dickens, Austen or Peacock. It is a multifaceted symbol which thematically supports Shaw’s main argument, and debatably, in many ways, is the argument itself.

What Frederick P. W. McDowell called an “elusive and complex symbol,” the set derives much of its symbolic importance not only from its ability to evoke “England’s maritime supremacy,” (“Technique” 341) but arguably also in how it illustrates more universal goals that form a part of any imperialist project: dominion and financial gain through exploitation which have been sugar-coated by the romanticism of the civilizing quest. Equally applicable to all imperial powers, these aims are specifically true for Britain, whose dominion stemmed from its ability to navigate the world’s oceans in its exploration

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16 For a more detailed description and argumentation see Stanley Weintraub’s “Journey to Heartbreak: The Crucible Years of Bernard Shaw 1914-1918” and the “Introduction” to Heartbreak House: A Facsimile of the Revised Transcript.
for resources and exploitation of markets. While the ship-set is an obvious allegory of England, it transcends this limitation expanding to include most, if not all, of humanity by its familiarity to nearly all cultures and ages.

The ship-set reminds the playgoer of Britain's central definition of self, for had it not been for the abilities and vision of sailor-adventurers, Britain would most probably not have succeeded in conquering a third of the world and creating an empire on which the sun never sets. It is a powerful image which resonates profoundly in the collective conscious of Britons calling to life that highly allegorical figure and mainstay of Britishness: Britannia, ruler of the waves. Placed in front of the audience throughout the entire play, in the beginning from within the ship and in the end on deck, Shaw's ship symbol serves not only to remind them of all that they owe to their maritime mastery, it maintains in the forefront those stories of foresight and bravery of the mariner in charge, those heroic captains who not only know their business, but whose apparent prime motivation is the safety and well-being of their passengers and crew. The mariners in charge are also the hero-captains, both fictional and real, including the likes of the ancient mariner, Walter Raleigh, Francis Drake, Horatio Nelson, and James Cook, as well as Robert Falcon Scott of Antarctic fame, a contemporary of Shaw. The set equally evokes that darker side to British dominion of the seas, those villainous pirates along the vein of Long John Silver, Davy Jones and even Captain Kidd to name but a few.

Yes the obvious allegory is England; however, there are other possibilities that are inherently built into the ship imagery. The ancient Greeks passed down to us what is perhaps the most famous of allegorical ship voyages in Homer's Odyssey. As noted previously with Kay Li's argument, the parallels between Heartbreak House and The Odyssey inherently surpass simple associations between symbolic ships. Both deal with themes of homecoming, hospitality, temptation, disguise and the ability to adequately know one's business, the ability to navigate through the traps and snares that life, the gods or providence set for humanity. It is an argument that unequivocally draws attention to the inherent possibilities expanding Shaw's allegory beyond the boundaries of Britain.

The ship as symbol also figures prominently in Judaism and Christianity. A cursory glance back to famous biblical ships, either from the Old Testament, such as Noah's or
Jonah’s, or from the New Testament, such as Peter’s barque, easily demonstrates the important symbolic association between ships and salvation. These biblical parables draw from a common mytheme: a ship in peril, the captain absent either through sleep or incompetence, and salvation which can only be obtained with the providential awakening of the captain to the dangers in order to save the ship and crew from certain destruction. The moral of these parables demonstrates that the ship whose course is true, whose captain knows his business, has no problem reaching a safe harbour. It is an idea that is recurrently linked throughout the play with awareness and awakening, major themes that Shaw consistently wove together as evidenced by the hypnosis scene during the second act. Even if the inhabitants of are aware of their plight, they are incapable of action.

The ship that is Heartbreak House is breaking up on the rocks; it is a ship adrift, leaderless, and lacking both in spiritual direction and apparent morality. While a captain may be on board, he is unheeded and ineffectual, oblivious either through drink or his presumably meaningless quest for spiritual guidance, his attempts in attaining that seventh degree of concentration. His effectiveness has been reduced to that of a warning and is limited to shouting out “breakers ahead”. It is a theme found in the implicit allusions to Homer’s *Odyssey*, Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Whitman’s “O Captain My Captain”. However, unlike the spiritual captains who successfully guided their ships and crew to safety, Shotover fails as destruction looms ever nearer. The church is not the only thing breaking up on the rocks: so is industry and capitalism in its current form as attested by the destruction of the piratical Dunn and Mangan in the gravel pit.

The above is perhaps an obvious reading of the set as symbol but as with everything else about this play, I would argue that there is more here than meets the eye. In a fashion similar to his treatment of the allusions and coherent with his own musical metaphor, Shaw distorts the familiar and recognizable to create something that is not quite real and evocatively unfamiliar while necessarily echoing the recognizable. By so doing he hopefully destabilizes playgoers’ perceptions in the hopes of effecting change. It is an attempt at changing a perceived familiar and safe known world that is locked in stasis into an imagined perilous and unfamiliar evolution.
Shaw’s stage directions are most explicit about the set. He indicates that the upstage wall is to be filled with windows and doors that are “ship built with heavy timbering” (HH 49), a motif that he determinedly maintained. In a letter sent to Lee Simonson, scenic director of the Theatre Guild in New York where the play premiered, Shaw refers Simonson to “XVII century Dutch marine painters” for any inspiration that he might need. Moreover, Shaw alludes to “the Flying Dutchman” claiming that given Shotover’s age, his notions of “naval architecture would not be more recent” (“The Meticulous Shaw”). Shaw’s own description of his desired set as expressed in this letter is of “brown wood-work with magnificent gilt framing, tall and handsome, with a balcony or storm gallery, gold in the framing, gold in the water, gold in the brown paint” (“The Meticulous Shaw”). Simonson had sent Shaw photographs showing a very dark, imposing almost claustrophobic set to which Shaw responded in a postscript thanking him “for the pictures. They are VERY reassuring” (“The Meticulous Shaw”).  

Shaw’s descriptions, both in the opening stage directions and those to Simonson, lend a sense of opulence, solidity and permanence which is limiting and constraining. Whereas on a ‘real’ ship these windows would have provided the passengers with an unobstructed view of rolling sea waves looking back over the distance travelled, they in fact frame a terrace looking out on the rolling hills of Sussex. While this potentially suggests that Shaw also wants his audience to look back, it paradoxically underscores the current stasis of his microcosm found within the confines of the play. The illusion of unbounded movement and vista suggested by a seagoing ship has rightly been reflected in the panorama of the rolling hills, or as Shaw states in his stage directions, “looking pleasant and fine” (HH 49), which implies a voyage without foreseeable incident. However, the actual view is that of a landlocked vessel going nowhere. Readers are led to believe in the solidity and safety within the confines of this particular world created by Shaw, but nevertheless it remains a world going nowhere. A ship, unless in dock, is in constant movement, and while the scenery on an ocean voyage appears the same (a never changing seascape) it is ever changing, perceptibly or not. In stark contrast, while the visible rolling

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17 The emphasis is Shaw’s.
hills of Shaw’s backdrop may imitate a never changing seascape, they are fixed and changeless. This stasis serves only to remind readers of this implicit irony – the seemingly solid, seaworthy ship is landlocked. It is a trap, a “soul’s prison” (HH 156), as is Brandt’s Ship of Fools.

This idea of a prison, of being trapped, is furthered when we examine the doors that lead out, or off the ship. More specifically, the door that is on the ‘port side’, or for the less nautical, the right side of the set from the audience’s perspective, should be the way off to dry land, as it is the door on the side where the ship docks when in port, hence the name. For most habitual sea travellers this is generally associated with egress and safety whereas doors found both stern and starboard would lead to the open sea. Shaw insists on the nautical metaphor, replacing the usual terminology of ‘stage right’ and ‘stage left’ by their corresponding sailing terminology of ‘port’ and ‘starboard’. In this translation of reality, the port door does not lead directly “to the open sea, but to the entrance hall” (HH 49) further underscoring the landlocked nature of this ship. Furthermore, this port door does not lead directly to the dock but to a sort of antechamber or purgatory, as if to indicate that even if the ship is landlocked, safety is not as simple as a door away.

Acts I and II take place within the confines of this set, one that A. M. Gibbs notes, without explanation, as a sort of drawing room gone mad. At first glance, it would seem indicative of Shotover’s ‘madness’, as the heteroclite collections of objects found here are certainly unexpected for a drawing room. Yet by not accepting the obvious and likewise, by developing the ship metaphor, it becomes apparent that this cannot simply be a drawing room, mad or otherwise. It is, however, simply the stern cabin, or ‘below decks’, which would have been the traditional safe haven from the storm.

Instead of the usual drawing room furniture, the playgoer is presented with a draughtsman’s table and instruments, a sofa upholstered in sailcloth and a wicker chair all suggestive of the masculine, especially since they are all described as “sturdy” or “stout” (HH 49). Any concession towards the comforts of a drawing room that a “woman’s hand”

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18 OED: “the side turned towards the port or place of loading cargo, the left-hand side (looking forward) of a ship or aircraft (“port”).
might suggest, albeit "unconvincingly," has been limited to a round table of teak with gate legs. It is not a room for entertaining; it is a place of work and study. Within this physical environment one finds symbols of wealth and knowledge, supposedly reflecting its inhabitants. Far from supporting the idea of Shotover’s eccentricities, the objects in the room serve to support Shaw’s arguments of financial exploitation. The furniture is most indicative of Britain and her empire: the draughtsman’s table is made of oak, a native wood, and the other furniture is made from more ‘exotic’ woods such as mahogany and teak, suggestive of the economic diversity resulting from trade with the colonies. What else would be more suitable for a reformed/retired pirate than a replica of a ghost ship\textsuperscript{19} doomed to roam the seas eternally in search of a port. Accepting the set as such further equates Shotover not only with the Ancient Mariner, but also with seafarers/wanderers who throughout time have been eternally condemned without respite: Cain, Prometheus, Sisyphus, the Wandering Jew, and Melmouth. It is a symbolic presence that serves to bring together certain ideas of the consequences of not knowing one’s business.

The symbolic importance of the set is not limited to the backdrop; the spatial orientation and the placement of the objects on stage are similarly important. The furniture is to be placed in specific locations on the stage, respecting quadrants corresponding to cardinal points. These are identifiable by Shaw’s specific use of nautical terminology such as port, starboard, bow and stern in lieu of the expected standard stage directions of stage left, stage right, up or down stage. This specific preservation of the ship metaphor serves to remind readers\textsuperscript{20} of the importance it has within the argument of the play and helps to establish their location in relation to the ‘ship’s course’. As seen earlier, the view from the windows is of the garden which “dips to the south before the landscape rises to the hills” (\textit{HH 50}). This, along with the other indicators of spatial orientation, provides readers with a precise bearing for the ship. If, as Shaw notes, those windows that “run across the room”

\textsuperscript{19} The reference here is to the \textit{The Flying Dutchman} in its various incarnations, something that Shaw mentions in a letter to Lee Simonson, set designer for the New York production in 1920.

\textsuperscript{20} Playgoers have a distinct advantage with this set over readers. For the latter, the setting is easily forgotten and tends to lose some of its importance while the former are constantly reminded of its importance, something that is arguably critical for this play.
and frame the view through the back of the set and form the "after part" \((HH\ 49)\) - the stern - are facing south, then the ship is forcibly headed north.

This is important, not only because it provides a course for the ship had it been able to move, but it also provides the cardinal points necessary for navigation. North, where the audience is placed and the 'direction of the ship', is generally associated with obscurity, old age, winter and death. For many classical civilizations, North was understood to be a place of chaos and destruction, for it was out of the north that the barbarian invasions came, signalling the fall of the empire and the ensuing darkness. This symbolic use of north is supported by the time of day and year in which the play is set. Shaw tells the reader that the bucolic view of the rolling hills seen to the south is of "a fine evening at the end of September" \((HH\ 49)\), more precisely at six o'clock. In northern climates, with the end of September comes the certain knowledge of the decay and death associated with winter. While it is also a time of plenty - as the New York playgoers would have been able to see with the gilding Shaw had added to his original design - it is also a time to prepare for the long winter that is about to arrive, for failure to prepare will result in certain demise. Against this double background of plenty and the need to prepare for what is to come, Shaw interposes his awkward potential for renewal in the presence of a "young lady" who ironically is ill at ease and "twisted" somewhat out of place and time.

If the north is chaos and barbarism, the east is renewal and hope rising with the sun \((Ferber\ 67)\). It is here, to starboard or the east, that playgoers find instruments of creativity and artistic endeavour. When Shaw specifically indicates that "against the starboard wall is a carpenter's bench" \((HH\ 49)\) with its used appearance and littered shavings on the floor, playgoers are intended to understand that creativity and endeavour are still active, though interrupted. Moving slightly across the stage from the east, playgoers find a "drawing board, T-square, straight-edges, set squares, mathematical instruments" \((HH\ 49)\) along with various other drawing and writing materials. These are the tools of an inventor or architect and clearly advance the association between renewal and an accepted potential to be found in the creative, artistic endeavour. Between these two 'work stations' playgoers detect the door to the pantry leading them to understand that the east is where one turns to find sustenance. It is also a place of refinement as it is from this pantry that the 'better' tea is
served from a Chinese lacquered tray (HH 55-56), a direct opposition to that inferior India tea and the “fly-blown cake” served by Nurse Guinness out of the west.

From the supposed renewal of the east, playgoers turn towards the west and death, echoing Odysseus on his voyage to Hades who followed the setting sun westward (Ferber 67). Ironically, it is also the direction that civilization has been following: from out of the Orient moving ever westward with each new decline. As we travel west from the creation and construction of the carpenter’s table in the east, playgoers come across a certain ease and comfort in the form of a sofa and chair, staples of any drawing room comedy. However, the anticipated comfort is not what it would seem. While the sofa may be a “sturdy mahogany article” it is “oddly upholstered in sailcloth” (HH 49) and, judging by Ellie’s reaction, not the most inviting place to sit.

There is a marked unity of purpose and function to this room which underscores Shaw’s argument. As playgoers continue their examination of the set from left to right (east to west), they eventually end up at the port side door. This, the west, is where Shaw has placed his “bookshelves,” suggestive of knowledge and learning. He is curiously quiet as to the quality and quantity of books the bookshelves should contain. Only one book is specifically mentioned during the play and it is that very specific volume and edition of Shakespeare that Ellie has brought with her. The inference is twofold: first, there are no books to be found indicating the bookshelves are empty, or, second, the books that are in bookshelves are merely decorative and inconsequential to his purpose with this play. In either case, there is a direct contradiction with the apparent industry implied by the carpenter’s table and the architect’s drawing table, both littered with shavings and paper. Had they been important, Shaw, in his painstaking manner, would have identified both titles and quantities as he had done in plays such as Arms and the Man, Candida, and The Philanderer, plays in which books have a particular significance. Arguably, by leaving the bookshelves empty, Shaw reminds playgoers that the further westward we travel, the closer we approach ‘civilization’, the less industrious we have become. Any inherent potential for renewal that these books might symbolize is ignored. It would appear that we are less able even to draw on and to learn from the collective accumulated knowledge that reposes in books waiting to be taken up, leaving the feeling that Culture and History have become
similarly inconsequential. In a play that continually implores its readers to learn their business, such an absence hardly seems negligible.

The set design is an integral part of Shaw’s argument, sending specific signals which are intended to both reassure and confuse. Iser might argue that it is also central to Shaw’s method of ideation where the readers are being asked to create significance from Shaw’s rearrangement of these displaced social and cultural artefacts. Shaw follows through with this in Act III when the action is taken outside, beyond the windows through which the playgoer has been looking during the first two acts. Curiously, when the metaphorical storm which has been brewing all evening amongst the inhabitants of Heartbreak House finally breaks, they do not seek the illusion of safety, that of below decks or inside. Instead, they prefer the surreal atmosphere to be found ‘on deck’, out of doors and on the terrace, facing down the heart of the storm in a sort of metaphorical strapping to the mast reminiscent of both Coleridge’s and Whitman’s captains.

The terrace is easily recognizable as a typical garden, quite possibly modelled on the terrace of any country house and not unlike one that Shaw visited, complete with observatory, hammock, garden seat, esplanade and flagstaff. More importantly, though, is the continuity of both allusion and symbol from the interior set of the two previous acts. The stage directions for Hector’s entrance at the beginning of Act III indicate that “he comes out through the glass door of the poop” (HH 139), preserving the unity of setting and maintaining playgoers within the confines of Shaw’s metaphor by equating a terrace with the poop deck of a ship.

Poop decks were found on the roof of the aft cabin and provided the captain and the helmsman with an elevated vantage point from which to survey the ship and to steer. Their purpose was functional and vital to the survival of the ship; they were not places of leisure but of work. This is not true of the terrace/deck set of Act III where one finds a flagstaff, deck chairs and a hammock, implying respectively a ship’s mast and lounging chairs. Conversely, there is neither helm nor any other visible means of navigation.

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21 This is argued by A. M. Gibbs in Heartbreak House: Preludes to Apocalypse, but he does not demonstrate how these objects interconnect and underscore the symbolism of the set.
The garden, as we have seen, “dips to the south” and the view is not ahead but behind. What is visible is a curiously turret-like “cupola” (HH 50) of the observatory. Shaw’s explanation for the cupola to Simonson was to “suggest the ravine supposed to be between it and the back cloth,” (“The Meticulous Shaw”) ostensibly providing an illusion of depth and distance. Arguably, there is more here than meets the eye and the cupola can be indicative of a greater malaise found within society – a confrontation between the scientific endeavour for betterment or for destruction.

Stanley Weintraub includes in his Heartbreak House: A Facsimile of the Revised Typescript Shaw’s drawings of the sets in which the cupola is clearly indicated with what would appear to be a telescope. Deliberate or not, this cupola, which the author unmistakably intends to be visible to the audience, curiously suggests a striking similarity to a gun barrel. Whether its purpose is defensive or offensive is irrelevant; compellingly, its import lies in the perversion of an instrument of knowledge into an instrument of destruction. This seeming pleasure ship is in fact a ship of destruction, ready to do battle. However, and like everything else about this landlocked ship, it is ineffective; while the ship may be ready, any danger is disregarded and no shot is ever fired. The furnishings of the pleasure craft contrast starkly with the gun-like telescope of the observatory and bring to light the fact that this ship has no true vocation, hence its business cannot be known. Like its inhabitants, it is without purpose and direction, a vessel whose captain “is asleep” (Shaw HH 139) and absent from the helm, however metaphorical that helm may be.

The below decks set for Acts I and II are of a space filled with the workings of an architect/builder interrupted. The accoutrements necessary for navigation and defence above decks in Act III have not been temporarily set aside; they have quite simply been replaced by indolence and a general laissez-faire attitude of the characters. There is no command post, no tiller, neither rudder nor helmsman; there is no visible sign of course or intention. It is therefore far from incidental that when a practical workspace is most needed, it has been transformed into a leisured, idling space filled with the paraphernalia of observation. As with the ship, society’s gradual transformations are not without consequences. When the captain should either be in his observatory keeping watch, or at
the helm directing and plotting his course, he has not only fallen asleep, he has been left ineffectual and without the means to steer.

In the moonless night a beacon has been lit, an "electric arc, which is like a moon in its opal globe" (HH 139). This moonlight shines significantly on the east to find "Lady Utterword lying voluptuously in the hammock" (HH 139). It is not the primary reddish-orange light of a dawn heralding a new age; it is the secondary opalescent moonlight indicating sleep and death of fallen night. There can be no renewal here, for regardless of how voluptuously she may lie, Ariadne Utterword, as she has demonstrated throughout the play by her comments and her age, is incapable of regeneration, metaphoric or otherwise. With this image, the waning of Britannia is complete. The time for conquering is past; at best the moonlight is "suitable for capturing the past ... but a hopeless time for making plans" (Vidal 100), a sentiment duly portrayed by both setting and actors.

This explicit detailing of the set permits Shaw not only to exploit some primal symbols, it also allows him to suggest certain major points of his argument. Readers who accept the allegory that the set suggests should be able to expand it beyond the obvious 'ship of state' to distinguish more discrete links between the common fate of all humanity, bound together in this ship. Humanity has been brought to a state of immobility, a direct contradiction of humanity's very nature, that of perpetual change. The irony of a landlocked ship should not be lost on readers and playgoers who are being exhorted to learn their business: navigate. The stasis of the current state of affairs is the direct result of having blindly abdicated individual responsibility to false councillors; it is the result of having listened to the siren calls and failing to understand them for what they were. Failure to take charge, to do something, to learn navigation at the individual level as well as at a societal level, has endorsed a trite trusting to providence which is the abdication of humanity.

Towards the end of Act III readers are confronted with the reality that no place is safe from the intrusion of modernity. The bucolic setting of a country house, that haven of safety from encroaching modernity, is as much at risk as anywhere else. The growling of the encroaching war, that impetus to change, is announced by a droning sound initially mistaken for the rumblings of a train. In fact, it is a Zeppelin, an "air ship", the second ship
that frames the narrative of the play. It is often argued that the Zeppelin’s attack signals the intrusion of the war into the play, remarkable by its absence, and its unreserved contrast to the preface. I would argue that, like the set itself, the Zeppelin serves a purpose more profound than either a simple deus ex machina or as an attendant incident from Shaw’s personal life providing him with a dramatic, unexpected conclusion. In “The Quintessence of Ibsenism”, Shaw dismisses such devices as the work of poor playwrights, making it highly unlikely that he would stoop to such artifice, suggesting the Zeppelin’s import lies elsewhere. Unlike Shotover’s land-bound ship, the Zeppelin is neither constricted nor directionless, and while its navigation may be somewhat erratic, its intent is decidedly determined and destructive, not unlike Wells’s Zeppelins in both A Sleeper Awakes and The War in the Air.

The Zeppelin makes its appearance immediately following Shotover’s call to wake up and learn one’s business which is to navigate: “Learn it and live; or leave it and be damned” (HH 156). It is the same admonition that Wells’s sleeper failed to learn in time to prevent his demise. The distant explosion evokes from Shotover that prophetic cry of “breakers ahead” and in the ensuing pandemonium judgement has come: the lights go out, the rectory and the gravel pit are hit and Shotover’s dynamite kills the two ‘practical men of business’. In characteristic misdirection, Shaw seemingly points readers towards a culpable Germany likening the explosions to Beethoven and Wagner. Christopher Innes and Ingrid Bogart argue that Ellie and Hesione mistake the distant drumming as the famous four note opening sequence to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony which is “frequently seen as a symbolic representation of Fate knocking at the door” (149), whereas they equate the Wagnerian reference as an implicit echoing of Die Götterdämmerung. It certainly ties organically into both mood and action of this final act as seen in Elbe’s invitation to ‘Marcus’, Hector’s heroic city ego, to set fire to the house in order to light the way, if nothing else, indicative of the disastrous conclusion to events of the play.

The Germans used Zeppelins for air raids on England during the war; however, they were employed more to create havoc than actual destruction simply because the technology

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22 This allusion is equally argued by McDowell, Weintraub, Gibbs and others.
was new and somewhat erratic. If we look beyond the explicit to examine their symbolic importance, the magnitude of these Zeppelins expands. They are the new order that is about to replace the old: sleek, manoeuvrable flying ships for proper sea-going ships which have become outdated, immovable, landlocked archaisms.

Once more looking back to H. G. Wells's novels *The Sleeper Awakes* and *The War in the Air*, Shaw uses the Zeppelins to take over and replace an existing world order. They are successful because those in charge failed to know their business, to navigate adequately within a world order rapidly undergoing substantial change. The commanders of the Zeppelins, unlike Shotover and the inhabitants of Heartbreak House, are not asleep at the helm, and while they may be fully cognizant, they have an unwieldy control over their new technology. Failure to know one's business, to navigate, results in unexpected and indeterminable disaster, a just warning to all who blindly go forth to change the world.

The general mood and atmosphere around this episode in the play reflects a general sentiment and reaction to the actual Zeppelin raids in England during the War. Quoting one of Virginia Woolf's letters recounting to her sister Vanessa one of the Zeppelin attacks, Ariela Freedman notes the typical 'farce' that was most people's reaction to these attacks: they were "really English". Freedman demonstrates that typically the reactions were "rather ludicrous with everyone dashing about like chickens with their heads cut off" (56) in response to a threat that could only be heard and was seldom seen. Zeppelins were a novelty, a spectacle in the sky, and brought the supposed thrill of war home; they were a way of participating in what Shaw argues in the preface to the play is Europe's collective 'death wish'. Freedman claims that Shaw uses the Zeppelins as a satirical device which acts "as a corrective, holding a mirror up to an audience that has ceased to recognize the difference between real suffering and the stage" (60). As with the set, here again Shaw draws from the 'real' which he sublimates to his own purposes. The boundary between reality and fantasy has once again been blurred and in this blurring lies the warning: know your business.

Framing the play with these two ships creates a distorted reality, a dreamlike state that, while resembling reality, is somewhat shifted and the key to understanding lies in the detection and decoding of the symbols and metaphors, much as it was Alice's only way out
of Wonderland. The familiar elements that are 'real' and seemingly authentic, such as the ship set, are not what they appear at first glance. Nor are they simply incidental. The ship set, while important in creating and maintaining the illusion, is an essential part of the argument. A. M. Gibbs argues that it is "a travesty of the[se] ship-like houses of order and hospitality in nineteenth century fiction" ("Chamber" 117). For Stanley Weintraub, inspiration was found at a house rented by the Webbs in Sussex during the summer of 1916 ("Curtains Speech" 499). While these may explain his inspiration, they do not explain the symbolic importance the set has to the overall arguments of the play, or its importance in tying these together into a coherent whole. The set should not be reduced to a curiosity, a souvenir of a pleasurable weekend in the country, any more than the Zeppelin can be explained away as an attempt to end a play that really has no end.

Debatably, the two facets of the set support and connect many of the numerous allusions in the play. From within the physical confines of this world, Shaw continues his challenge to his readers to discover the difference between the appearance of truth and reality and its actuality. Moreover he confronts our ability to know both self and others in that the ship set brings together, within the microcosm that is a sea voyage, the many disparate and random conversations that make up the human condition. However, the warning remains, never trust implicitly what you perceive: knowing one's business requires an active engagement with the conversation, to question what has been received as 'true' in the quest for what can be true.
Conclusion

My initial reaction in reading this play was similar to that of theatre critics such as Woollcott, Massingham, Vidal, and Rooney. This is very much a verbose and rambunctious play that is not easily discerned. On the surface, it is witty, comical and at times downright farcical, but like so many readers I was also left with a nagging feeling that there is more here than meets the eye. Taking up Shaw’s challenge has led to the discovery of a profoundly rich play that speaks from within the apparent confines of a specific context to a much larger audience, transcending both time and circumstance. It is not until “we pick out its key situations and arrange[e] them in their significant order that it can be made intelligible” (Shaw and Weintraub Autobiography 174). While Shaw may have written this about life in general, it is a sentiment that perfectly fits this play.

The key is and always has been finding those crucial situations. If we accept that literature is a “conscious and deliberate” (Eliot “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 52) act that is not the reflection of but the escape from emotions, with this play we need to consciously and deliberately examine its complexities. Oscar Wilde argues in the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray that “all art is quite useless” (The Picture of Dorian Gray 4) and literature, like all art, is the reflection of the spectator (reader) and not of life itself. When we accept that the use of the allusions, symbols and metaphors in this play are not incidental but intended to echo deliberate, dispassionate elements of the human condition that require, according to its author, a rigorous self-examination, the play translates into more than simply rambling conversations.

Its purpose is not simply to teach and delight, though needless to say it does both; it also presents a perception of a certain state of affairs without a morality other than its own. It is “the perfect use of an imperfect medium” (The Picture of Dorian Gray 3) to demonstrate potentialities, not realities. It is an argument of ceteris paribus sic stantibus, where continuing along the same trajectory cannot lead to safety. Blindly trusting to fate or

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23 Translated as “all other things being equal or held constant”. 
providence will no longer bring the ship safely to harbour because that particular harbour has been lost.

This is not drawing-room comedy; it is a serious discussion about our very existence and survival as cogent beings. Its verisimilitude lies in its mimicry of the chaotic way natural discussions leap about and how the performers on stage reflect certain realities of their audience with their vices and virtues all mixed up. As readers, we are actively encouraged to continue the conversation even after it has ceased on stage, to discover what lies beneath the pose, and is this not the very basis of good didacticism, that ability to question and to test ideas? We need to persist, to ask the question: is it too late or is it still possible to wake up from this nightmare that has been created? Arguably, it is a question that applied to the zeitgeist in which Shaw wrote this play as much as it still applies today. We need to continue, even after the curtain falls, to challenge and probe discovering how and why this possibly affects us.

The allusions in this play are varied, complex, and a rich source of possible readings, all interconnected through several common threads. One of these would be to question what happens when we allow ourselves to be lulled to sleep by interests that are not our own? It is well known that Shaw was very outspoken against the useless squandering of resources that is war. In *Heartbreak House* it is a discussion that he continues, for war, as seen, is still the “destructive use of ... forces at the command of kings and capitalists ... inculcated as heroism, patriotism, glory and all the rest of it” (“Common Sense” 72). The message, however, with these seemingly disjointed allusions, has been carefully camouflaged to resemble a more typical drawing room comedy.

Accepting Shaw’s challenge to look beyond the obvious dissimulation to the allusions allows the argument to expand beyond the author’s stated intentions of the preface. When, as readers, we are able to discern and read the literary origins of the allusions, we can partake of the conversation. Our failure to recognize them leaves us unable to join in this conversation, to make of this play what Barthes deems a writerly text.

This allusive conceit of *Heartbreak House* not only draws on the numerous echoes between Shaw and his contemporaries, but equally on Shaw’s particular ironic re-weaving
of these echoes, or in A. M. Gibbs' words, Shaw's "counter-discourse" (*Preludes* 41). This is neither piracy nor the work of a man lacking in originality or ideas; Shaw partakes in a literary conversation, the creation of "a dialogic . . . [and] very frequently oppositional relationship" (*Preludes* 40) with these other literary texts. Perhaps the more cogent parts of this dialogue are intended for his audience and not with other texts. If, as Shaw states, the purpose of the theatre is to incite discussion and to initiate change, then logically this would be the purpose of the allusions.

It is well known that Shaw was very outspoken against that useless squandering of war and his was a call to reason for which he paid. The argument found in *Common Sense about the War* has been tempered and distilled with *Heartbreak House*. By the time the play was published, he had come to the almost inevitable realization that one "cannot make war on war" (*HH* 47). So instead of attacking the loss of reason and waste engendered, he turned his attention to its causes by asking his readers to go beyond the obvious, preconceived "suburban face value" (Shaw and Weintraub Autobiography 147) of a "wittily written play" ("*Heartbreak House*" 6). This play expects an effort from its audience.

The entire world has been left to drift in a ship captained by self-absorbed, unconscious fools who have sold their souls to dark devils functioning only in their own self-interests; all perceived safe havens have failed. Shaw is not simply echoing or borrowing from the past, he lays bare the myths to have them re-examined in the light of a new reality. Moreover, he challenges us to look beyond the preconceived, received ideas about who we are and what we do without supplying a moral, a simple answer which solves the problems. If anything, the moral here is that there are no simple answers, only a collection of possibilities, loosely tied together and waiting to be discovered by those who know their business.

 Appropriately, in the opening lines of the preface to this play, Shaw states that "when the play was begun not a shot had been fired; and only the professional diplomatists and the very few amateurs whose hobby is foreign policy even knew that the guns were loaded" (*HH* 7). While this has led many scholars to argue over an actual date of setting pen to paper, I would argue that its purpose is quite another. Perhaps if the world had
trusted those amateurs and diplomats who knew of the loaded gun, people such as Wells who published his novel *The War in the Air* describing the repercussions of all-out world war in 1906, or even if more men had known their business was other than financial gain, Shaw would never have had a reason to write the play he did; but then again, hindsight is always perfect. Apathy and the quest for financial gain led the inhabitants of Heartbreak House to misconstrue, to fail to see the true nature of the conflict: the war was never about right or wrong—it was about assuring and maintaining material gain, regardless of the cost.

Yes, the play can appear confusing and perplexing, perhaps because Shaw’s subjects are confused and perplexed. There is no central unifying figure that leads the readers to an imagined safety, no hope in trusting to providence that all will work out in the end. This is the difference between the dogmatic and the didactic. Dogma tells the way, the truly didactic shows the ways. The rambling conversations that are seemingly purposeless are in fact filled with possibilities. However, there is despair, disillusionment and alienation, for that final angelic voice calling the boys who can to come home would appear to be heralding the end, not the beginning. Hector can light all the fires he wants to show the way; there is no one there.

Dan Laurence suggests that Shaw was “attempting a *kind* of play so crazily ambitious that some people are bound to object even to the very endeavour” (Laurence ix). Both profound and prophetic, it is a play that can still communicate if readers open their minds and allow it to do so. The generally accepted allegory of England adrift does not differ from many other nation-states that were/are floundering in a world gone equally mad and where knowledge is subverted to destruction. What happened to England has happened to others; hers was not and will not be the only ship of state adrift. When we look at the play from differing angles, from the unexpected, we see beyond the normal. Seeing the allusive conceit, that inclusion of literary devices such as allusions and metaphorical language which combine to form meaning, gives the play a unity that many could not or would not see.

Taking into consideration my own cultural heritage, that rectangle that I drew, I garner from Shaw that the money lust and dehumanization generated by an uncontrolled free market, where money is mammon and the only criteria of success that matters, have
become problematic to the survival of humanity. I would argue that very little has changed in the intervening ninety years since the play was first published and produced. Like the inhabitants of Heartbreak House, we have yet to learn our business. If it remains, as Laurence states, “an uncomfortable portrait” that “theatregoers have occasionally found hard to contemplate” (Laurence xi), quite possibly this is because it still hits too close to home with a simple message that is difficultly ignored: learn your business, whatever that may be.

The preceding has been an attempt to summarize and then to transcend what has already been written about the play, to examine more closely a few of the concealed or embedded allusions in the hopes of elucidating some sort of order out of what has been described as chaos. To say the least, it would be pretentious to claim to have uncovered all the allusions, for they extend beyond the scope of my literary understanding. My attempt has been to bring to light some of the references which Shaw used to render meaning in this play. It remains clear that this is not a compilation of epigrams any more than it is a collection of rambling conversations about romance and heartbreak. These are pretexts to the real question: is it too late? Can we learn our business or have we failed to see the roundabouts and circumlocutions of our leaders for what they truly are—attempts to put us all to sleep, comfortably drifting and unaware of the dangers that are lurking? Shaw issues not only comments on the war that had just finished; he also forewarns of what is to come.

Arguably, we still have to listen; we have disregarded Shaw’s roundabouts embedded in the allusions, losing sight of his real provocations—do you know your business? To borrow one of his metaphors, learning to navigate not only means knowing where we are going but equally how we are going to get there. The rumblings and growlings of Shaw’s impending disaster can still be heard and we seem as equally deaf as the inhabitants of Heartbreak House. Conceivably we are more akin to Ellie than we would comfortably admit; having fallen asleep, we blindly trust to Providence that all will work out for the best in the end. Shaw’s convoluted message needed and still needs a more direct approach to be easily accessible, but then he would fall into the trap of being truly dogmatic. For many this is considered a failing of the play, its lack of directness in clearly stating its intentions and the subsequent frustration felt by many to create a systemic
decoding of all the allusions and symbols into a coherent whole. To this, I would emphatically argue the opposite; herein lies the play’s strength as a teaching tool. Yes, perhaps the provocations failed for some, but for this particular reader, it is the author’s implied faith in his readers to be able to decipher the play’s inherent potential for generating and perpetuating discussions about our very potential as humans that gives it its didactic value. In this very failure to tell rather than suggest lies the difference between education and propaganda for, to paraphrase an old English proverb, “you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink”.

As readers, we need to discern and carry on this conversation started by Shaw, for the conditions under which he instigated it have yet to disappear.
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