

Two Examples of the Rational  
Perspective in Literature

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## Two Examples of the Rational Perspective in Literature

Literature is a tool through which meaning is conveyed, and from that meaning we gain insight and develop wisdom. There are many different types of literature, such as novels, plays, and poetry, and each new creation contributes with expanding creativity to the broadening of our collective understanding. Numerous literary styles convey meaning, including satire, drama, historical fiction, and mystery, or any combination of these or other forms. Any art form is a blend of creativity and skill, and literature, as art, uses various techniques in creative ways to skillfully open our eyes to both our rationality and irrationality. Two works—Man and Superman, by Bernard Shaw, and The Caucasian Chalk Circle, by Bertolt Brecht—exemplify how the qualities of the rational perspective may be expressed through literature.

Literature, as a form of creative endeavor, must have certain elements to be successful in reaching an audience. For a story to be believable, it should have many of the elements that we associate with the rational perspective, including structure, logical sequencing, and believability (i.e., reasonableness). With rationality we gain understanding, meaning, and ultimately realize truth. Without rationality, we experience its opposites, including confusion, falsehood, and disharmony. Rationality and irrationality may seem like two sides of the same coin, especially since the word *irrational* denotes the negation of rationality. Their associative connotations are also dichotomous. However, to assume the two opposites are the only choices when it applies to human behavior and activity is a false dichotomy. Something is not *either* rational *or* irrational. That something (e.g., a thought, a decision, an action) can be a mix of the two, depending on degree, and depending on what other factors are involved, and on what values are weighed heavily against other values. Our inclination is to lean toward the rational, but we inadvertently

pull along the irrational as well in the decision-making process. We can observe this mixture by examining the two works by Shaw and Brecht.

### Man and Superman

Satire is defined as “the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc.” (Random 1705). Satire sometimes uses humor, and it always provides us with insight through its use of irony. What has been referred to as the “Don Juan in Hell” section of Man and Superman is actually a dream sequence, is structured like a play, and is a satirical representation of bipolar world views (Mahon 41). The plot occurs in hell, where four characters—Don Juan, the Devil, Ana, and the Statue—exchange observations and wit. Yet what seems reasonable isn’t always rational.

Through work, humans actively engage in modifying their environment to suit changing needs. In hell, the Devil knew that people could just *imagine* an ideal environment, so there really wasn’t any need for work. He wondered why anyone should work so hard when they can just have their illusions seem real. It is so easy to just allow what is mentally desired to appear real. Everyone in hell can believe what they want because there are “no hard facts to contradict them” (Shaw 140). Fantasy, therefore, is the reality of those in hell, where the imagination creates what it wants without labor and its associative work ethic. The statue, who had been Ana’s father when alive, had come down from heaven for a visit, and, after a brief time, started to really enjoy how pleasant and easy it was to exist in hell.

In contrast to the playing and pretending of those residing or sojourning in hell, heaven was depicted as a place where living and working were valued. The view that the mind is the playground of the imagination was sufficient for the Devil. He thought that real awareness could have no chance against imagination since the latter never gets dull. But our imagination and

creativity, when coupled with action (viz., work), makes us like God (i.e., a creator). Creativity does not equal creation. One is latent, the other is manifest, and action must follow thought to get real, tangible, and meaningful results. Through Don Juan's discussion with the Devil, we realize that hard work is indeed a veritable virtue.

Imagining and creating, when implemented towards some worthwhile endeavor, establishes us as creative beings. That creativity strengthens us as a society in many different ways. However, the Devil thought that man's creative strength was singularly measured by his destructiveness. Warfare and its destructive weapons have certainly evolved over time and we now have greater destructive power than ever before. But the Devil's view was limited. Humans measure strength by creative advancement, and improving destructive capabilities is only one of countless forms of progress. The Devil, a decided cynic, saw strength only in terms of brawn. There is another, greater, and more rational type of strength—the strength to persevere with creative ideas and subsequent action toward implementation.

The Devil made several seemingly good points during the discussion with the other three characters, and always presented his ideas politely and eloquently, which reminds us that falsehood may be cloaked in plausibility. His arguments, while reasonable, are specious, because they were always limited to his slanted view of the world. His truths are lesser truths than those of the perspicacious Don Juan. With his skewed view, the Devil evinces evidence of rational thinking, but he is, nevertheless, largely a sophist.

Ana irrationally thought that all of her confessions at church should have been enough to grant her entrance into heaven. She admitted to loving confessions so much before dying that she had actually given more confessions than her sins required. Don Juan suggested that confessing too much was as bad as confessing too little; both were untruthful, and neither was reasonable.

But Ana thought that there was a natural balance between good and evil and despaired in the realization that perhaps all of her good deeds had been wasted. The rational perspective assumes that there is order and structure in the world (Mahon 39). But Ana mistakes that natural order for a fair balance of good and evil regarding human affairs. She erroneously thought that the balance of goodness would have been enough for her to get into heaven, and didn't realize that each action must stand on its own. A criminal, for example, may go to prison for committing only one crime, regardless of how many good deeds he might have been magnanimous enough to effectuate prior to incarceration. There are sins against others and against self. Society takes care of the former, while providence takes care of the latter.

The fact that the plot of the dream takes place in hell is significant. The dichotomous views of heaven and hell, and of good versus evil, force us to use reason to distinguish between rationality and irrationality. It is not easy to do so in all cases, but it is easier through the structure of literature to see the polarizing world views of heaven and hell. Despite Ana's naiveté, she had still tipped the balance of her life, whether knowingly or not, in favor of admission into hell. Perhaps hell, with its environment that allowed makeshift mental images to seem real, was just right for her. Her illusions and decisions in life got her to hell in the first place. The fact that the deceased could go back and forth between heaven and hell shows us that it is never too late to correct errors of perception and learn what is truthful (and therefore rational).

Don Juan observes the fundamental difference between heaven and hell by saying, "To be in Hell is to drift: to be in Heaven is to steer" (169). With that observation, he indicated to the Devil that humans naturally want to be in control of their destiny, and action must follow thoughts in order for humans to be *real* creators. The Devil realized that he couldn't keep life-

worshippers in hell, because those who value life know that there is more to life than pleasure and delightful thoughts. Don Juan states that hell was for seekers of happiness (139). In contrast, heaven is for the seekers of understanding, even if the truth they realize through that understanding is unpleasant. So, hell is, in essence, a virtual world, while heaven is the real world.

### The Caucasian Chalk Circle

Originally written as a play, The Caucasian Chalk Circle has two stories that both come together in the end after forcing us to see how decision-making can become complicated by the mix of rationality and irrationality. One story involves Grusha, a servant who takes a baby (Michael) who had been left behind by the fleeing governor's wife during a military coup d'état. The second story involves a village clerk, Azdak, who, because of fateful circumstances, finds himself appointed as a judge. The Singer's role, as narrator, is clearly defined with the observation, "So many words are said, so many left unsaid" (82). The singer thus adds useful, revealing information in a side-bar-type fashion, providing for the reader, with insight, what the characters don't say.

Grusha is confronted with several issues that require choices and decision-making. For example, she takes a child that is not hers. Also, she marries a man named Jessup who appears to be dying, but who she soon learns has actually feigned illness to avoid conscription. In addition, she is caught off guard when her former fiancé comes home from the war to find her apparently already married and with a child.

Nagel writes that nothing up to the point at which one chooses determines irrevocably what his or her choice will be (49). Grusha's decision-making appears problematic on the surface, with evidence of irrationality, but at every critical point of decision-making, she chooses

what she had deemed best based on what she valued at the time. No factor influenced her greater than her own sense of reason. She realizes that she was in control and responsible for her decisions. Taking a child that was not hers doesn't seem to be rational, but taking it to protect it from the neglectful mother and the Ironshirts weighed heavier on her than the consequences of being caught. Trying to cross a dilapidated bridge with the child after the villagers told her it was highly unsafe seems irrational, but her resolve to save the child and herself weighs heavier than her fear of the bridge's collapse. Marrying Jessup seemed like a foolish thing to do since she didn't know him or love him, but gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the community weighed heavier on her than being stuck in what quickly turned out to be a mistake of a marriage. Not pulling Michael out of the chalk circle at the end seemed irrational, especially since she loved him so much, but the child's safety weighed heavier on her than yanking him from Natella, his biological mother. In each of these situations, she was confronted with difficult decisions, but she used what reason she had at the time to take what she thought to be the most rational course of action at each critical point.

Grusha was obviously affected by her emotions, but there is nothing wrong with emotions being involved in a decision as long as reason is also included. Using our brains as intelligent beings, we should always do our best to balance our reasoning and emotional centers. The proper balance of the two, while perhaps unique for each individual, will ensure a greater likelihood that a rational decision will be made.

Azdak also had moments of decision-making that didn't seem entirely rational. His view of justice was idiosyncratic at the very least. For example, he sympathizes with a doctor who had treated the wrong leg of a rheumatic patient, and actually exhibited the senselessness of penalizing the patient (101). He sides with a rapist, saying that the victim was responsible for the

crime since she effectively encouraged the crime with her attractiveness (103). Judges are supposed to interpret the law and dispense justice fairly, but Azdak irrationally holds himself above the law and administered justice not in terms of legal precedent, but in terms of his quirky conception of fairness. Thinking of the self only, rather than of the self as a part of society, is unreasonable when others might be affected adversely. The rational approach, and that which improves humanity as a whole, is to take a broader view. A society must work together to share responsibility and allow as much personal freedom as is reasonably possible without infringing upon the liberties of other societal members.

Besides the smaller issues that Grusha and Azdak face, a much larger issue—that of property rights—was presented in The Caucasian Chalk Circle. That issue is presented in two different ways. One regarded private property (i.e., real estate), and was introduced at the beginning of the story when two groups, farmers and goat herders, argue in front of a civil delegate over who should get the land that the farmers had been occupying for countless years. One old farmer unsuccessfully reasons that, “The valley has belonged to us from all of eternity” (21). Regardless of ownership, the land was granted to the goat herders who made a *more reasonable* case to the delegate that they would be better stewards of the land than the farmers could continue to be.

The second case of property rights pertained to parental rights. The issue was brought up in the court case when Azdak had to decide between Grusha and Natella over who should get the child. Is it possible that motherly *nurture* weighs more heavily than biological *nature*? Indeed it is possible. When Grusha wouldn't attempt to pull the child out of the circle, Azdak realized that she wouldn't do anything that would harm him, and granted her sole custody. Whereas the biological mother had valued ownership of property over its care, Grusha had valued proper care

over ownership. The decision made by Azdak effectively communicates to us that whoever can take better care of a property should get that property, regardless of original ownership. The implications of such a decision are colossal for a society, yet such decisions must be made from time to time.

### Summary

Every occasion of experience is dipolar—it is a mental experience integrated with a physical experience (Whitehead 32). The Devil, in Man and Superman, would have us limit our own creative potential by having only the mental experience. Similarly, Azdak, as a zany judge in The Caucasian Chalk Circle, would allow people to avoid having to account fairly for their actions. He devalued their actions and the effects of those actions on others by his permissive attitude and absurd judgments. While his judgment relating to Grusha benefited her by being in her favor, many more of his judgments seemed unreasonable, and therefore irrational.

Bertolt Brecht, eager for a chance of a public performance with The Caucasian Chalk Circle in a highly-competitive playwriting industry, admitting to making the character of Grusha “much too pure, too good and too chaste” (Volker 303). Had Brecht made Grusha’s character slightly crafty and devious, it would have been harder for us (as readers) to accept her as a suitable guardian for Michael. Real-life can obviously be much more complicated than the lives depicted in stories. Character traits of those in the real world are multifaceted, compounding the difficulties in making judgments and sound, rational decisions.

In the “Don Juan in hell” section of Man and Superman, we realize the characters are in a dream. But the symbolism of heaven and hell forces us to realize what we can do now, in the present moment, with the knowledge and wisdom we have gained. No one has been to heaven and hell and returned to tell of their adventures. But through literature, we can explore the two

symbolic worlds to compare what we discover to be rational in our current existence.

It takes both rationality and irrationality to give us the broad picture from which we can recognize the rational perspective. And it is not just the polar opposites that we should examine, but also the various degrees between the two that make up the sum total of our awareness to direct thoughts, actions, and, ultimately understanding.

Polarities in literature, such as good and bad, and heaven and hell, may not fully represent actual realities, but they serve a purpose. With the structuralist view of literary criticism, paired opposites, or dyads, are used so that contrasts act as a “skeletal structure” from which truth can be ferreted out (Barry 55). Through literature, we can more clearly see contrasts and conflicts between life and art, truth and fallacy, and rationality and irrationality.

At the heart of both the arts and the sciences is evidence of our burning desire to create. That desire is an integral part of what we are as humans. To create something new or to originate a better understanding of values “awakens a resonant response deep within us” (Huntley 20). Creative expression through literature allows us to explore and push beyond boundaries that limit an understanding of our complex world. The joy of creativity is part of the rational perspective. It is not the poem itself, or the fugue, or the painting, or the novel that is of ultimate value for the creator, but rather, the process of creating those things. In addition, and more importantly, it is what can be learned about ourselves during that process. The mathematician, scientist, artist, musician—anyone who creates—widens and clarifies the creative mental vision on behalf of all humankind (Huntley 97). Those who have limited creative ability can still find value in the process of appreciating the creations of others, and they, too, can learn about themselves and about their values by what they glean from observation.

Learning is not static; it is a part of the process of creation. Literature allows that creative

process and creative appreciation to endure long after a work has been completed by its author.

We learn in many ways and from many teachers so that we can be better than before, and so that out of many experiences, we have one collective whole of humanity that expresses greatness.

Coleridge wrote of “unity in variety,” and Pythagoras noted “the reduction of many to one”

(Bronowski 16, 22). Similarly, literature, in its many forms and styles, presents variety through the countless ways we can learn, reflect, and grow as one collective humanity. We may observe a mix of both rationality and irrationality in literature, but those representations are edifying as a reflection of us. The supreme value that we gain through the process of studying literature is, therefore, a greater understanding of ourselves as rational beings.

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