

## English Drama in the Late of Victorian Period (1880-1901): Realism in Drama Genre Revival

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### Abstract

*A progressive growth in literature was seen significantly during Victorian period. These decades also saw an overdue revival of drama, in which the existence of drama was started to improve when entering late of Victorian period. Along with that situation, Thomas William Robertson (1829-1871) emerged as a popular drama writer at that time besides the coming of Henrik Ibsen's works in 1880's. However, Robertson's popularity was defeated by other dramatists during late of Victorian period (1880-1901), drama writer like Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). Beside Wilde, there were several well known dramatists during late of Victorian period. Dramatists as Shaw, Jones, and Pinero were also influential toward the development of drama at that time. In the discussion of English drama development, role of late Victorian period's dramatists was really important toward the development of modern drama. Their works and efforts really influenced the triumph of realism and development of drama after Victorian period ended. Therefore, the development of drama during late of Victorian period is discussed in this particular writing, due to the important roles of dramatist such as Wilde, Shaw, Pinero, and Jones. Here, their roles to the revival of English drama and the trend of realism in the history of English literature are very important.*

**Keywords:** drama, late of Victorian period, realism

### Introduction

During Victoria's long reign, a progressive growth in literature was seen significantly. In the domain of fiction, it was practiced notably by Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, George Eliot, Trollope, James and Hardy. Domain of Poetry was popular as well, especially works of Tennyson, Browning, and Hopkins. Basically, it was an age both exhilarated and bewildered by the growing wealth and power, the pace of industrial and social change, and by scientific discovery. However, its last two decades took on a different atmosphere, and literature developed various specialist forms such as; aestheticism, professional entertainment, and disenchanting social concern (Alexander, 2000: 293). Besides, these decades also saw an overdue revival of drama, in which the existence of drama that was not really significant during the early of Victorian period, it slowly started to improve when entering late of Victorian period. During these decades, the old Victorian poets went on writing, but their juniors were retiring or minor, consciously aesthetic or consciously hearty.

On the other concern, Samekto (1998: 78) explains that one of the important characteristics of Victorian English literature was the purpose of increasing society's morality. Literature was used to portray a realistic life and to guide society in ideal way of life by enlarging people's understanding by nurturing sympathy that was depicted upon all in the power to feel a common humanity at work in humble modes of life, petty aspirations, and thwarted desires (Adams, 2009: 189). In such condition, literature was directed to the perspective of 'realism'. Realism is an important term in the discussion of literature that began to flourish around 1850. Realism itself is used as a response to the imaginative descriptions exaggerated by the literary works of the previous period (Romantic). It rebuked the visions of imagination or at least tested them against definite reality which presumably will dispel the merely visionary and enhance one's appreciation of everyday life (Adams, 2009: 188-189). Therefore, realism became a resistance to fantasy and a submission to external reality.

As explained previously, Victorian period saw an overdue revival of drama. As influenced by romantic period, the early Victorian period still did not have passion in drama writing. At that time, the existence of drama was not really appreciated by society of middle class who dominated social life in England (Samekto, 1998: 95). After entering 1860, the situation started to change because of the interest of Queen Victoria in drama, and afterwards it was followed by her society. Along with that situation, Thomas William Robertson (1829-1871) emerged as a popular drama writer at that time. Originally, he was familiar because of his popular novel-based drama "David Garrick" (1864) that showed the elements of realism, and in 1867 he published "Caste" as his following masterpiece that even though it was not really soft to read, but quite successful when it was performed

on the stage (Samekto, 1998:95). It can be said that Robertson was one of pioneers for the advance of realism, especially in the domain of drama besides the coming of Henrik Ibsen's works in 1880's. However, Robertson's popularity was defeated by other dramatists during late Victorian period (1880-1901), drama writer like Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) with his comedies was better in entertaining and attracting audiences. Beside Wilde, there were several well-known dramatists during late Victorian period. Dramatists as Shaw, Jones, and Pinero were also influential toward the development of drama at that time.

In the discussion of English drama development, the role of late of Victorian period's dramatists was really important toward domain of modern drama. Their works and efforts really influenced the triumph of realism and development of drama after Victorian period ended. Therefore, the development of drama during late of Victorian period is discussed in this particular writing, due to the important roles of dramatist such as Wilde, Shaw, Pinero, and Jones. Here, their roles to the development of English drama and the advance of realism through their drama will be explicated in detail.

### Method

Since it is a library research, this research is done by using descriptive qualitative method in which the data analyzed are in a form of texts in some primary data sources that support the analysis about drama development during late of Victorian period. The data gotten are processed and analyzed based on conditions and trends of drama during the late of Victorian period.

### Discussion

Novelists' attention to perform real life was reflected in part of the new prominence of the theater. It was pioneered by Thomas William Robertson whose dramas performed based on the stories of his own novel. Adams (2009: 382) explains that the first rapid improvement in the financial rewards derived from playwriting, as the royalty system expanded and copyright became more secure during late Victorian period. Based on that situation, there was a growth of small theaters in which that did not significantly occur during the early Victorian period.

### Dramatists and Their Works

The thematic fulcrum of a newly vitalized drama was sexual politics and social life, and farce was ideally suited to mock social form (Adams, 2009: 382). Furthermore, the existence of drama was getting more alive because more affluent audiences tended to be more responsive to the aspiration of critics. The dominant playwrights during the late Victorian period were Henry Arthur Jones (1851-1929), Arthur Pinero (1855-1934), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950). Outside those names, there was a famous Norwegian dramatist named Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828-1906) who was able to overshadow and influence the development of drama in England during this period through his works.

Ibsen was often considered as the father of realism and also one of the founders of modernism in theater. Ibsen's works examined the realities, in which they utilized a critical eye and free inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of morality. At his age, Ibsen was often ranked as one of the truly great playwrights in the European tradition, and he was widely regarded as the most important playwright since Shakespeare. He influenced other playwrights around Europe especially in England. Even if he wrote his works in Danish, but in England his works was translated into English. In 1779, Edmund Goose had published an account of Ibsen's work and William Archer began translating his plays in 1880. The success of that effort was reached when a license was finally secured for "*A Doll's House*", and it was continued by the productions of "*Romersholt*", "*Hedda Gabbler*", and "*Ghost*" in 1891 (Adams, 2009: 383-384). As result, at the end as non-English playwright, Henrik Ibsen was quite important and influential to the development of English drama during late of Victorian period. His works in realistic perspective were able to inspire new sense of theater to other playwrights in England and that became a first step to the advance of realism in drama during late of Victorian period.

#### 2.1 Henry Arthur Jones

Basically Henry Arthur Jones' works were not radical and in either content or form, but were sufficiently unconventional in their topics and treatment to unsettle conservative critics (Adams, 2009: 382). His first success was gotten with "*The Silver King*" (1882), in which it impressed many critics because they considered it as

spectacle in favor of supple and had naturalistic dialogue in his melodrama. *The Silver King* tells a story of a young man tricked into believing himself a murderer, who flees to Nevada and makes a fortune in mining, and then he returns home in disguise to discover his innocence (Jackson, 1982: 5, in Adams, 2009: 383). In 1884, Jones published "*Saints and Sinners*" which ran for two hundred nights. It placed on the stage a picture of middle-class life and religion in a country town, and the introduction of the religious element that caused a considerable outcry by portraying a hypocritical dissent congregation that drives out its minister in punishment for his daughter's sexual lapse (Adams, 2009: 383).

During his career, not less than twenty dramas produced by Jones, although often raising similar subjects and with a similar realistic style as Henrik Ibsen, Jones was much less well known. The reasons are his lack of deep psychological insight characteristic of the Norwegian master and his conservative minded attitude, as opposed to the liberal minded of Ibsen. However, his contributions toward the life of English drama development on late Victorian period cannot be denied, since his perspective of reality among the society through his works at that time was really appreciated by the critics and society proven by long re-ran of his drama in each publication of them. Therefore, his role in reviving domain of drama through realistic style had activated the notion of realism at that time, in which mainstream of realism was getting advanced in history of English drama.

## 2.2 Arthur Pinero

Throughout Pinero's creativity, he promoted theater into more sustained and dared to engage with contemporary sexual ferment (Adams, 2009: 383). Adams also explains that Pinero started his career as an actor with Henry Irving's company at the Lyceum in the late 1870, but soon he turned to playwriting in which he would be very productive, because he had nearly sixty works produced in his lifetime. Unlike Jones, Pinero shaped his early reputation with farce rather than melodrama. However, his great achievement was gotten through his melodrama such as "*The Profligate*" in 1887 and "*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*" in 1893. *The Profligate* depicted a man whose stainless wife prompts agonized memory of his own past transgressions, which in the original version tormented him to the point of suicide, though the ending was softened for its performance in 1889.

*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* was more widely applauded than any other by an English playwright of the past generation (Adams, 2009: 384). Adams explains that the characteristics of melodramatic are really recognizable in this play, because its story depicts the major character's past that returns to haunt her, and the play is culminated with her suicide, but the play offers newly complex attention to the burdens of respectability, where the heroine is plunged into numbing social isolation, compounded by her uneasy relations with her husband's austere daughter and by her sense that her husband's devotion is divided between the two women. Regarding to this play, Adams (2009: 384) also explains that one reviewer once complained that *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* was much too tame, that the self-sacrifice of its major character prolonged the myth of natural female innocence and obscures a more fundamental social reality.

Basically, Pinero's works were not really radical both content and form to show its social critics, like what Jones did, however his works had created many huge success and made stars of their actresses and actors. On the other concerns, although his dramas were not as radical as Ibsen's works, nonetheless they had represented many issues of social life in England. Moreover, Pinero's realistic style was really appreciated by society proven by 230 performances of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* since it was published, and gave 36.000 pounds at the box office at that time. Therefore, Pinero's role toward the development of drama during late of Victorian period cannot be underestimated, and his realistic drama style also well contributed to the advance of realism in the domain of English drama history to that period.

## 2.3 Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

Oscar Wilde was a brilliantly provocative critic, where his distinction resided in his famous comedies. According to Andrew Sanders (1994: 476), Wilde's experience in tragedy plays was not really successful. His first play, "*Vera: or, The Nihilists*" in 1880, gave a pretty minimal mastery of theatre technique and a thinner grasp of the Russian political realities which it attempted to dramatize. His blank-verse drama, "*The Duchess of Padua*" (written in Paris) in 1883, never even reached the stage, while "*A Florentine Tragedy*", begun in 1894 when Wilde was at the height of his powers, remained unfinished until 1897. That was only one of his tragedies considered as the most powerful and influential entitled "*Salome*". It was written in French and translated into English in 1894 by Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, in which this play, was not produced in England until 1931 because it was

considered as outrageous treatment of the Bible history and it had bad author's reputation (Wilde's homosexual case).

Otherwise, Wilde's comedies of the 1890s had a far surer place in the theatre. Based on Sanders (1994: 476-477), *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895 has indeed been accorded an unchallenged canonical status considered as the most quoted play in the English language after *Hamlet*. "*Lady Windermere's Fan: A Play about a Good Woman*" in 1892 was Wilde's first supreme success on the London stage, and it was continued by "*A Woman of No Importance*" in 1893, in which both plays had a noticeable feminist bias in which they stressed the innate strength of their central female characters.

In April 1895, at the time of Wilde's arrest charged with illegal homosexual practices, both "*An Ideal Husband*" and "*The Importance of Being Earnest*" were playing to large London audiences. As the scandal developed, first Wilde's name was removed from the hoarding outside the theatres, and then the running of both plays was suddenly terminated. However, beside his terrible social reputation, Wilde's contribution to the development of English drama was obviously influential. His inspiring mastery and facetiousness in the use of words to his drama were really fresh and entertaining (Samekto, 1998: 96). He made many serious issues such as birth, love, marriage, died, illegal relation, honor and etc, to a very light and humorous performance, so that no one would feel offended by his works.

## 2.4 George Bernard Shaw

Among some famous playwrights during late Victorian period, George Bernard Shaw was considered as one of the most influential playwrights toward not only late Victorian period, but also early until middle of twentieth century. Besides, he is considered to have the longest career as English playwright in the history of English drama (Samekto, 1998: 122). He was an Irish but he had already lived in England since his young age. He was inspired by the experience of Henrik Ibsen and started his playwright career at the Independent theater (Adams, 2009: 385), and like Ibsen, Shaw also used drama to portray his social ideas (Samekto, 1998: 122). According to Adams (2009: 385), Shaw's first play was a didactic reality play in three acts entitled "*Widower's Houses*" in 1892, and it was followed by "*The Philanderer*" in 1893, in which he depicted an ideal of sexual freedom through this drama.

Shaw was a member of "*Fabian Society*", in which that community had a purpose to realize socialism via democratic ways (Samekto, 1998: 122). As the follower of such ism, he saw many serious imbalances in the society. However, he never put his ideas with miserable atmosphere in his plays. In fact, he presented his ideas with prank, full of clever and witty use of diction, reminding to the style of Oscar Wilde. Since an important aim of his many plays was to face his audiences with completely new points of view and ways of looking at their own life and the society they lived in, he enjoyed to show his idea by expressing them with much wit (Thornley and Robert, 1984: 165-166). Samekto (1998: 122) also explains that Shaw's facetious excellence compared to Wilde was "Provocative Paradox" that he used to tease and arouse his audiences' feeling.

Paradox is a notion that is contradictory with common sense or weird but it actually contains truth (Samekto, 1998: 123). In his works, Shaw delighted in saying and showing the opposite of what his audiences expected, as example were "*Arms and the Man*" in 1898 that presented a sympathetic figure of soldier who does not want to fight, and "*The Devil's Disciple*" in 1901 that presented the man whom conventional society has thought as evil and selfish, but willing to sacrifice himself for others (Thornley and Robert, 1984: 166). In this case, Shaw tried to transfer his ideas about human experiences such as sex, ethics, religion, politics, and etc, by giving an extraordinary way of moral message transfer. Paradox was used to approach audiences' mind and feeling, so at the end the audiences would understand the message transferred by understanding themselves and their reality in social life. Ibsen's influences basically had inspired Shaw to move under thought of realism, in which via his dramas he had contributed to the advance of realism during late Victorian period and later he could sustain the triumph of realism in twentieth century drama development.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are two major points that can be sum up based on all explanation given previously. Firstly, during long reign of Victorian period, the revival of drama occurred in the late Victorian period, in which the thematic fulcrum of that newly vitalized drama was sexual politics and social life. Furthermore, Society's interest and their responds to the aspiration of critics triggered the existence of drama to be more alive at that time. Secondly, Outside English dramatists, works of Norwegian dramatist Henrik Johan Ibsen also influential toward the development of drama in England during this period. His realism perspective inspired some English Dramatists

to develop their own realistic drama style. That situation also triggered to the advance of realism in English drama domain that led to the triumph of realism in early until mid of twentieth century. Therefore, the revival of drama on late of Victorian period can be considered as one of the golden ages of drama development in the domain of English literature because it had numerous playwrights with their masterpieces and also high number of theaters.

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