



## Human Decency in Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*

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### ABSTRACT

*Irwin Shaw(1900-1900) is considered one of the most prominent and international WW11 novelists. Like his contemporaries, he depicts in his novel The Young Lions (1958) the atrocities of the WW11. Nonetheless, he is considered more superior than them because he presents his optimistic view of the world. Though the world is dominated by the evils of the war, there is still hope for reconstruction on the basis of inherent human decency and democracy. He believes that decency and democracy are the essentials for building a gentle society.*

*This paper focuses on the experience of three main characters who belong to different social backgrounds. He explores how far their decency is affected by the evils of the war through their actions and thinking. In addition, the paper presents Shaw's literary skills in using allegory as a means by which he follows the moral development of the central characters. Most critic agree that they are ideas rather than human beings.*

**KEYWORDS :** Inclusion, inclusive education, children with disabilities, schemes and conventions.

### Introduction

Each person has inside a basic decency and goodness. If he listens to it and acts upon it, he is giving a great deal of what it is the world needs most. It is not complicated but it takes courage...to listen to his own goodness.

### Pablo Casals

Being a prolific writer, Irwin Shaw(1913-1984) is an American novelist, playwright, screen writer, and a short story author. Initially, he wrote his two famous plays *Bury the Dead*(1936), and *The gentle People*(1939). After the success of his first novel *The Young Lions*(1948), Shaw became an international literary figure. Among the best known of his twelve novels are: *The Troubled Air*(1951), *Lucy Crown*(1956), *Two Weeks in Another Town*(1960), and *Voices in A Summer Day*(1965). In addition, Shaw wrote many short stories which offered a foundation for his novels that have risen him to the peak of mastery.<sup>1</sup>

Shaw enlisted in the U.S army during the WW11 in Europe as a warrant officer. His experience in the army has provided a fresh material for his successful novel *The Young Lions* which is a gritty and realistic novel.<sup>2</sup> Alfred Kazin comments:

It is my duty to describe something beyond the imagination of mankind. This became the only serious and honest view of World War11 as, by the Fifties, the liberal intellectual's image of it was demolished by so many uncovered horrors, so many new wars on the horizon, such a continued general ominousness that 'the war' soon became War anywhere, anytime. War that has never ended, War as the continued experience of twentieth-century man.<sup>3</sup>

Irwin Shaw points out later: "I never had the feeling that wars would stop. I only wanted to make sure we fought on the right side"<sup>4</sup> It is clear that Show's comment indicates that his literary creativity is inspired by his experience in the army, the fear of war, and imminent death.

Like the American World War11 novelists, Shaw presents a terrible and horrifying picture of the WW11 but with positive aspect.<sup>5</sup> No doubt there is a reflection upon a chaotic and deathly world due to the war. However, amid this chaos and disorder there is still a chance for a reconstruction on the basis of human decency and democracy. Consequently, he is considered more supreme than his contemporaries in his optimistic view of the world.<sup>6</sup> Shaw has faith in the inherent decency of humanity, especially of the Americans, which he considers an essential element for building a gentle and conscious society.<sup>7</sup>In *Saturday Review*, Lionel Trilling explains Shaw's interest in decency. He states:

..... as a function of his goodwill, Mr. Shaw has been content to tell

his audience that decency is a kind of simplicity, that modern life is ghastly because it is affront to simplicity and that the simple virtues are all we have for our defence. It can be assumed that Shaw... is quite willing to settle for modest, gentle attitudes..... into decency.<sup>8</sup>

As far as Shaw is concerned, there is still goodness and gentleness which emerge from humanity and in spite of the fact that the world is swept away by false American dream, corruption and economic depression.<sup>9</sup>

After Shaw's discharge from the army, war became his chief concern in his writings. It opened his eyes to the horrible reality of violence and death. So, his first novel *The Young Lions*(1948) presents his experience in Europe during WW11. It deals with the years of Nazi occupation of Paris, the allied invasion of France, and the liberation of Paris. He witnessed the day of the liberation of Paris (August25, 1944).<sup>10</sup>

### Human decency

The novel opens in an Austrian resort on New Year Eve before the war begins, and continues up to the end of WW11. It is told from the viewpoint of three main characters; one German and two American soldiers. The story circles around the experience of these characters and the effect of war on their thinking and behavior.<sup>11</sup>It is worth mentioning that the American fiction has turned its concerns from the individual to society especially in the beginning of the 1930s up to the WW11. Henceforth, the soldiers are not only fighters but men who are representative of the world.<sup>12</sup>Thus, the first character is Christian Diestl who is an Austrian ski instructor and an ex-communist. He has joined the Nazi party and participated in the war as a crusader. The second character is Noah Ackerman who is a lonely young unemployed Jew, and is introduced with his father dying in Santa Monica. Michael Whitacre is introduced as a third soldier. He is an American entertainment celebrity. Later on, the three characters meet together in a Bavarian camp which has just been liberated by the Americans. Skillfully enough, Shaw has linked the experience of the three soldiers with the introduction of a beautiful American girl, Margaret Freeman-tle who has a thematic significance in the novel. She is raped by an Austrian named Frederick after a night of drinking and singing in an Austrian resort. Later, she leaves with her Jewish lover Joseph. After that in the novel she reappears at a party held by Michael Whitacre in Pennsylvania. Then she has an affair with Whitacre. After that she disappears from the novel having served her thematic function in the novel.<sup>13</sup>

To begin with, Shaw believes in the inborn decency within man. He presents the experience of three major characters and focuses on the effect of war on their behavior and thinking, for each one of them reacts complete differently to the war. Michael Whitacre is introduced in the novel as a stage manager in the New York theatre. He is an educated man who reads Shakespeare, Strindberg, and thinks about the

meaning of war and the nature of things. He is the archetypal character of the "confused liberal". His rejection of the dogma of the Far Left prevents him from engaging himself with any political group. As a matter of fact, Whitacre wishes to fight for his liberal beliefs. Consequently, he welcomes the WW1 because he thinks that war provides an opportunity for meaningful action. He joins the American army as a private, managing a cushy desk job. In the training camp, he witnesses violence and brutality of the war when ten huskies gang up on a slim Jewish boy whose name is Noah Ackerman. The horrors of war, however, have changed his mind and, consequently, he goes back to his barracks to have rest where:

The soft Southern voices on the barracks stop, after Taps, the ends of the cigarettes glowing in the dark, the voices counting over the treasures of former lives, the names of children, the color of a wife's hair, the shape of a home ... and your feeling at that obscure, lonely hour no longer judge or critic, no longer weighing words and motives, but blindly and faithfully living, weary and at peace in the heart of a troubled time.<sup>14</sup>

For this reason Whitacre decides to stick in his desk job almost to the end of the war. His terrible experience in the army has discourages him to identify himself with the war effort. However, Whitacre finds faith through the influence of Noah Ackerman whom he has met in the war. With Noah, Whitacre finds sustaining faith which is necessary in resisting the horrors of war. As far as Whitacre is concerned, Bergen Evans points out that he is:

...more serious than his concern with pacifism is his concern with the uncertain liberal, the man who wants to do the right thing but is not sure what the right thing is and even less sure of how to go about doing it and, even when he is sure on both counts, is restrained by conflicting sympathies or enervated by his ability to see the opposing point of view.<sup>15</sup>

Disappointed by the dogmatism of the Left and the selfishness of the Right, Whitacre joins the army as a private. However, the discomfort of being a common soldier has led him to apply for officer training. Shaw describes the character as "a cynic, anti-intellectual, devoted to hedonistic pleasure, yet settled himself at firm base of decency in spite of other current ideologies."<sup>16</sup> Whitacre's character is changed through the course of the novel; he learns to hold responsibility in his actions and be in contact with life and experience rather than with ideas only. Thus, the action of holding the body of Noah Ackerman on his shoulder and delivering him to captain Green indicates that Whitacre is a person who has decency of feelings:

Michael waked back to where he had left Noah. The breathing had stopped. The boy lay quiet among the flowers. Michael stared dryly down at him for a moment. Then he picked Noah up, and carrying him over his shoulder...without stopping once, back to the camp. And he refused to allow any of the other men in the company to help him carry the body, because he knew he had to deliver Noah Ackerman personally to captain Green. (689)

As the novel focuses on the experiences of three soldiers who belong to different social background, Noah Ackerman is introduced as a second character in the third chapter of the novel. He is a Jew from Santa Monica. He is introduced near his dying father on the New Year Eve. Noah has spent his childhood unsettled and wandering aimlessly. He has a meaningful love affair with Hope Plowman, a daughter of a rugged New Englander. Later on he marries Hope and leads a quiet and happy life with her. He enlists the army with a crusading spirit, moved by the desire to fight against the Nazi regime. In his struggle with his anti-Semitic and prejudiced army comrades along with the Germans, Noah Ackerman makes his way to dignity and self-reliance. As he is attacked for his Jewishness, Noah's friends: Cannon, Michael Whitacre, a young soldier named Johnny Burnecker, and Hope Plowman support him in his struggle to gain identity and pride. Captain Colclough and Sergeant Rickett are representatives of totalitarian ignorance who try to destroy the ambition and the crusading spirit aroused in Ackerman by his friend Roger Cannon. They also try to drive the rest of the soldiers into physical and mental harassment. Back in New York, Ackerman deserts the army and is imprisoned in Governor's Island. Believing that he is wrong to have deserted the army, he requests only a transfer. After he has realized the pregnancy

of his wife Plowman, Noah Ackerman returns to the company of Colclough again. This means that a new responsibility is waiting for him. After returning to Colclough, Noah Ackerman realizes that there is a kind of resolution has been gained and that "...his personal armistice with the army had been made...on lunatic terms, on the threat of the knife and the absurd prestige of his opposition to authority, but it was real..."(pp.353-354). Ackerman's opinion about the personal armistice reflects Shaw's anger at the army in general and the Nazi atrocities in particular. Shaw's treatment of Ackerman's problem as a Jew in the novel shows his concern to identify the Jew with the American society as ordinary people who are part of the American people and culture. He expresses his hope that the Jewish people in America will identify themselves with the dominant culture and become just like everybody else.<sup>17</sup> Shaw's presentation of Ackerman's self-identity as a human being expresses his hope of the possibility that decent human beings will rule the world. Ackerman shouts "The human beings are going to be running the world!...The human beings! There is a lot of Captain Greene! He is not extraordinary! There're millions of them!...Human beings!... The world is full of them" (p.680). Thus, Shaw means that everyone is a human being and no one is special on the basis of inborn decency within man.

The novel is a panorama of the conflict in Europe, Christian Diestl is presented as the third character in the novel. He is a tall slim young man and an Austrian ski instructor of German origin. Enthusiastically enough, Diestl joins the Nazi party out of poverty and humiliation of his motherland. As the war goes on, Diestl undergoes self-deterioration. His mentor in the army is Lieutenant Hardenburg who is a fanatical Nazi. Diestl's latent brutality and monstrosity is hidden behind his external gentleness and decency. This is manifested in the scene when he consoles Margaret Freemantle after being raped by Frederick. He condemns Frederick while speaking with Margaret. He says: "It's too easy for you in America to condemn everything. You're so rich and you can afford so many luxuries. Tolerance, what you call democracy, moral position"(p.18). Here, Diestl's condemnation reveals his gentleness which conceals his monstrosity. His first step to overt brutality is shown when his jeep has been ambushed by some Frenchmen outside Paris. He kills the Frenchman and he does not feel anything special about that. He stands up and calls:

"All right, Himmler. Come on out here." He looked down at the man he had just killed as Himmler and others came crashing down out of the brush. Brandt took a picture of the corpse, because photographs of dead Frenchmen were still quite rare in Berlin. "I've killed a man", Christian thought. Finally, he didn't feel anything special (pp71-72).

Diestl's moral degeneration is culminated when he makes an adulterous and perverted affair with Gretchen Hardenburg, general Hardenburg's wife while on leave in Berlin. Though he dislikes lieutenant Hardenburg, Diestl imitates him when he hums to himself before giving orders to shoot the American troops. Through the character of Diestl, Shaw reveals the real face of Nazism and its moral decline due to false ethical choices- "a little injustice for a large justice" and "the end justifies the means". Following these basic false premises, they can easily excuse their actions. Lee Rogow comments:

They begin as fundamentally civilized human beings, smarting under a sense of frustration and personal violation. To satisfy their psychic hunger, they give themselves to the brutes among and are then misled through successive stages of resurgence, triumph, bitterness, defeat, and despair, until they descend to a level of vicious subhumanity.<sup>18</sup>

Rogow, here, presents the true nature of the Nazi soldiers represented in the novel by Diestl and general Hardenburg. They subdue to their subhuman actions and descend to the state brutality. Diestl's superficial decency and gentility are destroyed by his latent monstrosity. He ruthlessly attacks his enemy soldiers and murders his innocent civilians. In one of his savage actions, he disguises as an inmate during a riot in a concentration camp and stabs a German officer to death in his attempt to survive. Shaw is proved to be very successful in portraying the character of Diestl and his gradual moral degeneration. His corruption is the result of the atrocities and corruption of the war. He is "changed into a defeated personality as the events of the war turn the German advances into a series accelerating retreats."<sup>19</sup>

thus, Diestl and Hardenburg's decency is gradually killed by the atrocities of war. They give way to brutality to control their actions, disregarding the negative outcome of their misbehavior.

In the end of the novel, the three central characters meet together in the woods of Hurtgen Forest along the Rhine river. While Whitacre and Noah Ackerman are walking back to the front line of the battle, Diestl sees them and decides to attack them in an attempt to achieve victory after a series of defeats. He kills Noah and wounds Whitacre. In a symbolic ending, Whitacre kills Diestl and carries Noah to the platoon camp.

It is worth mentioning that Shaw's literary talent is well revealed in his usage of allegory as a means by which he proclaims decency and moral values in the three main characters in the novel as well as his point of view about war.<sup>20</sup> Most critics agree that the characters of the novel are incarnate ideas rather than real characters. In the personalities and actions of the three central characters there is too little characterization and too much symbolism.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Diestl symbolizes the philosophy and actions of Nazism. He is "an idea walking around on two feet."<sup>22</sup> Through the use of allegory, Shaw makes the reader follow the destruction of decency within him and his moral deterioration. He considers killing a normal action. Regarding Germans as superior race who can rule the world by force, Diestl loses all his moral values as the novel progresses. His actions become increasingly devoid of any humanity and values. He ruthlessly attacks his enemy soldiers and murders the innocent civilians. On the other hand, Michael Whitacre symbolizes pre-war liberalism. He detests Fascism which dominated Europe and he encourages the idea of democracy. Though he joins the army enthusiastically, he is discouraged by the uneducated and unthinking fellow Americans. Consequently, he decides to stay away and protect himself in a "privileged detachment."<sup>23</sup> His friendship with Noah, however, helps him form a new positive vision and takes part in different battles fighting for their beliefs. Besides, Noah represents the suffering of the Jew as a target of social contempt and who try to find their identity in a hostile world. In the boot camp, he must fight his platoon mates who attack him because of their prejudice against the Jew. He participates in the war so that "the ordinary citizens can live free of ideology."<sup>24</sup> Margaret Freemantle is the linking character. She appears infrequently in the novel. Having been raped by Frederick, she is consoled by Diestl. She is attracted by his gentleness. Later in the novel, she meets Whitacre and they have a long and successful love affair. For Shaw, Margaret Freemantle represents the intellectual decent American. Nevertheless, this kind of decency is dangerous because she is unaware of the latent monstrosity of Diestl and she easily trusts him and judges him by his superficial goodness, nor is she aware of Michael Whitacre's goodwill. As far as Shaw is concerned, this kind of decency is ineffectual and impractical because Margaret is unable to comprehend reality. She has limited intellect and wisdom which are the essentials of judging people according to a set of ethical values. Furthermore, Shaw's creative use of allegory is extended to include the fourth character which is the bullet. It is fired by Whitacre and kills Diestl in the Black Forest. For Shaw, the bullet is a primitive means of destruction. In one of his interviews published in *The Paris Review*, Shaw states:

...I started off with a very grandiose idea indeed, one that eventually proved not to be feasible and I had to give it up. I had three main stories, all based on character: Christian Diestl, the German Sergeant; Noah Ackerman, a young American Jew; and Michael Witacre... To link these three I introduced a fourth character, a bullet- the bullet fired by Whitacre in the Black Forest which kills Diestl. ... My idea was to show how we are all linked in this world-soldiers, civilians, the

most sophisticated, the most primitive- the link being in our time, death.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the bullet represents death, however, in the novel, it symbolizes the defeat of Nazism represented by Diestl and the survival of active decency represented by Whitacre. Though the bullet is a means of destruction, it reflects Shaw's optimistic vision that the world is eventually going to be ruled by decent people.

### Conclusion

Like the postmodern novelists, Irwin Shaw presents a chaotic and a horrific picture of WW11. However, he finds hope for building a conscious and gentle society on the ground of human decency and democracy. He believes in the inherent decency in man as an essential element for a good and decent society. In the novel, Shaw demonstrates war as a condition by which the decency and morality of man can be tested. Thus, Michael Whitacre's decency is not shaken by the evils of war. He prefers to detach himself from his uneducated comrades and the corruption of war. Instead of being affected by the contrary, he is changed from a passive character to an active person gradually in the novel. Unlike Whitacre, Diestl's decency is threatened by the external forces represented by war. He completely surrenders to the state of brutality due to his feeble morality. Adopting false ethical values is the reason of his moral degeneration. Thus, with the survival of Whitacre and the death of Diestl, Shaw expresses the possibility of building a new society based on decency, good will and democracy.

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