**[On the Horizon: Irwin Shaw: Adultery, the Last Politics](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/on-the-horizon-irwin-shaw-adultery-the-last-politics/)**

Leslie A. Fiedler discusses American liberalism in his brief review of the career that has led Irwin Shaw from the…

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*You have to understand that a critic, in order to be a critic, always has to have his own pet theory about a writer. He has to put you in some definite category, stuff you in a pigeon hole*. . . . Irwin Shaw in an interview (*Paris Review*, Number 4)

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But this is a remark, of course, precisely out of the pigeon hole—not the expression of an independent opinion at all, but a cliché about critics not quite redeemed by the rancor behind it. To be sure, the bad temper of writers who hate critics is no more significant than the bad temper of critics who hate writers who hate critics; it is the particular names they call each other that matter. What, then, are Shaw’s charges against the critics? First, that they are pettish, smug, and self-satisfied, and second, that they will not let the poor, dedicated author show in his fictions the defeat of a “decent man.” The first part of the indictment is merely a banality compounded of the same sleazy part-truths as Shaw’s observation that in America all writers are regarded as eggheads and subversives, or his trite observation that “writing can still be original, but talking or writing *about* writing can’t.” “Holy man,” he cries to his questioners with the masculine contempt for chatter of which he seems so proud, “I want to play some tennis.”

The second item on his bill of particulars is, of course, simply not true. That anyone who could be called a critic in any real sense of the word would object to a writer’s attempting tragedy is utterly incredible; and as a matter of fact, Shaw must know that his own work has been belabored, by some critics at least, for exactly the opposite fault, for the surrender of the tragic to the sentimental, for smuggling into a situation of defeat an illegitimate note of tearful hope. He is, in fact, the master of the Happy Ending once removed, as he demonstrates yet once more in *Lucy Crown*.

No, what irks Shaw is that the critics put him squarely in the pigeon hole which he really inhabits, and which he cannot even escape in attacking them. As a matter of fact, it is only what is *typical* about him that makes him interesting enough for critical comment. His books and plays with their breathless pursuit of the very latest liberal-old cliché-problem, his improbable dialogue (only he himself apparently talks like his own characters), his limp watery prose are scarcely worth more than the sentence it takes to describe them. More precisely, perhaps, they would be worth no more than that sentence, except for the fact that they represent an *ideal* of literary achievement, a style and attitude and choice of subject of which a whole class of readers dream. Irwin Shaw is, in fact, a sociological touchstone, revealing in a certain taste a certain order of frustration inherent in a certain way of life.

The group for whom he writes often appear as characters in his fiction: the writer, for instance, who thinks he has sold himself and who tries to keep his self-respect by buying Parrington’s *Main Currents of American Thought*, in the short story called after that critical work; or the muddled protagonist of *The Troubled Air*; or even Tony Crown in the latest novel, trapped in the career of a cartoonist. That group in real life, the well-heeled beneficiaries of mass communications with their regrets and “higher” yearnings, are well enough aware of their kinship to Shaw, know him for their voice. In the movie, *Sunset Boulevard*, itself the product of the aspirations of this group, we are given a quick glimpse of the hack writer-gigolo hero reading in his spare time, not as escape but as an act of piety, Shaw’s *Young Lions*. And, indeed, that book and the whole body of Shaw’s work is precisely what the soul-weary liberal writer of bad movie scripts imagines he might produce if he were only “free”: the sort of work in which slickness and sentimentality are turned from the service of entertainment and name brands to social awareness and “human understanding.” Needless to say, they remain still slickness and sentimentality, never reach the outrageous level of imagination and poetry. If mere “decency” of intent could redeem banality, Shaw would be a first-rate writer rather than a symptom.

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It is not, therefore, surprising to read that Shaw’s latest novel has been bought, for an eminently satisfactory sum, by Hecht-Lancaster, the producers of *Marty* and the representatives in Hollywood of exactly the *kitschy* ambitions to which Shaw appeals. One expects so little of the movies, after all, that the moderate triumphs of *Marty* have been welcomed not only by those whose notions of “real honesty” can be equally well satisfied by *The Troubled Air*. Yet it is good to be aware that Chayefsky’s fable of a Bronx bachelor’s escape from the tender trap of Saturday night homosexuality was a perilous achievement, close always to a distressing sentimentality underneath the realism that threatened continually to become mere Fordham Road décor; and it is hard to see how the choice of *Lucy Crown*represents anything but a falling off. The big speeches about low budgets at the last Academy dinner have not prevented the Hecht-Lancaster people from preparing to splurge on their next effort, apparently on the unsafe assumption that there can be high-budget “honesty” as well as low.

It is too bad that these producers and Shaw should have come together at this moment of mutual best-sellerdom and self-esteem in that realm of half-art where nothing fails like success. Shaw, I think, has little to lose, but the producers of *Marty* have something at stake. It is interesting, all the same, that they should have joined forces on the subject of sex, in an “enlightened” treatment of sexual infidelity. The marriage relationship has become the last politics of those who have lost their politics, the subject of the subjectless, the one area in which “liberalism” of the vintage of the thirties or even the twenties can still swagger smugly before its glass. Those who may be doubtful in the extreme about their former ideas on war or the economic organization of society have at least the conviction that they have broken through forever certain old-fashioned restrictive bugaboos about the relations of men and women. In a fascinatingly vestigial way, adultery (or what once would have been called adultery) remains the contemporary subject *par excellence*, precisely because we are no longer sure what it is or what it implies. In no other area, can we indulge so convincedly in the sense of our own understanding and tolerance. In no other area, can we feel so emancipated at so little actual cost. In the most respectable bourgeoisdom, especially that suburban world of those who would all be Shaws if they could, only the Freudian revolution has succeeded unequivocally.

It is a part of Irwin Shaw’s uncanny flair for what is topical in this world (which is the world of everyone, for its writers smuggle daily into their copy these bootleg ideas) that has brought him on the long journey from *Bury The Dead* to *Lucy Crown*. In a way, he is vindicating his repeated protest that he was not ever *really*a propagandist, though he wrote against war when pacifism was the reigning passion of the young (in *Bury The Dead*), then for a war against fascism when feeling had shifted in that direction (in his sadist-sentimental parable, *The Gentle People*), about Nazis and nonconformists in World War II when the age demanded The Big War Book once more (in *The Young Lions*), about McCarthyism and Communism when the newspapers were trying to persuade us we could think of nothing else (in *The Troubled Air*). When no one seems to care about political subjects for the moment, or when at least they have ceased to sell, Shaw can give up politics without a quiver of regret and return to the human subject, to sex and the family, as if he had never left home.

It is not even a question of opportunism. The march of Shaw’s subjects from little sermons out of the *New Masses* to hoked-up versions of ladies’ magazine standards, the evolution of his sponsors from the New Theater League to the Group Theater to Hecht-Lancaster may correspond to his own progress from rags to riches: that is, from Brooklyn to Manhattan to Hollywood to Paris, Rome, and the foothills of the Pyrenees; but his changes represent neither a personal betrayal nor a personal success story, except in the general sense that his whole generation has been betrayed by the success for which, children of the Crash, they were not even looking. His development is only typical after all, the common experience of those whose passage from adolescence to middle age was synchronized with the world’s drift from depression to war, and from war to prosperity. There is a certain constancy in Shaw; at least, two impulses have been present in him and his work from the beginning: a desire to get the hell out of Brooklyn and stay out, plus the need to find temporary objectifications for the great, warm, free-floating cloud of sentimentality which has always hovered just over his head like the sign of his chosenness. Both together, of course, represent a single force, his basic source of energy: the desire to externalize the self-pity that has haunted him from the start and thus once and for all to be free of it.

I cannot pretend that Shaw’s kind of self-pity and the enormous (and finally insatiable) need for success it breeds is alien to me. I, too, began in my own sort of Brooklyn; and I can remember with embarrassing clarity screaming in ecstasy as the soldiers walked portentously across the stage at the end of *Bury The Dead*; it seemed a play written for me and for my friends, *our* play. It is a little hard for me, however, even to imagine at this point the feelings that might make *Lucy Crown*coherent and meaningful. Somewhere in the late thirties, way back in the time of his short stories, we came apart, Shaw and I—crawled, perhaps I should say, into different pigeon holes, where we must wait for the critics to find us. The way Shaw has chosen seems to me finally intolerable: to be just right always—not a Communist a month past the time when being a Communist seems (to the most enlightened) a creditable excess; not against war a month past the point when true liberalism demands it; not a millimeter off the precise center between Red-baiting and whitewashing; just eggheaded enough to feel righteous but not too eggheaded to hate critics; able to read the right books in the morning but play a good game of tennis in the afternoon.

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At the end of this road is *Lucy Crown*, the book an author like Shaw writes when the times no longer provide him with an ostensible public subject and he must do his best with his own *Lathes Home Journal* kind of imagination. Everyone knows by now, I should suppose, what the book is about: the melodramatic gimmick of the boy who through the half-raised blind sees his mother in bed with his tutor, and the consequent collapse of a family: the vulgarization and death of the father, the casting-off and slow ruin of the son, the degradation of the mother. Unfortunately, things do not stop with this vision of the horror which follows upon the summer’s dalliance of a middle-aged woman and a college kid. As the popular formula of such stories demands, the misunderstanding and grief must be redeemed finally, at least in prospect, as the curtain goes down. Lucy Crown, converted from the higher nymphomania (frequent unfaithfulness as a protest against her husband’s over-protection and then as a patriotic service) to a rather maudlin devotion to international social work among children, weeps with her long-lost son at the place her husband died—and prepares in the final pages to make a present to her grandchild, the token of a new life. Almost disheartened perhaps, tear-soaked certainly, and a little titillated by the discreet *voyeurism* of the book’s beginning, we make it to the long-deferred, muted, almost apologetic Happy Ending.

This is not, please note, the vulgar Happy E. which is *too* happy, but the H.E. once removed, the Higher H.E. Yet for even this mitigated fortunate close, just as for its humbler *Saturday Evening Post* cognates, the intervention of coincidence is required: the U.N. and a sentimentally amorous bartender must, as a matter of fact, collaborate before the chance meeting in Paris between the separated mother and son can be brought about; but what sentimentality demands, probability cannot refuse; and if character will not yield the desired reversal, contrivance will exact it.

Probable or not, the son who has hated his mother and the mother who has feared her son accept their kinship and common guilt in a final embrace. The tragic is rejected (because of the long-distant influence of the critics?) and over all floats a suggestion of that sickliest of mottos: *tout savoir est tout pardonner*, which means quite clearly in this book what in reality it always means, “to know nothing is to forgive all.” For indeed, Shaw understands or admits understanding nothing of what makes his characters go beyond his own skill at puppetry; the real psychological or social roots of their malaise, the influence of class and culture on their actions, the role of their deepest instincts: all this is suggested superficially or else actually camouflaged.

It is not a matter of the characters’ not understanding each other and themselves; we are forbidden to understand them; for if we were permitted to see truly into their depths the Happy Ending would be precluded. No, we must somehow believe that a tangled confluence of desire and ambition and fear, the whole pattern of Bovaryism and suburban paralysis and Oedipal jealousy, which only the ideal analysis could hope to mitigate or the perfect revolution resolve—are capable of being brought to a satisfactory resolution by mere good will, frankness, and sentimentality. *Tout savoir est tout pardonner*.

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