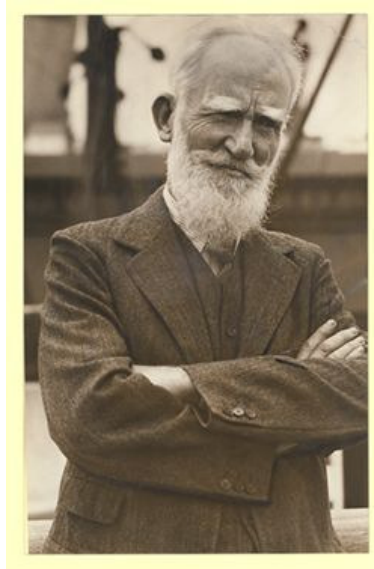


# George Bernard Shaw

(1856-1950),



**George Bernard Shaw** was born in Synge Street, Dublin in 1856 to George Carr Shaw (1814–1885), whose father was Bernard Shaw, an unsuccessful grain merchant and sometime civil servant, and Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw, born Gurly (1830–1913), a professional singer. He had two sisters, Lucinda Frances (1853–1920), a singer of musical comedy and light opera, and Elinor Agnes (1854–1876). George attended a number of schools and one would assume did not enjoy his time in any of them. In fact he harbored a lifelong animosity toward schools and teachers. He painstakingly detailed the reasons for his aversion to formal education in his *Treatise on Parents and Children*. In brief, he considered the standardised curricula useless, deadening to the spirit and stifling to the intellect. He particularly deplored the use of corporal punishment, which was prevalent in his time.

When his mother left home and followed her voice teacher, George Vandeleur Lee, to London, Shaw was almost sixteen years old. His sisters accompanied their mother but Shaw remained in Dublin with his father, first as a reluctant pupil, then as a clerk in an estate office. He worked efficiently, albeit discontentedly, for several years.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1876, Shaw joined his mother's London household. He was provided with a pound a

week while he frequented public libraries and the British Museum reading room where he studied earnestly and began writing novels. His novels were rejected, however, so his literary earnings remained next to nothing until 1885, when he became self-supporting as a critic of the arts.

Influenced by his wide reading, he became a dedicated Socialist and a charter member of the Fabian Society, a middle class organization established in 1884 to promote the gradual spread of socialism by peaceful means. Through this involvement he met fellow Fabian Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress, and they married in 1898. In 1906 the Shaws moved into a house, now called Shaw's Corner, in Ayot St. Lawrence, a small village in Hertfordshire; it was to be their home for the remainder of their lives, although they also maintained a London home.

Shaw's plays were first performed in the 1890s and by the end of the decade he was an established playwright, writing 63 plays in all. He was also a novelist, critic, pamphleteer, essayist and, private correspondent. critic, pamphleteer, essayist and private correspondent; His output was prodigious - he is known to have written more than 250,000 letters. Along with Fabian Society members Sidney Webb, Beatrice Webb and Graham Wallas, Shaw founded the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895 with funding provided by private philanthropy. One of the libraries at the LSH is named in Shaw's honor and holds collections of his papers.

Shaw wrote five unsuccessful novels at the start of his career: *Cashel Byron's Profession* (1886), *An Unsocial Socialist* (1887) *Love Among the Artists* (1914), *The Irrational Knot* (1905) and *Immaturity*, (1931) The dates are those of publication; Shaw had written *Immaturity*, for example, in 1879. A collection of Shaw's short stories, *The Black Girl in Search of God and Some Lesser Tales*, was published in 1834. *The Black Girl*, an enthusiastic but misguided convert to Christianity, goes searching for God, whom she believes to be an actual person. Written as an allegory, somewhat reminiscent of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Shaw uses her adventures to expose flaws and fallacies in the religions of the world. At the story's happy ending, the Black Girl quits her searchings in favor of rearing a family with the aid of a down-to-earth to-earth red-haired Irishman.



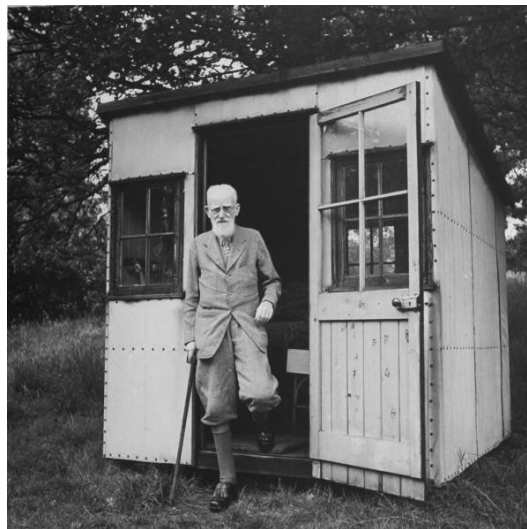
### **Shaw's Corner**

However it is for his plays that Shaw is best known. Shaw's plays, like those of Oscar Wilde, are full of cutting humor, which was exceptional among playwrights of the Victorian era and both authors are remembered for their comedy. However, Shaw's wittiness should not conceal the important role he played in revolutionizing British drama. In the Victorian Era, the London stage had been regarded as a place for frothy, sentimental entertainment. Shaw made it a forum for considering moral, political and economic issues, possibly his most lasting and important contribution to dramatic art. In this, he considered himself indebted to Henrik Ibsen, who pioneered modern realistic drama, meaning drama designed to heighten awareness of some important social issue. Significantly, *Widowers' Houses* — an example of the realistic genre — was completed after William Archer, Shaw's friend, had translated some of Ibsen's plays to English and Shaw had written his treatise *The Quintessence of Ibsensism*. The play *Pygmalion*, for example, was an expression of Shaw's furious objection to what he saw as the deterioration of English usage. Asked once why, if he felt so strongly about this particular issue he didn't just deliver lectures on the subject, he replied tartly (as was his habit) that if he were to deliver a lecture on the subject very few seats in the hall would be occupied, whereas his play was drawing full houses night after night!



**Scene from Shaw's play "Mrs Warren's Profession."**

[Shaw's published plays come with lengthy prefaces. These tend to be more about Shaw's opinions on the issues addressed by the plays than about the plays themselves. Often his prefaces are longer than the plays they introduce. For example, the Penguin Books edition of his one-act *The Shewing-up Of Blanco Posnet* (1909) has a 67-page preface for the 29-page playscript!]



**Shaw on his 90th birthday, standing in front of the hut he called "The Shelter" where he worked at his typewriter.**

As Shaw's experience and popularity increased, his plays and prefaces became more voluble about reforms he advocated, without diminishing their success as entertainments. Such works, including *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898), *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905) and *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), display

Shaw's matured views, for he was approaching 50 when he wrote them. By the 1910s, Shaw was a well-established playwright. A musical adaptation of *Arms and the Man* was produced in 1908, titled *The Chocolate Soldier* and produced by Oscar Straus. It was very popular, but Shaw detested it and, for the rest of his life, forbade musicalisation of his work. One wonders how he would have reacted to *Pygmalion*; becoming the Broadway musical *My Fair Lady* (and later a Hollywood film) – explosively no doubt.

Shaw's outlook was changed by World War I, which he uncompromisingly opposed despite incurring outrage from the public as well as from many friends. His first full-length piece, presented after the War but written mostly during it, was *Heartbreak House* (1919). A new Shaw had emerged—the wit remained, but his faith in humanity had dwindled. In the preface to *Heartbreak House* he said:

*"It is said that every people has the Government it deserves. It is more to the point that every Government has the electorate it deserves; for the orators of the front bench can edify or debauch an ignorant electorate at will. Thus our democracy moves in a vicious circle of reciprocal worthiness and unworthiness."*

Shaw had previously supported gradual democratic change toward socialism, but now he saw more hope in government by benign strong men. This sometimes made him oblivious to the dangers of dictatorships. Near his life's end that hope failed him too. In the first act of *Buoyant Billions* (1946–48), his last full-length play, his protagonist asks:

*"Why appeal to the mob when ninety-five per cent of them do not understand politics, and can do nothing but mischief without leaders? And what sort of leaders do they vote for? For Titus Oates and Lord George Gordon with their Popish plots, for Hitlers who call on them to exterminate Jews, for Mussolinis who rally them to nationalist dreams of glory and empire in which all foreigners are enemies to be subjugated."*

In 1921, Shaw completed *Back to Methuselah*, his "Metabiological Pentateuch". The massive, five-play work starts in the Garden of Eden and ends thousands of years in the future. Shaw proclaimed the play a masterpiece, but many critics disagreed.

*Methuselah* was followed by *Saint Joan* (1923), which is generally considered to be one of his better works. The play was an international success, and is believed to have led to his 1925 Nobel Prize in Literature. (Shaw accepted the honour but declined to accept the money.) He wrote plays for the rest of his life, but very few of them are as notable as his early works.

Shaw viewed writing as a way to further his humanitarian and political agendas. His crusading nature led him to adopt and tenaciously hold a variety of causes, which he furthered with fierce intensity, heedless of opposition and ridicule. For example, *Common Sense about the War* (1914) lays out Shaw's strong objections at the onset of World War I.<sup>[38]</sup> His stance ran counter to public sentiment and cost him dearly at the box-office, but he never compromised.<sup>[39]</sup>

In his old age, Shaw was a household name both in Britain and Ireland, and was famed throughout the world. His ironic wit endowed English with the adjective "Shavian", used to characterise observations such as: "My way of joking is to tell the truth. It's the funniest joke in the world."

During his final years, Shaw enjoyed attending to the grounds at Shaw's Corner. In the small village of Ayot St Lawrence, Hertfordshire. His home is now a National Trust property, open to the public. The Shaw Theatre, Euston Road, London, opened in 1971, was named in his honour. Near its entrance, opposite the new British Library, stands a contemporary statue of *Saint Joan*, commemorating the author of a play by that name – George Bernard Shaw.

His death at 94 from renal failure was the direct result of injuries suffered when he fell while pruning a tree. His ashes, mixed with those of his wife, were scattered along footpaths and around the statue of Saint Joan in their garden.

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Here are some Shavian quotations you might enjoy.

A fashion is nothing but an induced epidemic.

A gentleman is one who puts more into the world than he takes out.

An asylum for the sane would be empty in America.

Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance.

Capitalism has destroyed our belief in any effective power but that of self interest backed by force

Democracy is a form of government that substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few.

He knows nothing and thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career.

Human beings are the only animals of which I am thoroughly and cravenly afraid.

I learned long ago, never to wrestle with a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it.

If all the economists were laid end to end, they'd never reach a conclusion.

Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.

People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it

Perhaps the greatest social service that can be rendered by anybody to the country and to mankind is to bring up a family.

Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything

She had lost the art of conversation but not, unfortunately, the power of speech

Some look at things that are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were and ask why not?

The faults of the burglar are the qualities of the financier.

We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.

We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.

Youth is a wonderful thing. What a crime to waste it on children

## **WORKS**

### **Novels**

- *Immaturity*

- *Cashel Byron's Profession*
- *An Unsocial Socialist*
- *The Irrational Knot*
- *Love Among the Artists*

### Short stories

- *The Black Girl in Search of God* (1932)
- *The Miraculous Revenge*

### Drama

- Plays Unpleasant (published 1898)
  - *Widowers' Houses* (1892)
  - *The Philanderer* (1898)
  - *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893)
- Plays Pleasant (published 1898):
  - *Arms and the Man* (1894)
  - *Candida* (1894)
  - *The Man of Destiny* (1895)
  - *You Never Can Tell* (1897)
- Three Plays for Puritans (published 1901)
  - *The Devil's Disciple* (1897)
  - *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898)
  - *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1899)
- *The Admirable Bashville* (1901)
- *Man and Superman* (1902–03)
- *John Bull's Other Island* (1904)
- *How He Lied to Her Husband* (1904)
- *Major Barbara* (1905)
- *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906)
- *Getting Married* (1908)
- *The Glimpse of Reality* (1909)
- *The Fascinating Foundling* (1909)
- *Press Cuttings* (1909)
- *Misalliance* (1910)
- *Annajanska, the Bolshevick Empress* (1917)
- *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (1910)
- *Fanny's First Play* (1911)
- *Overruled* (1912)
- *Androcles and the Lion* (1912)
- *Pygmalion* (1912–13)
- *The Great Catherine* (1913)
- *The Inca of Perusalem* (1915)
- *O'Flaherty VC* (1915)
- *Augustus Does His Bit* (1916)
- *Heartbreak House* (1919)
- *Back to Methuselah* (1921)
  - *In the Beginning*
  - *The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas*



- *The Thing Happens*
- *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*
- *As Far as Thought Can Reach*
- *Saint Joan* (1923)
- *The Apple Cart* (1929)
- *Too True To Be Good* (1931)
- *On the Rocks* (1933)
- *The Six of Calais* (1934)
- *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934)
- *The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet* (1909)
- *The Millionairess* (1936)
- *Geneva* (1938)
- *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939)
- *Buoyant Billions* (1947)
- *Shakes versus Shav* (1949)

## Essays

- *Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891)
- *The Perfect Wagnerite, Commentary on the Ring* (1898)
- *Maxims for Revolutionists* (1903)
- *Preface to Major Barbara* (1905)
- *How to Write a Popular Play* (1909)
- *Treatise on Parents and Children* (1910)
- *Common Sense about the War* (1914)
- *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928)

## Sources:

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[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/g/george\\_bernard\\_shaw.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/g/george_bernard_shaw.html)