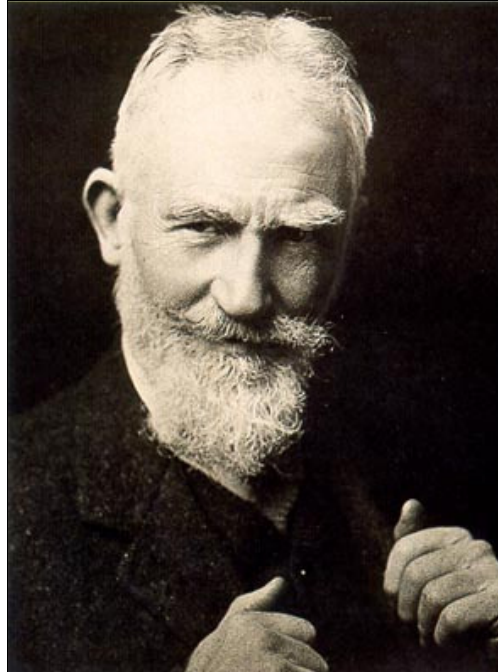


George Bernhard Shaw

(1856-1950)

“I have been dinning into the public head that I am an extraordinarily witty, brilliant and clever man. That is now part of the public opinion of England; and no power in heaven or on Earth will ever change it.” George Bernard Shaw wrote this about himself in 1898. He was then 42 years old. A tall, thin, red-bearded man, he was already well known in London as a critic of music, art, and drama. He was an influential socialist speaker, and he had written plays that attacked the accepted ideas of his time.



George Bernard Shaw—often referred to by his initials—was born in Dublin, Ireland, on July 26, 1856, to an Irish Protestant family. His father had a small wholesale business but drank heavily and neglected his affairs. Shaw’s mother was a cold, humourless woman whose main interest was music. Eventually she and her husband were separated. His mother’s interest in music offered her and her son a means of escape from this situation. She became acquainted with a musician named George John Vandaleur Lee, and in association with him she filled her house with other musicians. Shaw heard so much music during this period of his life that he developed a deep appreciation for classical music.

Shaw’s formal education did not last long. He was tutored by his uncle, then attended day schools, in which he was “near or at the bottom” of his class. By the age of 15 he had become a clerk in a land agent’s office. He was a good worker, but he saw no future for himself in office work. His mother and sister had left his father in Dublin and moved to London, and in 1876 he joined them there.

He spent his days at the British Museum reading room, writing several novels—all failures—and studying. During the evenings he began to attend lectures and debates, and he developed into an effective orator. He joined the Fabian Society in 1884 and became one of its most active members. In 1885 Shaw was given a job as a book reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. This was followed by several other jobs as a critic of books, art, or theatre for various periodicals.

Shaw’s first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, was performed in 1892. This was the first of many plays, nearly all successful. His main purpose as a dramatist was to shock people out of conventional, hidebound ways of thinking. His view of his work was reflected in the title of his collection *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant*, published in 1898. *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, which was not produced until 1902 because of censorship, was included in this collection. Shaw labelled such plays as unpleasant

because “their dramatic power is used to force the spectator to face unpleasant facts.”

The play concerns the inability of one of the characters to accept the fact that her mother, Mrs. Warren, gained her fortune through prostitution. Mrs. Warren is the most conventional character in the play, and she defends her life with an attack on the society that rewards vice and oppresses virtue.

Among Shaw’s many plays are *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candide* (1897), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901), *Man and Superman* (1905), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Pygmalion* (1913), and *Saint Joan* (1923). Shaw also published many essays, including *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928).

In 1898 Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend. They had no children, and Mrs. Shaw died in 1943. His correspondence over the years with the actresses Ellen Terry and Mrs. Patrick Campbell was widely publicized. In 1925 he won the Nobel Prize for literature. Shaw died in Ayot St. Lawrence, Hertfordshire, on Nov. 2, 1950.

”What is life but a series of inspired follies?”
Pygmalion