

## Life and Works of "Bernard Shaw"

George Bernard Shaw, (26 July 1856 – 2 November 1950) was an Irish playwright. George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in a family belonging to the Irish Protestant gentry. Apart from the musical education he received from his mother, he was practically self-educated. At the age of 20 he went to London and set to work as a novelist. He wrote five novels in all, but none of them made him famous. In 1884 he joined the newly formed Fabian Society, a large society of socialistic intellectuals whose leader he was between 1884 and 1900. He edited *Fabian Essays* (1887), which was influential in forming socialist opinion in Britain.

Before starting his career as a dramatist, G. B. Shaw wrote much theatre and music criticism for a number of papers. In 1891 he published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, a study on the Norwegian dramatist whose plays of social criticism impressed him very much for bringing a new perspective in drama. In Shaw's plays though it is the ideas and not the characters that really matter, his characters do not talk in order to define themselves but to make speeches.

Although Shaw's first profitable writing was music and literary criticism, his talent was for drama, and he authored more than 60 plays. Nearly all of his writings deal sternly with prevailing social problems, but have a vein of comedy to make their stark themes more palatable. Shaw examined education, marriage, religion, government, health care, and class privilege and found them all defective. He was most angered by the exploitation of the working class, and most of

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his writings censure that abuse. An ardent socialist, Shaw wrote many brochures and speeches for the Fabian Society. He became an accomplished orator in the furtherance of its causes, which included gaining equal political rights for men and women, alleviating abuses of the working class, rescinding private ownership of productive land, and promoting healthful lifestyles.

Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a fellow Fabian, whom he survived. They settled in Ayot St. Lawrence in a house now called Shaw's Corner. Shaw died there, aged 94, from chronic problems exacerbated by injuries he incurred by falling.

He is the only person to have been awarded both the Nobel Prize for Literature (1925) and an Oscar (1938). These were for his contributions to literature and for his work on the film Pygmalion, respectively. Shaw wanted to refuse his Nobel Prize outright because he had no desire for public honors, but accepted it at his wife's behest: she considered it a tribute to Ireland. He did reject the monetary award, requesting it be used to finance translation of Swedish books to English.

Nobel Prize

Birth & origin education

George Bernard Shaw 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 briefly attended the Wesleyan Connexional School, a grammar school operated by the Methodist New Connexion, before moving to a private school near Dalkey and then transferring to Dublin's Central Model School. He ended his formal education at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School. He harbored a lifelong animosity toward schools and teachers, saying,

"Schools and schoolmasters, as we have them today, are not popular as places of education and teachers, but rather prisons and turnkeys in which children are kept to prevent them disturbing and chaperoning their parents."

Shaw expressed this attitude in the astringent prologue to Cashel Byron's Profession where young Byron's educational experience is a fictionalized description of Shaw's own schooldays. Later he painstakingly detailed the reasons for his aversion to formal education in his Treatise on Parents and Children. In brief, he considered the standardized 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.

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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. In 1876, Shaw joined his mother's London household. She, Vandeleur Lee, and his sister Lucy, provided him with a pound a week while he frequented public libraries and the British Museum reading room where he studied earnestly and began writing novels. He earned his allowance by ghostwriting Vandeleur Lee's music column, which appeared in the London *Hornet*. His novels were rejected, however, so his literary earnings remained negligible until 1885, when he became self-supporting as a critic of the arts.

Influenced by his 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. In the course of his political activities he met Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress and fellow Fabian; 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 residence at 29 Fitzroy Square in London.

Fabian  
Society

Shaw's plays were first performed in the 1890s. By the end of the decade he was an established playwright. He wrote sixty-three plays and his output as novelist, critic, pamphleteer, essayist and private correspondent was prodigious. He is known to have written more than 250,000 letters. Along with

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Fabian Society members Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb and Graham Walls, Shaw founded the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895 with funding provided by private philanthropy, including a bequest of £20,000 from Henry Hunt Hutchinson to the Fabian Society. One of the libraries at the LSE is named in Shaw's honor; it contains collections of his papers and photographs.

During his final years Shaw enjoyed attending to the grounds at Shaw's Corner. His death, at 94, from renal failure, was precipitated by injuries incurred by falling 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.

## LITERARY WORKS

### Criticism

Shaw became a critic of the arts when, sponsored by William Archer, he joined the reviewing staff of the Pall Mall Gazette in 1885. There he wrote under the pseudonym "Corno di Bassetto" ("basset horn") chosen because it sounded European and nobody knew what a *corno di bassetto* was. In a miscellany of other periodicals, including *Dramatic Review* (1885-86), *Our Corner* (1885-86), and the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885-88) his byline was "GBS". From 1895 to 1898, Shaw was the drama critic for Frank Harris' Saturday Review, in which position he campaigned brilliantly to displace the artificialities and hypocrisies of the Victorian stage with a theater of actuality and thought. His earnings as a critic made him self-supporting as an author and his articles for the *Saturday Review* made his name well-known.

Much of Shaw's music criticism, ranging from short comments to the book-length essay *The Perfect Wagnerite* extols the work of the German composer Richard Wagner. Wagner worked 25 years composing *Nibelung's Ring*, a massive four-part musical dramatization drawn from the Teutonic mythology of gods, giants, dwarves and Rhine maidens; Shaw considered it a work of genius and reviewed it in detail. Beyond the music, he saw it as an allegory of social evolution where workers, driven by "the invisible whin of

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