

Topic Page: [Shaw, George Bernard \(1856 – 1950\)](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/shaw_george_1856_1950)

Summary Article: **Shaw, George Bernard**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1856–1950, Irish playwright and critic. He revolutionized the Victorian stage, then dominated by artificial melodramas, by presenting vigorous dramas of ideas. The lengthy prefaces to Shaw's plays reveal his mastery of English prose. In 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Early Life and Career

Born in Dublin, Shaw was the son of an unsuccessful merchant; his mother was a singer who eventually left her husband to teach singing in London. Shaw left school at 14 to work in an estate agent's office. In 1876 he went to London and for nine years was largely supported by his parents. He wrote five novels, several of them published in small socialist magazines. Shaw was himself an ardent socialist, a member of the Fabian Society, and a popular public speaker on behalf of socialism.

Work as a journalist led to his becoming a music critic for the *Star* in 1888 and for the *World* in 1890; his enthusiasm for Wagner proved infectious to his readers. As drama critic for the *Saturday Review* after 1895, he won readers to Ibsen; he had already written *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891). In 1898 Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a wealthy, wellborn Irishwoman. By this time his plays were beginning to be produced.

Plays

Although Shaw's plays focus on ideas and issues, they are vital and absorbing, enlivened by memorable characterizations, a brilliant command of language, and dazzling wit. His early plays were published as *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (2 vol., 1898). The “unpleasant” plays were *Widower's Houses* (1892), on slum landlordism; *The Philanderer* (written 1893, produced 1905); and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (written 1893, produced 1902), a jibe at the Victorian attitude toward prostitution. The “pleasant” plays were *Arms and the Man* (1894), satirizing romantic attitudes toward love and war; *Candida* (1893); and *You Never Can Tell* (written 1895).

In 1897 *The Devil's Disciple*, a play on the American Revolution, was produced with great success in New York City. It was published in the volume *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901) along with *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1899), notable for its realistic, humorous portraits of historical figures, and *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1900).

During the early 20th cent. Shaw wrote his greatest and most popular plays: *Man and Superman* (1903), in which an idealistic, cerebral man succumbs to marriage (the play contains an explicit articulation of a major Shavian theme—that man is the spiritual creator, whereas woman is the biological “life force” that must always triumph over him); *Major Barbara* (1905), which postulates that poverty is the cause of all evil; *Androcles and the Lion* (1912; a short play), a charming satire of Christianity; and *Pygmalion* (1913), which satirizes the English class system through the story of a cockney girl's transformation into a lady at the hands of a speech professor. The latter has proved to be Shaw's most successful work—as a play, as a motion picture, and as the basis for the musical and film *My Fair Lady* (1956; 1964).

Of Shaw's later plays, *Saint Joan* (1923) is the most memorable; it argues that Joan of Arc, a harbinger of Protestantism and nationalism, had to be killed because the world was not yet ready for her. In 1920 Shaw, much criticized for his antiwar stance, wrote *Heartbreak House*, a play that exposed the spiritual

bankruptcy of the generation responsible for World War I.

Among Shaw's other plays are *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), *Fanny's First Play* (1911), *Back to Methuselah* (1922), *The Apple Cart* (1928), *Too True to Be Good* (1932), *The Millionairess* (1936), *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939), and *Buoyant Billions* (1949). Perhaps his most popular nonfiction work is *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928).

Bibliography

See his collected plays with their prefaces, ed. by D. H. Laurence (7 vol., 1970-75); his letters, particularly those to Ellen Terry (1931), Mrs. Patrick Campbell (1952), Granville-Barker (1957), and Molly Tompkins (1960);

his collected letters, ed. by D. H. Laurence (4 vol., 1965-88); his complete musical criticism, ed. by D. H. Laurence (3 vol., 1981); and his autobiography, reconstructed by S. Weintraub (2 vol., 1969-70).

See also biographies by A. Henderson (3 vol., 1911-56), F. Harris (1931), H. Pearson (1942 and 1950), and M. Holroyd (1 vol. 1988-93, abr. ed. 1998);

studies by E. R. Bentley (2d ed. 1967), L. Crompton (1969), M. M. Morgan (1972), M. Valency (1973), E. Bentley (1985), H. Bloom (1987), and S. Weintraub (1996);

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