

THE AUTHOR

George Bernard Shaw 1856 - 1950

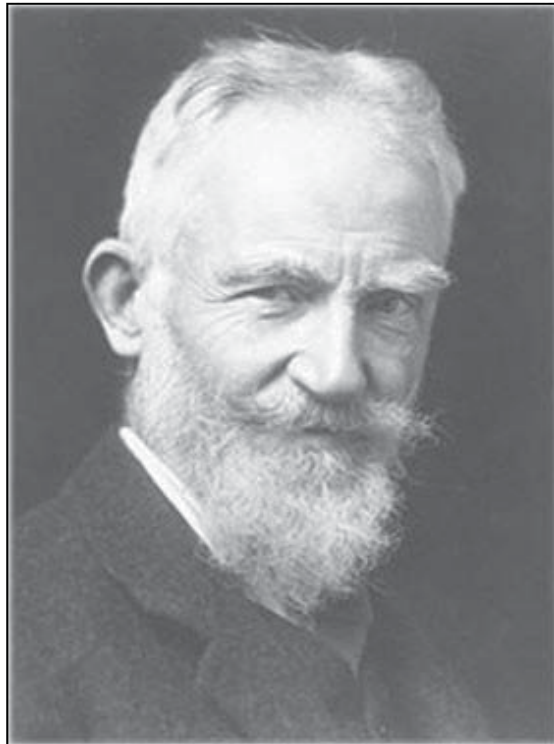
George Bernard Shaw, born in Dublin in 1856, began his writing career as a novelist and journalist, but gained his great fame as a playwright. Most people consider Shaw the second-greatest playwright in the English language, after only Shakespeare.

Growing up in Dublin, Shaw developed a wide knowledge of music, art and literature under the influence of his mother, a singer and vocal music teacher. At age 20 he moved to London, where he spent his afternoons in the British Museum and his evenings pursuing his informal education by attending lectures and debates. He declared himself a socialist in 1882 and joined the new “Fabian Society” in 1884. Soon he distinguished himself as an effective public speaker, and an incisive and irreverent critic of music, art and drama.

As a critic, he grew weary of the fashionable but intellectually barren melodramas of the 19th century. His admiration for the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (about whom he wrote influential essays) encouraged Shaw to reshape the English stage with sophisticated comedies that presented what he considered important social issues.

Shaw’s first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, was produced at a private theatre club in 1892. It was followed by *The Philanderer* and *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. These three plays were published as *Plays Unpleasant* (1898). More palatable, though still rich with challenges to conventional middle-class values, were his *Plays Pleasant* published the same year: this volume included the

plays *Arms and The Man*, *Candida*, *The Man of Destiny* and *You Never Can Tell*. In 1897 Shaw attained his first commercial success with the American premiere of *The Devil’s Disciple*, the income from which enabled him to quit his job as a drama critic and to make his living solely as a playwright.



In 1898 he married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress whom he had met through his Fabian friends Beatrice and Sidney Webb.

Although Shaw’s plays were not popular initially, in the period 1904-07 he began to reach a larger audience through an influential series of productions at London’s Royal Court Theatre. His plays became known for their brilliant arguments, their wit, and their unrelenting challenges to the conventional morality of his time. His best-known play, *Pygmalion*, was first performed in 1913. Two generations later, it attained even greater fame as the musical *My Fair Lady*.

During World War I, Shaw’s anti-war speeches and a controversial pamphlet entitled *Common Sense About the War* made him very unpopular as a public figure. In *Heartbreak House* (performed 1920) Shaw exposed, in a country-house setting, the spiritual bankruptcy of the generation responsible for the carnage. Next came *Back to Methuselah* (1922) and *Saint Joan* (1923), acclaim for which led to his receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1925.

Shaw continued to write plays and essays until his death in 1950 at the age of 94.