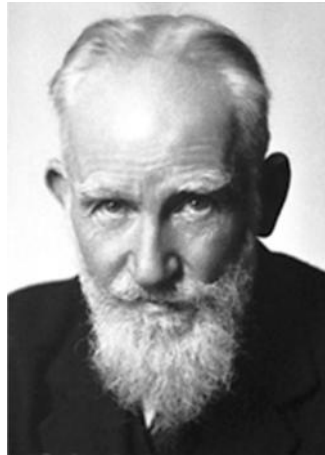


Nobel Prize in Literature 1925



George Bernard Shaw

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1925 was awarded to George Bernard Shaw "*for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty*".

George Bernard Shaw showed in the novels of his youth the same conception of the world and the same attitude to social problems that he has maintained ever since. This provides a better defence for him than anything else against the repeated accusations of lack of honesty and of acting as a professional buffoon at the court of democracy. From the very beginning his convictions have been so firm that it seems as if the general process of development, without having any substantial influence on himself, has carried him along to the tribune from which he now speaks. His ideas were those of a somewhat abstract logical radicalism; hence they were far from new, but they received from him a new definiteness and brilliance. In him these ideas combined with a ready wit, a complete absence of respect for any kind of convention, and the merriest humour - all gathered together in an extravagance which has scarcely ever before appeared in literature.

What puzzled people most was his rollicking gaiety: they were ready to believe that the whole thing was a game and a desire to startle. This was so far from being true that Shaw himself has been able to declare with a greater justice that his careless attitude was a mere stratagem: he had to fool people into laughing so they should not hit upon the idea of hanging him. But we know very well that he would hardly have been frightened out of his outspokenness by anything that might have happened, and that he chose his weapons just as much because they suited him as because they were the most effective. He wielded them with the certitude of genius, which rested on an absolutely quiet conscience and on a faithful conviction.

Early he became a prophet of revolutionary doctrines, quite varied in their value, in the spheres of aesthetics and sociology, and he soon won for himself a notable position as a debater, a popular speaker, and a journalist. He set his mark on the English theatre as a champion of Ibsen and as an opponent of superficial tradition, both English and Parisian. His own dramatic production began quite late, at the age of thirty-six, in order to help satisfy the demands that he had aroused. He wrote his plays with instinctive sureness, based on the certainty that he had a great deal to say.

In this casual manner he came to create what is to some extent a new kind of dramatic art, which must be judged according to its own special principles. Its novelty does not lie so much in structure and form; from his wide-awake and trained knowledge of the theatre, he promptly and quite simply obtains any scenic effect he feels necessary for his ends. But the directness with which he puts his ideas into practice is entirely his own; and so too are the bellicosity, the mobility, and the multiplicity of his ideas.

In France he has been called the Molière of the twentieth century; and there is some truth in the parallel, for Shaw himself believes that he was following classical tendencies in dramatic art. By classicism he means the rigorously rational and dialectical bent of mind and the opposition to everything that could be called romanticism.

He began with what he calls *Plays Unpleasant* (1898), so named because they brought the spectator face to face with unpleasant facts and cheated him of the thoughtless

entertainment or sentimental edification that he expected from the stage. These plays dwell on serious abuses - the exploitation and prostitution of poor people, while those who perpetrate these abuses manage to retain their respectability.

It is characteristic of Shaw that his orthodox socialistic severity toward the community is combined with a great freedom from prejudice and a genuine psychological insight when he deals with the individual sinner. Even in these early pieces one of his finest qualities, his humanity, is fully and clearly marked.

Plays Pleasant (1898), with which he varied his program, have on the whole the same purport but are lighter in tone. With one of these he gained his first great success. This was *Arms and the Man*, an attempt to demonstrate the flimsiness of military and heroic romance, in contrast to the sober and prosaic work of peace. Its pacifist tendency won from the audience a more ready approbation than the author had generally received. In *Candida*, a kind of *Doll's House* with a happy ending, he created the work which for a long time was his most poetical one. This was due chiefly to the fact that in this play the strong superior woman which for him - for reasons unknown to us - has become the normal type, has here been given a richer, warmer, and more gentle soul than elsewhere.

In *Man and Superman* (1903) he took his revenge by proclaiming that woman, because of her resolute and undisguisedly practical nature, is destined to be the superman whose coming has been so long prophesied with such earnest yearning. The jest is amusing, but its creator seems to regard it more or less seriously, even if one takes into account his spirit of opposition to the earlier English worship of the gentle female saint.

His next great drama of ideas, *Major Barbara* (1905), has a deeper significance. It discusses the problem of whether evil ought to be conquered by the inner way, the spirit of joyful and religious sacrifice; or by the outer way, the eradication of poverty, the real foundation of all social defects. Shaw's heroine, one of his most remarkable female characters, ends in a compromise between the power of money and that of the Salvation Army. The process of thought is here carried out with great force, and naturally with a great deal of paradox. The drama is not entirely consistent, but it reveals a surprisingly

fresh and clear conception of the joy and poetry of the life of practical faith. Shaw the rationalist here shows himself more liberal and more chivalrous than is customary with the type.

Time does not permit us to hint at the course of his further campaign even in his more outstanding works: suffice it to say that without a trace of opportunism he turns his weapons against everything that he conceives as prejudice in whatever camp it may be found. His boldest assault would seem to be in *Heartbreak House* (1919), where he sought to embody - always in the light of the comic spirit - every kind of perversity, artificiality, and morbidity that flourishes in a state of advanced civilization, playing with vital values, the hardening of the conscience, and the ossification of the heart, under a frivolous preoccupation with art and science, politics, money-hunting, and erotic philandering. But, whether owing to the excessive wealth of the material or to the difficulty of treating it gaily, the piece has sunk into a mere museum of eccentricities with the ghost-like appearance of a shadowy symbolism.

In *Back to Methuselah* (1921) he achieved an introductory essay that was even more brilliant than usual, but his dramatic presentation of the thesis, that man must have his natural age doubled many times over in order to acquire enough sense to manage his world, furnished but little hope and little joy. It looked as if the writer of the play had hypertrophied his wealth of ideas to the great injury of his power of organic creation.

But then came *Saint Joan* (1923), which showed this man of surprises at the height of his power as a poet. This it did especially on the stage, where all that was most valuable and central in the play was thrown into due relief and revealed its real weight, even against the parts that might evoke opposition. Shaw had not been happy in his previous essays in historical drama; and this was natural enough, as he happened to combine with his abundant and quick intelligence a decided lack of historical imagination and sense of historical reality. His world lacked one dimension, that of time, which according to the newest theories is not without significance for space. This led to an unfortunate lack of

respect for all that had once been and to a tendency to represent everything as diametrically opposite to what ordinary mortals had previously believed or said.

In *Saint Joan* his good head still cherishes the same opinion on the whole, but his good heart has found in his heroine a fixed point in the realm of the unsubstantial, from which it has been able to give flesh and blood to the visions of the imagination. With doubtful correctness he has simplified her image, but he has also made uncommonly fresh and living the lines that remain, and he has endowed *Saint Joan* with the power of directly holding the multitude. This imaginative work stands more or less alone as a revelation of heroism in an age hardly favourable to genuine heroism. The mere fact that it did not fail makes it highly remarkable; and the fact that it was able to make a triumphal progress all around the world is in this case evidence of considerable artistic worth.

If from this point we look back on Shaw's best works, we find it easier in many places, beneath all his sportiveness and defiance, to discern something of the same idealism that has found expression in the heroic figure of Saint Joan. His criticism of society and his perspective of its course of development may have appeared too nakedly logical, too hastily thought out, too unorganically simplified; but his struggle against traditional conceptions that rest on no solid basis and against traditional feelings that are either spurious or only half genuine, have borne witness to the loftiness of his aims. Still more striking is his humanity; and the virtues to which he has paid homage in his unemotional way - spiritual freedom, honesty, courage, and clearness of thought - have had so very few stout champions in our times.

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