

# PYGMALION

## LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

It is with good reason that Archibald Henderson, official biographer of his subject, entitled his work *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century*. Well before his death at the age of ninety-four, this famous dramatist and critic had become an institution. Among the literate, no set of initials were more widely known than G.B.S. Born on July 26, 1856, in Dublin, Ireland, Shaw survived until November 2, 1950. His ninetieth birthday in 1946 was the occasion for an international celebration, the grand old man being presented with a *festschrift* entitled *GBS 90* to which many distinguished writers contributed. A London publishing firm bought space in the Times to voice its greetings:

GBS

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!

Shaw was the third child and only son in a family which he once described as “shabby but genteel.” His father, George Carr Shaw, was employed as a civil servant and later became a not too successful merchant. Shaw remembered especially his father’s “alcoholic antics”; the old man was a remorseful yet unregenerate drinker. It was from his father that Shaw inherited his superb comic gift. Lucinda Gurley Shaw, the mother, was a gifted singer and music teacher; she led her son to develop a passion for music, particularly operatic music. At an early age he had memorized, among others, the works of Mozart, whose fine workmanship he never ceased to admire. Somewhat later, he taught himself to play the piano—in the Shavian manner.

One of the maxims in *The Revolutionist’s Handbook*, appended to *Man and Superman*, reads: “He who can does. He who can’t teaches.” Shaw, who was to insist that all art should be didactic, viewed himself as a kind of teacher, yet he himself had little respect for schoolmasters and formal education. First, his uncle, the Reverend George Carroll, tutored him. Then, at the age of ten, he became a pupil at Wesleyan Connexional School in Dublin and later attended two other schools for short periods of time. He hated them all and declared that he had learned absolutely nothing. But Shaw possessed certain qualities which are not always developed in the classroom—for example, an inquisitive mind and a boundless capacity for independent study.

Once asked about his early education, he replied: "I can remember no time at which a page of print was not intelligible to me and can only suppose I was born literate." He went on to add that by the age of ten he had saturated himself in the works of Shakespeare and also in the Bible.

A depleted family exchequer led Shaw to accept employment as a clerk in a Land Agency when he was sixteen. He was unhappy and, determined to become a professional writer, he resigned after five years of service and joined his mother, who was then teaching music in London. The year was 1876. During the next three years he allowed his mother to support him, and he concentrated largely on trying to support himself as an author. No less than five novels came from his pen between the years 1879 and 1883, but it was soon evident that Shaw's genius would never be revealed as a novelist.

In 1879, Shaw was induced to accept employment in a firm promoting the new Edison telephone, his duties being those of a right-of-way agent. He detested the task of interviewing residents in the East End of London and endeavoring to get their permission for the installation of telephone poles and equipment. A few months of such work was enough for him. In his own words, this was the last time he "sinned against his nature" by seeking to earn an honest living.

The year 1879 had greater significance for Shaw. He joined the Zetetical Society, a debating club, the members of which held lengthy discussions on such subjects as economics, science, and religion. Soon he found himself in demand as a speaker and a regular participant at public meetings. At one such meeting held in September, 1882, he listened spellbound to Henry George, an apostle of Land Nationalization and the Single Tax. Shaw credits the American lecturer and author with having roused his interest in economics and social theory; previously, he had concerned himself chiefly with the conflict between science and religion. When Shaw was told that no one could do justice to George's theories without being familiar with the theories of Karl Marx, Shaw promptly read a French translation of *Das Kapital*, no English translation being then available. He was immediately converted to socialism.

The year 1884 is also a notable one in the life of Bernard Shaw (as he preferred to be called). After reading a tract entitled *Why Are the Many Poor?* and learning that it was published by the

Fabian Society, he appeared at the society's next meeting. The intellectual temper of this group, which included such distinguished men as Havelock Ellis, immediately attracted him. He was accepted as a member on September 5 and was elected to the Executive Committee in January. Among the debaters at the Zetetical Society was Sidney Webb, a man whom Shaw recognized as his "natural complement." He easily persuaded Webb to become a Fabian. The two, along with the gifted Mrs. Webb, became the pillars of the society which preached the gospel of constitutional and evolutionary socialism. Shaw's views, voiced in public parks and meeting halls, are expounded at length in *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928); many of his ideas also find a place in his dramas.

In the next stage of his career, Shaw emerged as a literary, music, and art critic. Largely because of the influence of William Archer, the distinguished dramatic critic now best remembered as the editor and translator of Ibsen, Shaw became a member of the reviewing staff of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885. Earlier, he had ghostwritten some music reviews for G. L. Lee, with whom his mother had long been associated as a singer and as a music teacher. But this new assignment provided him with his first real experience as a critic. Not long thereafter, and again through the assistance of William Archer, Shaw added to these duties those of an art critic on the widely influential *World*. Archer insisted that Shaw knew very little about art but realized that Shaw thought that he did, which was what mattered. As for Shaw, he blandly explained that the way to learn about art was to look at pictures; he had begun doing so years earlier in the Dublin National Gallery.

Shaw's close association with William Archer was paramount in his championing the dramas of Henrik Ibsen as a new, highly original dramatist whose works represented a complete break with the popular theater of the day. "When Ibsen came from Norway," Shaw was to write, "with his characters who thought and discussed as well as acted, the theatrical heaven rolled up like a scroll." Whereas the general public, nurtured on "well-made" romantic and melodramatic plays, denounced Ibsen as a "muck-ferreting dog," Shaw recognized that Ibsen was a great ethical philosopher and a social critic, a role which recommended itself to Shaw himself. On July 18, 1890, Shaw read a paper on Ibsen at a meeting of the Fabian Society. Amplified, this became *The*

*Quintessence of Ibsen* (1891). Sometimes called *The Quintessence of Shaw*, it sets forth the author's profoundest views on the function of the dramatist, who, Shaw believed, should concern himself foremost with how his characters react to various social forces and who should concern himself further with a new morality based upon an examination and challenge of conventional mores.

In view of what Shaw had written about Ibsen (and about himself) and because of Shaw's dedicated activities as a socialist exhorter, *The Widowers' Rouses*, his first play, may be called characteristic. Structurally, it represents no departure from the tradition of the well-made play; that is, the action is plotted so that the key situation is exposed in the second act, and the third act is devoted to its resolution. But thematically, the play was revolutionary in England. It dealt with the evils of slumlandlordism, a subject hardly calculated to regale the typical Victorian audience. Produced at J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre in London, it became a sensation because of its "daring" theme, but it was never a theatrical success. Shaw, however, was not at all discouraged. The furor delighted him. No one knew better than he the value of attracting attention. He was already at work on *The Philanderer*, an amusing but rather slight comedy of manners.

In 1894, Shaw's *Arms and the Man* enjoyed a good run at the Avenue Theatre from April 21 to July 7, and it has been revived from time to time to this very day. At last, the real Shaw had emerged—the dramatist who united irrepressible gaiety and complete seriousness of purpose. The play has been described as "a satire on the prevailing bravura style," and it sets forth the "view of romance as the great heresy to be swept from art and life."

In the same year, Shaw wrote *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, which became a *cause celebre*. Shaw himself grouped it with his so-called "Unpleasant Plays." Dealing with the economic causes of prostitution and the conflict between the prostitute mother and her daughter, it created a tumult which was kept alive for several years on both sides of the Atlantic. It may well be argued that in this play Shaw was far more the polemist than the artist, but the play still has its place among the provocative dramas of ideas.

The indefatigable Shaw was already at work on his first unquestionably superior play, *Candida*. First produced in 1895, it has been popular ever since and has found its place in anthologies.

Notable for effective character portrayal and the adroit use of inversions, it tells how Candida and the Reverend Morrell, widely in public demand as an advanced thinker, reached an honest and sound basis for a lasting marriage.

While working with the Fabians, Shaw met the personable Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress deeply concerned with the many problems of social justice. He was immediately attracted to her. After she had helped him through a long illness, the two were married in 1898, and she became his modest but capable critic and assistant throughout the years of their marriage.

During this period there was no surcease of playwriting on Shaw's part. He completed *You Never Can Tell*, *The Man of Destiny*, and *The Devil's Disciple*. This last play, an inverted Victorian-type melodrama first acted in the United States, was an immediate success, financially and otherwise. By the turn of the century, Shaw had written *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *The Admirable Bashville*. He was now the acknowledged major force in the new drama of the twentieth century.

The year 1903 is especially memorable for the completion and publication of *Man and Superman*. It was first acted (without the Don Juan in Hell intermezzo which constitutes Act III) in 1905. Then, some twenty-three other plays were added to the Shavian canon as the century advanced toward the halfway mark. Best known among these are *Major Barbara* (1905), *Androcles and the Lion* (1912), *Pygmalion* (1912), *Heartbreak House* (1916), *Back to Methuselah* (1921), and *Saint Joan* (1923). During the years 1930-32, the Ayot St. Lawrence Edition of his collected plays was published. Shaw's literary pre-eminence had found worldwide recognition. He refused, however, to accept either a knighthood or the Order of Merit offered by the Crown, but in 1926 he did accept the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was quite typical of him to state that the award was given to him by a grateful public because he had not published anything during that year.

Shaw persistently rejected offers from filmmakers. According to one story, when importuned by Samuel Goldwyn, the well-known Hollywood producer, he replied: "The difficulty, Mr. Goldwyn, is that you are an artist and I am a business man." Later, however, the ardor and ability of Gabriel Pascal impressed him, and he agreed to prepare the scenario of *Pygmalion* for production. The film, released in 1938, was a notable success. *Major Barbara* and *Androcles and the Lion* followed, and the

Irish-born dramatist had now won a much larger audience. *My Fair Lady*, a musical adapted from *Pygmalion*, opened in New Haven, Connecticut, on February 4, 1956, starring Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews, and it was and remains a spectacular success. A film version won an Academy Award in 1964 as Best Picture.

Discussing *Macbeth*, Shaw once wrote: "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' for me. It is a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for the moment; and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." Life indeed was a bright torch which burned long for Bernard Shaw. Almost to the very end, when he was bedridden with a broken hip, he lived up to his credo. He was ninety-two years old in 1949, when *Buoyant Billions* was produced at the Malvern Festival. In the same year his highly readable *Sixteen Self Sketches* was published. He was planning the writing of still another play when he died on November 2, 1950.

# THE SOURCE OF THE TITLE: THE LEGEND OF PYGMALION AND GALATEA

Shaw took his title from the ancient Greek legend of the famous sculptor named Pygmalion who could find nothing good in women, and, as a result, he resolved to live out his life unmarried. However, he carved a statue out of ivory that was so beautiful and so perfect that he fell in love with his own creation. Indeed, the statue was so perfect that no living being could possibly be its equal. Consequently, at a festival, he prayed to the goddess of love, Aphrodite, that he might have the statue come to life. When he reached home, to his amazement, he found that his wish had been fulfilled, and he proceeded to marry the statue, which he named Galatea.

Even though Shaw used several aspects of the legend, most prominently one of the names in the title, viewers, writers, critics, and audiences have consistently insisted upon there being some truth attached to every analogy in the myth. First of all, in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins is the most renowned man of phonetics of his time; Higgins is also like Pygmalion in his view of women—cynical and derogatory: Higgins says, “I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance.” And whereas in the myth, Pygmalion carved something beautiful out of raw stone and gave it life, Shaw's Higgins takes a “guttersnipe,” a “squashed cabbage leaf” up out of the slums and makes her into an exquisite work of art. Here, however, the analogies end. Shaw's “Galatea,” Eliza, develops a soul of her own and a fierce independence from her creator.

In the popular film version and in the even more popular musical comedy version (*My Fair Lady*), the ending allows the audience to see a romantic love interest that blends in with the ancient myth. This, however, is a sentimentalized version of Shaw's play. Shaw provided no such tender affection to blossom between professor and pupil.

# **PYGMALION**

## **PREFACE TO PYGMALION**

Shaw ultimately wrote a preface to almost all of his plays that he considered important. In fact, sometimes the Prefaces, the Prologues, and the Afterwords exceeded the length of the original dramas. In one of his prefaces, he comments that most dramatists use the preface to expound on things that have little or no importance to the drama. Here, Shaw's preface does not comment upon the drama that is to follow, but instead, since the play deals with phonetics, and since the character of Henry Higgins is based largely upon a man named Henry Sweet, and since Shaw ultimately *did* leave a large sum of money upon his death for a thorough revision of English spelling rules, he uses this preface to comment upon the absurdity of English spelling in connection with English pronunciation. Finally, Shaw sarcastically refers to those critics who say that a successful play should never be didactic; this play is obviously didactic, and it has been immensely popular ever since it was first presented.



## A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

On a summer evening in London's Covent Garden, a group of assorted people are gathered together under the portico of St. Paul's Church for protection from the rain. Among the group are Mrs. Eynsford-Hill and her daughter, Clara, who are waiting for the son, Freddy, to return with a cab. When he returns in failure, he is again sent in search of a cab. As he leaves, he collides with a young flower girl with a thick Cockney accent, and he ruins many of her flowers. After he is gone, the mother is interested in how such a "low" creature could know her son's name; she discovers that the flower girl calls everyone either "Freddy" or "Charlie." When an elderly gentleman comes into the shelter, the flower girl notes his distinguished appearance and tries to coax him to buy some flowers. This gentleman, Colonel Pickering, refuses to buy the flowers, but he gives the girl some money. Members of the crowd warn the girl against taking the money because there is a man behind her taking notes of everything she says. When the flower girl (Eliza) loudly proclaims that "I am a good girl, I am," the bystanders begin to protest. The note taker, it turns out, is Professor Henry Higgins, an expert in phonetics. His hobby is identifying everyone's accent and place of birth. He even maintains that he could take this "ragamuffin" of a flower girl and teach her to talk like a duchess in three months. At this time, the elder gentleman identifies himself as Colonel Pickering, the author of a book on Sanskrit, who has come to meet the famous Henry Higgins, to whom he is now talking. The two go off to discuss their mutual interest in phonetics.

The next morning at Professor Higgins' house, the two men are discussing Higgins' experiments when the flower girl is announced by Mrs. Pearce, Higgins' housekeeper. The girl, Eliza Doolittle, remembers that Higgins bragged about being able to teach her to speak like a duchess, and she has come to take lessons so that she can get a position in a flower shop. Pickering makes a wager with Higgins, who, in the spirit of good sport, decides to take the bet: he orders Mrs. Pearce to take the girl away, scrub her, and burn her clothes. He overcomes all of Eliza's objections, and Eliza is taken away. At this time, Eliza's father appears with the intention of blackmailing Higgins, but he is so intimidated by Higgins that he ends up asking for five pounds because he is one of the "undeserving poor." Higgins is so pleased with the old fellow's audacity and his unique view of morality that he gives him the five pounds and is immediately rid of him.

Some time later, Higgins brings Eliza to his mother's house during her "receiving day." Freddy Eynsford-Hill and his mother and sister Clara are also present. These turn out to be the same people whom we saw under the portico in the first act. Now, however, none of the guests recognize that Eliza is the "ragamuffin" flower girl of that night. Everyone is amused with the pedantic correctness of her speech and are even more impressed with Eliza's narration of her aunt's death, told in perfect English, but told with lurid and shocking details. After Eliza's departure, Mrs. Higgins points out that the girl is far from being ready to be presented in public.

Some time later, Higgins, Pickering, and Eliza return late in the evening. The men are delighted with the great success they have had that day in passing off Eliza as a great duchess at an ambassador's garden party. They are so extremely proud that they totally ignore Eliza and her contribution to the success of the "experiment." Infuriated, Eliza finally throws a slipper at Higgins, only to be informed that she is being unreasonable. Eliza is concerned with what will happen to her now that the experiment is over: Is she to be tossed back into the gutter; what is her future place? Higgins cannot see that this is a problem, and after telling her that all of the clothes that she has been wearing belong to her, he retires for the evening.

The next day, Higgins arrives at his mother's house completely baffled that Eliza has disappeared. He has telephoned the police and is then surprised to learn that Eliza is upstairs. While waiting for Eliza, Mr. Doolittle enters and he accuses Higgins of ruining him because Higgins told a wealthy man that Doolittle was England's most original moralist, and, as a result, the man left an enormous sum of money in trust for Doolittle to lecture on moral reforms. He has thus been forced into middle-class morality, and he and his common-law wife are miserable. He has come to invite Eliza to his wedding, another concession to dreadful middle-class morality.

Eliza enters and agrees to come to her father's wedding. As they all prepare to leave, Higgins restrains Eliza and tries to get her to return to his house. He maintains that he treats everyone with complete equality. To him, he makes no social distinction between the way he would treat a flower girl or a duchess. Eliza is determined to have respect and independence, and thus she refuses to return to Higgins' house. Higgins then admits that he misses her and also admires her newfound independence. He

further maintains that she should return, and the three of them will live equally, as “three bachelors.” Eliza, however, feels otherwise, and she leaves with Mrs. Higgins to attend her father’s wedding.

# LIST OF CHARACTERS

**Professor Henry Higgins** Higgins is a forty-year-old bachelor who specializes in phonetics and who is an acclaimed authority on the subject of dialects, accents, and phonetics.

**Eliza Doolittle** She is an uneducated, uncouth “guttersnipe,” the flower girl whom Higgins (for a dare) decides to mold into a duchess. She is probably twenty years younger than Higgins.

**Alfred Doolittle** Eliza’s father; he is a dustman with a sonorous voice and a Welsh accent, who proudly believes in his position as a member of the “undeserving poor.”

**Colonel Pickering** A distinguished retired officer and the author of Spoken Sanskrit. He has come to England to meet the famous Professor Henry Higgins. He is courteous and polite to Eliza, and he shares in Higgins’ experiments in phonetics in teaching Eliza to speak as a duchess.

**Mrs. Higgins** Henry Higgins’ mother, who thoroughly loves her son but also thoroughly disapproves of his manners, his language, and his social behavior.

**Mrs. Eynsford-Hill** A lady of the upper-middle class who is in a rather impoverished condition but is still clinging to her gentility.

**Clara Eynsford-Hill** Her daughter; she tries to act the role of the modern, advanced young person.

**Freddy Eynsford-Hill** Her son; he is a pleasant young man who is enchanted by Eliza upon first meeting her.

**Mrs. Pearce** Professor Higgins’ housekeeper of long standing. She is the one who first sees the difficulty of what is to happen to Eliza after Higgins and Pickering have finished their experiment with her.