

# BERNARD SHAW'S NOVELS: AND WHY THEY FAILED

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## I

THOUGHTFUL readers of Shaw, especially readers of his novels, invariably wonder why he began his literary life as a novelist. A retrospective glance, covering the first twenty-seven years of his life, should afford a satisfactory answer to this query. Shaw once told me that he must have been born with a knowledge of the alphabet, because he never remembered learning it. The first recorded act of his life was involuntarily standing on his head. Fortunately for Shaw, and for the world, this became a fixed habit, as has been recorded in one of Max Beerbohm's delightful cartoons. Like myself, for some of my ancestors came directly from Dublin to North Carolina, Shaw was brought up on the *Bible*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Swiss Family Robinson* (which he and his sisters detested), *Robinson Crusoe*, the novels of Sir Walter Scott; which were responsible in part for his anti-romanticism, and the rollicking adventure stories of Charles Lever. Later on, he read Byron diligently, swallowed Shakespeare in gobbets with illustrations, and devoured all of Shelley, whom he pedestaled and enshrined as his literary deity.

Dickens he began to read at a very early age, and continued to read him with undiminished delight to the end of his life. Throughout his career he continued to pay unbounded tribute to Dickens, in both his critical and creative writings, unequivocally pronouncing him to be "by far the greatest man since Shakespeare that England has ever produced" in the art of fictive writing. At the height of his career, he described Dickens as "one of the greatest writers that ever lived;" and threw critical distinctions in the discard with the blanket endorsement of all of his books as "magnificent." And yet Shaw never lost the power of discrimination between the artist and the person, between Dickens' genius as a novelist and his character as a man. Shaw once remarked to me that, as a lad, he had seen Dickens, presumably on one of his lecturing or barnstorming tours; but acknowledged that he was unfavorably impressed by his flashy dress, loud voice, and over-effusive manner. Writing of sex and sex-control, Shaw once deplored the domestic problems raised by incontinence, which he claimed would be solved under Socialism. "Charles Dickens' marriage was wrecked after

twenty years by the state to which his wife had been reduced by chronic pregnancy resulting in an enormous family which, if it should have been produced at all, should have been spaced out by decent intervals for recuperation."

## II

One day, while at work in an estate agency in Dublin, Shaw was startled by the remark of another apprentice that every young man thinks he is going to be a great man. This observation, Shaw once confessed to me, made him suddenly aware that this was his own precise intention. Although naturally "teachable," he had found his teachers in all the schools he had attended, wholly unsympathetic, and in consequence, he habitually neglected his studies. But, as it happened, he was an insatiable student of literature, and superbly self-educated in the best models for creative writing. This was long before the days of Dr. Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, the Abbey Theatre, and the Irish Literary Movement. Although Shaw as a lad and young man was fascinated with drama, opera and pantomime, he never so much as dreamed of writing plays. "I had to go to London," he wrote in some autobiographic confessions at the age of sixty-five, ". . .the literary centre for the English language, and for such artistic culture as the realm of the English language (in which I proposed to be king) could afford."

So in March, 1876, at the age of nineteen, Shaw rendered himself permanently expatriate, joining his mother and sisters in London. Despite his reiterated assertions that, like Hamlet, he was lacking in ambition and rose to the top merely by the "sheer force of gravitation" (surely "levitation" would be more accurately descriptive!), the plain truth of the matter is that, at this early period, he was obsessed by two burning ambitions: to write successful novels and to become a master of the English language. In one of the earliest published interviews with Shaw, he is quoted to the following effect: "My destiny was to educate London, but I had neither studied my pupil nor related my ideas properly to the common stock of human knowledge." Jocular and bumptious as is this oracular utterance, it is extraordinarily close to the mark, as we shall soon see. Shaw wanted to write fiction, believed he could write fiction, and proceeded to write fiction to teach himself to write fiction. His own rephrasing of Menander's famous lines is singularly pertinent here:

For know, rash youth, that in this starcrossed world  
Fate drives us all to find our chiefest good  
In what we can, and not in what we would.

## III

During the five-year period, 1879-1883, with an energy, pertinacity and stoicism which deserved a better fate, the passionately ambitious young recluse wrote five novels, on an average of one a year, which encountered virtually unflinching refusal at the hands of British publishers. The first, *Immaturity*, a long autobiographical novel which he wrote in five months to reveal to the world how immature he was, succeeded in its purpose—not reaching publication until it appeared in Shaw's *Collected Works* half a century after it was written. The four remaining novels, in order of composition, *The Irrational Knot*, *Love Among the Artists*, *Cashel Byron's Profession*, and *An Unsocial Socialist*, were submitted to upwards of sixty British publishers—all virtually to no avail. Several ran serially in Socialist magazines, and one or two actually appeared between covers in queer, misshapen, strictly limited (necessarily) editions, with sometimes garbled title pages. Singularly enough, one escaped across the Atlantic and appeared—of all places!—in “Harper's Seaside Library”, famous for the light, superficial romances of writers of the type of “The Duchess”, Mrs. Alexander, and Miss M. E. Braddon. Memory lingers fondly on the “hammock literature” which included *The Duchess*, *Doris*, and *Lady Audley's Secret*. But how could *Cashel Byron's Profession* have got into that gallery?

Over a period of nine years, 1876-1885 inclusive, the man who later won a great fortune and achieved global renown, earned by his novels and periodical writings an average of one cent a day! Only Shaw's confidence in his own powers and his conviction that he belonged in the company of the immortals, enabled him to rise above one of the most devastating failures in the history of literature.

## IV

No serious or detailed attempt has been made by anyone to explain the universal rejection of Shaw's novels by all the reputable British publishers. Some of Shaw's own revealing letters and the texts of readers' reports on the novels, which have been made available within recent years, shortly before and since his death, throw a revealing light on the subject.

The letters to publishers show that Shaw was modest, sensitive, and shy—strange as it may seem!—and employed no high-pressure methods of salesmanship, so familiar to the reading public of today. He asked no one to recommend his manuscripts, sent no advance blurbs, and in fact had no literary friends of either influence or affluence to go to the bat for him. Below is the text of the first letter known to me accompanying the manuscript of one of his novels: a letter concerning *Immaturity* to Messrs. W. Blackwood & Sons, London, from 13 Victoria Grove, September 22, 1880:

Gentlemen

On the 24th of last March, I submitted to you, by your permission, an MS novel entitled "Immaturity." If you have had leisure to examine it, I should feel obliged by your communicating the result.

Pardon me for thus anticipating your convenience, and believe me

faithfully yours

G. B. Shaw

It is to be noted that, in advance of submitting the manuscript, he had written to the publisher prior to March 24, 1880, requesting permission to submit the manuscript. Not unnaturally, the ambitious young candidate for literary honors chafed under the publishers' neglect. Often months elapsed before he received any intimation from the publisher that the precious manuscript had even been received.

Another brief letter of similar type, having several points of interest, and addressed to Messrs. Smith, Elder & Company, July 14, 1881, is reproduced below:

Gentlemen

Will you oblige me by reading a MS novel of mine, for which I am desirous to find a publisher? It is of the usual length, and deals with modern society.

After the 1st prox. my address will be 37 Fitzroy Street  
W.

I am, Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant

G. B. Shaw.

This manuscript may have been that of either *Immaturity* or *Love Among the Artists*, probably the former as dealing with "modern society" rather than art or music. The date of removal of the Shaw family is given as approximately August 1, 1881, although one "authority" has given it as January, 1881. One

shudders over "what might have been" had either Blackwoods or Smith Elder & Company accepted a Shaw manuscript. We might have had a second-rate Thackeray or Trollope, instead of a first-rate Dickens, Voltaire and Molière, rolled into one. The escape was indeed a narrow one. For Blackwood did accept *Immaturity*, but on further consideration reneged—without either protest or expressed regret from the stoical young Celt.

Primarily from readers' reports are we enabled to discover some of the real reasons why Shaw's novels failed. Rejection is a flinty fact, without need of explanation; but at least it indicates disapproval of some sort. George Meredith, for example, then a reader for Chapman and Hall, gave a laconic but uninformative report on *Immaturity*: the single word "No." The most sympathetic of the publishers was Macmillan; and the report of this anonymous reader on *Immaturity* contains expressions of moderate approval of a manuscript which he found to be undoubtedly clever, but dry, unattractive, devoid of emotion, and far too long. The reader further reports:

I have given more than usual attention to this M.S., for it has a certain quality about it—not exactly of an attractive kind, but still not common. It is the work of a humourist, and a realist, crossed, however, by veins of merely literary discussion. There is a piquant oddity about the situations now and then: and the characters are certainly not drawn after the conventional patterns.

The critical conscience of the reader, however, compelled a second reading of the manuscript. The conclusion was adverse: "On reflecting over the MS. of Mr. Shaw, I am very very doubtful of the expediency of publication." The word "expediency" raises a multitude of unanswerable queries.

A year later, Macmillan's anonymous reader was even more adverse, this time toward *The Irrational Knot*, which he unequivocally damns:

. . . A novel of the most disagreeable kind. It is clearly the work of a man with a certain originality and courage of mind. . . . But the thought of the book is all wrong; the whole idea of it is odd, perverse and crude. It is the work of a man writing about life, when he knows nothing of it.

Shaw had not much better luck with *Cashel Byron's Profession*, with its Horatio Alger hero and wealthy, aristocratic heroine. Macmillan's reader found it "by no means without flavour or originality. . . but too whimsical for anything. . . I should like to see the writer at work on a happier theme. He

has some promise of writing in him if he did not disgust us by his subject." And this concerning a story which convulsed Robert Louis Stevenson with merriment, delighted William E. Henley, made William Morris chuckle, and even pleased the ever-hard-to-please William Archer! We should not forget, however, that when Mrs. Stevenson read Cashel Byron's fervent utterance "I hate my mother," she was so outdone that she slammed the book shut and flung it away to the far corner of the room.

After appearing serially in the Socialist magazine *Today* the pages of *Cashel Byron's Profession* were stereotyped and a thousand copies struck off. Later on, another, a shilling, edition was brought out. By 1890 it was reported a failure, having sold only 1500 copies, whereas Shaw expected 10,000 to be quickly gobbled up. There is a sort of grim irony in the circumstance that Bentley, the publisher, who had first refused the manuscript, was eager to bring it out after it was praised by Stevenson and Henley, and was "furious," to use Shaw's adjective, on learning that Shaw had already given it to another publisher. Gene Tunney, famous pugilist, called it a "silly story" and expressed the opinion that the character of Cashel Byron was "badly drawn." Shaw once said to me that he considered admiration of this novel the "mark of a fool."

The climax in this comedy of errors came when the manuscript of *An Unsocial Socialist* reached Macmillan and was entrusted to the tender mercies of John Morley, the future cabinet minister and biographer of Gladstone. It fell to his lot to answer the burning literary question of the day, so aggressively posed by Shaw: Was the time ripe for a staid, conservative British publisher to bring out a novel with a Socialist program of Marxian manufacture and a hero who was a literary prefiguration of Lenin? Morley described the manuscript as a "dish which I fancy only the few would relish," and surmised that the general public "would not know whether the writer was serious, or was laughing at them." Nor did he believe that the "Ruskinian doctrine" of the book would prove very attractive to a large public. However, of the writer's ability he is in no doubt: "The author knows how to write, he is pointed, rapid, forcible, sometimes witty, often powerful, and occasionally eloquent. . . . If he is young, he is a man to keep one's eye upon."

The first of Shaw's novels to find a commercial publisher was *An Unsocial Socialist*, which was begun July 9 and completed November 1, 1883. This novel, written in less than four

months, was a truncated affair, being merely the first two chapters of a huge projected work describing the imminent Socialist revolution and downfall of capitalist civilization. The remainder of the narrative, although never told as a novel, may be found, it goes with out saying, scattered piecemeal throughout Shaw's subsequent works, both plays and treatises. True to the Shavian trait of putting the cart before the horse, the last-written of his novels was published first, serially in *Today*. After various rejections by standard publishers, the manuscript, originally entitled *The Heartless Man*, was accepted by the publishing firm of Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey and Company. Although there were two editions, namely three printings of the "Scarletinas" and two of the "Maroons" (so-called from the colors of the bindings), the sales were minute; and the price quickly fell from 6 to 2 shillings per copy, one lot going for less than a shilling per copy. Shaw solemnly announced to all his friends that his royalties had increased one hundred and seventy per cent in two years. This proud boast was only Shaw's little joke—for his royalties in 1889 were 2 shillings tuppence and for 1891 7 shillings 10 pence, an actual increase of about 170 per cent.

## V

Bernard Shaw's novels, despite an occasional minor *succès d'estime* in Socialist and radical circles, failed; and from the financial standpoint, failed ignominiously. And yet they were by no means complete artistic failures. Half a century ago the late James Huneker declared that, judging by the "supreme pages of his tales," Shaw could rank higher as a novelist than as a dramatist. Christopher Morley regarded Shaw the dramatist as a "great novelist gone wrong." An anonymous critic in *The New Statesman* in 1930 ventured the opinion that "Shaw might, had he chosen, have taken that place in the English novel which has been unfilled since the death of Thackeray." On the basis of some of Shaw's recently released confessions and the opening of his personal files since his death, it is possible to venture a tentative answer to the provocative query: Why did Shaw's novels fail?

Early in my acquaintance with him, he explained to me that he had arrived in England at an exceptionally unfortunate moment, historically: when he was not yet twenty years old, and just six years after the introduction in England of compulsory education. The newly literate reading public, crude

and undeveloped in literary taste, wanted only novels like the penny dreadfuls ("penny plain, tuppence colored") of the third quarter of the nineteenth century: sentimental thrillers dealing with beautiful, dumb heroines and brave, dashing heroes not infrequently criminal in character. The vast army of semi-literate new readers wanted scenes of burning love and daring adventure by writers of fiction eager to tell lucrative lies for their diversion. The callow young Irishman, despite Stevenson's classic success with *Treasure Island*, even though lacking the dim blonde, would not, and indeed could not, qualify for this role. He wrote deliberately for possible readers endowed with speculative intellects "restlessly cerebrate", who earnestly craved exhibitions of character and suggestions of social problems.

In response to a request from Mr. Daniel Macmillan to be allowed to publish his early letters to the firm, he replied with a frank statement of some of the reasons for his failure as a novelist. (Charles Morgan, *The House of Macmillan, 1843-1943*, for this and other quotations concerning Macmillan.)

I began, not very wisely, by calling on all the publishers in person to see what they were like, and they did not like me. . . I was young (23), raw, Irish from Dublin, and Bohemian without being in the least convivial or self-indulgent, deeply diffident inside and consequently brazen outside, and... utterly devoid of reverence. . . . Altogether a discordant personality in the eyes of the elderly great publishers of those days, a now extinct species.

In 1946, when Shaw presented the manuscripts of four of his novels to the Royal Library of Dublin, he gave a brief, but illuminating statement in his own handwriting, which offers another explanation of the treatment which his novels received at the hands of the British publishers and British public:

#### "AN UNSOCIAL SOCIALIST"

The title of this novel finished me with the publishers. One of them refused even to read it. I had read the first volume of Karl Marx's *Capital*, and made my hero a Marxian Socialist. This was beyond endurance. A clerk for a hero (my first) was not a recommendation; but at least he accepted the world as it was and wore a white linen collar in its social eddies. I was perhaps to be encouraged. But my second, a working electrical engineer crashing through the castes and mastering them: that was distasteful and incorrect. I was going wrong. Then a British Beethoven, careless of his clothes, ungovernable, incomprehensible, poor, living in mean



lodgings at an unfashionable address: this was absurd. The next, a prizefighter, wooing and marrying a priggishly refined lady of property, was a bit of romance without a child dying in it but with a fight or two.

But a Socialist! A Red, an enemy of civilization, a universal thief, atheist, adulterer, anarchist and apostle of Satan he disbelieved in! ! And presented as a rich young gentleman, eccentric but not socially unpresentable! ! ! Too bad.

And all the time I did not know that I was being ostracized on social and political grounds instead of, as I thought, declined on my literary merits, which, as is now clear, were never in question.

## VI

Shaw was intimately acquainted with the novels of Dickens and Trollope (although the latter was ludicrously misunderstood by Dublin readers), had read Scott for romance, thereby "getting over" romance for good; and appreciated Thackeray's satiric studies of the English governing classes, although reacting violently from his slavery to sentimental ideals. But as to any first-hand knowledge of Horseback Hall—the astoundingly uncultured fox-hunting, country-house, English aristocratic set—Shaw was a rank Outsider. He regarded the British as barbarians appallingly deficient in literary and musical culture and in esthetic sensibility. Of himself at this time, on the contrary, he wrote in 1921:

The moment music, painting, literature, or science came into question, the positions were reversed: it was I who was the Insider. I had the intellectual habit; and my natural combination of critical faculty with literary resource needed only a clear comprehension of life in the light of an intelligent theory: in short, a religion, to set it in triumphant operation.

But this, alas! at this time was precisely what the immature Shaw—rationalist and atheist of a sophomoric type—did not have. And this basic desideratum Shaw was a quarter of a century in acquiring.

The style of the young novelist, jejune and stilted, was a model of literary propriety, with meticulously executed sentences and paragraphs of pedantic precision. "I resolved," Shaw confesses, "that I would write nothing that should not be intelligible to a foreigner with a dictionary. . . and I therefore avoided idiom." This was the literary fashion of the day. The persons of quality in fiction spoke with a decorous stylishness which made them appear unnatural; and only the persons of

more humble station spoke idiomatically. This Young Self bore little or no resemblance to the Later Self, who in the plays displayed a marvellously pliant, expressive, idiomatic style. Indeed, one of Shaw's greatest triumphs was the demonstration, in play-writing, that idiom is perhaps the most vitally effective form of language. In 1905 Shaw, profoundly influenced as a Socialist by economic questions, remarked:

If I failed (as a novelist) to create a convincingly verisimilar atmosphere of aristocracy, it was not because I had any illusions or ignorances as to the common humanity of the peerage, and not because I gave literary style to its conversation, but because, as I had no money, I had to blind myself to its enormous importance, with the result that I missed the point of view, and with it, the whole moral basis, of the class which rightly values money, and plenty of it, as the first condition of a bearable life.

In Shaw's opinion, the failure of his novels was due "not to any lack of literary competence on my part, but to the antagonism raised by my hostility to respectable Victorian thought and society." This is the subjective plea of the Socialist and moralist, not the objective judgment of the literary critic. The novels are strangely unreal, largely because the characters are two-dimensional and the plots are episodic. Shaw's 3-D characters first appear in his plays, beginning with *Candida*; and he created a type of disquisitory and discursive plays to which episodic treatment was natural. Shaw was predestined to practice the art of fiction, but, for him, the novel was the wrong medium. In 1888, Swan Sonnenschein, who published *An Unsocial Socialist*, wrote to Shaw; "I still think it is as clever a novel as we have brought out," suggesting that Shaw "go in for plays (which are even more suited to you, in my opinion)" than novels. Shaw himself arrived at the same conclusion, writing on January 28, 1890: "My next effort in fiction, if ever I have time to make one, will be a play." Of the novels, he once said to me: "They are very green things, very carefully written." To Mr. Daniel Macmillan, he wrote what he calls the "soul truth:"

I really hated those five novels, having drudged through them like any other industrious apprentice because there was nothing else I would or could do. That in spite of their disagreeableness they somehow induced readers rash enough to begin them to go on to the end and resent that experience seems to me now a proof that I was a born master of the pen. But the novel was not my proper medium. I wrote novels because everybody else did so then.