Unit 2: Drama 2

Christopher Marlowe

- Father of Blank Verse Drama
- Both him and Shakespeare are born in 1564.
- Popularized the "Renaissance Man".
- Cambridge University
- Popularized necromancy, spirits and ghosts.
- Theaters of late 16th century were brimming with such characters and themes.

Plays-

Dido, Queen of Carthage

- Published in 1594.
- Considered to be his first play.
- Carthagian setting.
- Dido sees Aeneas in the temple of Juno.
- Source: *Aeneid* by Virgil.
- Cupid's arrow induces Dido's mad infatuation towards Aeneas.
- Dido declares to give him the throne of Carthage.
- Intervention of Jupiter: he must leave for Italy.
- Aeneas, reluctantly, accepts the divine command and prepares to leave for Italy.
- Dido is left in despair.

- She curses Aeneas' progeny and throws herself on a burning pyre.

Tamburlaine the Great

- *Taimur the Lame*
- Performed in 1587.
- First play by Marlowe to be performed on stage.
- One of the first plays written in blank verse
- Popular drama- sequel Tamburlaine the Great, Part II.
- Begins mature phase of Elizabethan drama.
- About a Scythian shepherd whose lust to rule makes him the king.
- Ist part- About Tamburlaine's fights with various kings, his accession to the throne and his falling in love with princess Zenocrate.
- IInd part- Set after Tamburlaine's wedding with Zenocrate; his conquest of Babylon. Ends with the death of Tamburlaine and Zenocrate.

The Jew of Malta

- 1592- first performance.
- 1633- earliest printed edition.
- *The Famous Tragedy of the Rich Jew of Malta.*
- Used fourteeners- 14 syllables in a line.
- Barabas is a Jewish merchant.
- He is a Machiavellian character.

- The governor of Malta compensates cost of war with the Turks by confiscating the entire wealth of the Jewish population.
- Revenge them.
- Machiavel- speaks the prologue.
- In the end, Barabas falls into his own trap and dies by burning alive.
- Uses “Gunpowder” to kill his enemies.

Edward II

- Only Historical play by Marlowe.
- Published in 1594.
- First drama in English to have homosexual theme.
- Inspired Shakespeare’s *Richard II.*
- About Edward’s accession to the throne.
- His favors/love towards Piers Gavestone.
- This incites his wife Isabella and her lover Martevis and the rest of the barons to overthrow him.

The Massacre at Paris

- About the Bartholomew’s Day massacre on 24th August 1572.
- Mass execution of Protestants.
- *The Massacre at Paris: With the Death of the Duke of Guise*

The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus

- From German *Faustbuch.*

- Published: 1604
- Written in blank verse.
- Both prose and verse are used.
- Setting- Wittenberg- site of Protestant reformation.
- Chorus- single character- appears four times in the beginning of the play, between Act II and Act III, between Act III and Act IV and at the end of the play).
- 5 acts.
- Good angel- Bad angel- Element of Morality Play
- Myth of Icarus, son of Daedalus (wax wing maker)
- Prologue and Epilogue.
- Mephastophilis- the demon that Faustus conjures up.
- Lucifer
- Old man- comes at the end asks Faustus to repent.
- Wagner- Faustus' servant.
- Valdes and Cornelius- teach Faustus black magic.
- Clown Dick and Horse-keeper Robin- comical characters.
- Charles V, Pope Adrian VI, Bruno, Duke of Vanholt, Knight, 2 scholars.

18th Century Drama

- The 'patent' theatres were the only two venues in the city that were allowed to perform spoken drama in the beginning of the 18th century by virtue of Royal Patents belonging to the Restoration era.

- One was the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane; the other was located at Lincoln's Inn Fields.
- Drury Lane Theatre was built by the theatre manager Thomas Killigrew in 1663.
- It suffered a major fire breakout and was rebuilt and opened in 1674.
- The successor of Killigrew was Colley Cibber.
- Lincoln's Inn Fields, was being run by Cibber's great rival John Rich.
- With the immense success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728 it became one of the greatest theatrical successes of the age.
- In 1732, the Royal Opera House was opened at the Covent Garden, inaugurated in grand style with a production of William Congreve's *The Way of the World*.
- Covent Garden Theatre accommodated over 1,000 spectators, ranged between boxes (the most expensive seats), gallery (middle-range) and the pit (cheapest).
- It was sumptuously decorated, featuring the latest stage and scenic technology and boasting pitch-perfect acoustics, music systems, etc.
- By the end of the eighteenth century, following several rebuilds, it could accommodate 3,000 audience members.
- Other theaters also sprang up following the success of Royal Opera House.
- Little Theatre in the Haymarket (1720)
- Two theatres in Goodman's Fields in east London (1729 and 1732), Sadler's Wells in Islington (1733)

- Several in Richmond towards the west of London.
- There also used to happen performances at fairs and newly created ‘pleasure gardens’ such as those at Vauxhall and Chelsea.

Licensing Act, 1737

- Robert Walpole’s government attempted to put a halt to the expansion of theaters by passing the Licensing Act, because he was particularly offended by an anonymous satirical farce of that year called *The Golden Rump*, which mocked both him and the royal family.
- The Act renewed the monopoly of the patent theatres and also insisted that every script had to be approved before performance by the Lord Chamberlain, who was also given the powers to close down shows entirely.
- The Act referred to actors as ‘rogues and vagabonds’.
- When it came to avoiding “spoken drama: as the law dictated, managers were able to find legal loopholes, keeping their theatres open by offering melodrama, pantomime, ballet, opera and music instead of ‘serious’ drama.
- Furthermore, rather than taking the risk of staging new plays that might under censorship, many producers brought classics back in – chiefly works from the Restoration era and most of all Shakespeare.
- In 1794, Drury Lane became the first British theatre to turn the curtain into a safety feature, using an fireproof ‘iron’ barrier to prevent fires onstage from destroying the rest of the building – an ever-present risk in the era of candlelight.

Actors

- The first great star was David Garrick.

- His 1741 appearance in Richard III at Goodman's Fields rocketed him to overnight success.
- By 1747, he was running the building.
- For the next three decades, Garrick remained the most important figure in London theatre, not only as an actor but one of the first 'actor managers' – producer, playwright/adapter.
- Margaret 'Peg' Woffington- a famous comedian
- Charles Macklin- Garrick's rival at Shakespearean plays
- Spranger Barry- a famous leading man
- Colley Cibber
- Satirist playwright-actor Samuel Foote
- John Philip Kemble was acclaimed for his statuesque performances in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, and separately managed both Drury Lane and Covent Garden, introducing to the London stage for the first time live animals and aquatic effects.
- Sarah Siddons was regarded as the greatest tragedienne of the age, at roles such as Lady Macbeth.

Important plays

The Beggar's Opera

- A ballad opera in three acts.
- Written in 1728 by John Gay; music by J.C. Pepusch.
- It satirized Italian Operas, which had become widely popular in London back in the day.

- Elisabeth Hauptmann (with Bertolt Brecht) and Kurt Weill adapted the opera into *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928.
- Peachum, a thief catcher, criticizes the fact that his daughter Polly is marrying the famous highwayman, Macheath.
- He arranges for Macheath to be arrested and imprisoned at the prison run by the corrupt warden, Lockit at the New Gate Prison by his implants Jenny Diver and Suky Tawdry.
- Macheath tries to escape by gaining the help of Lockit's daughter Lucy and promising to marry her.
- His plan is complicated when Polly tries to save him.
- Thus, Lucy and Polly end up in an inevitable rivalry.
- Lockit and Peachum, both realizing their daughters' relationships with Macheath make a compromise.
- They discover Macheath's hiding place and decide to split his fortune.
- Meanwhile, Polly visits Lucy to try to also reach an agreement, but Lucy tries to poison her.
- Polly narrowly avoids the poisoned drink, and the two girls find out that Macheath has been recaptured. They plead with their fathers for Macheath's life.
- However, Macheath now finds that four more pregnant women each claim him as their husband. Hence, he declares that he is ready to be hanged.
- The narrator (the Beggar), notes that although in a properly moral ending Macheath and the other villains would be hanged, the audience demands a happy ending, and so Macheath is reprieved, and all are invited to a dance of celebration, to celebrate his **wedding to Polly.**

She Stoops to Conquer

- Written by Oliver Goldsmith in 1771.
- First time performed in 1773.
- The play centers around the desire of Hardcastle, a wealthy landowner in the country, for his daughter, Kate Hardcastle, to marry the well-educated Charles Marlow.
- Together with Marlow's father, Sir Charles Marlow, they arrange for the younger Marlow to visit the Hardcastle's house and court Kate.
- However Kate is less than impressed when she finds out that, despite his otherwise strong, respectable character, Charles is extremely shy and reserved around ladies. She therefore vows to herself that she could never marry him.
- Before Charles and his friend, George Hastings, can arrive at the house, they are intercepted by Mr. Hardcastle's stepson at the local alehouse.
- A mischievous joker, Tony Lumpkin persuades them that the Hardcastle's house is, in fact, the local inn. Thus, when Marlow and Hastings arrive, Marlow treats the Hardcastle family with impudence and disrespect, falsely believing them to be servants there.
- In order to get to the bottom of his true character, Kate disguises herself as a maid and comedy ensues as Marlow makes love to the "maid" and disregards her father.
- Meanwhile, George Hastings is thrilled to find his true love, Constance Neville, neice of Mrs. Hardcastle, living at the Hardcastle's house.
- Through the scheming of Mrs. Hardcastle, she is due to marry Tony, despite their mutual dislike of each other.

- Finding a way to get out of his marriage, Tony helps Constance to retrieve her inheritance and gets his mother out of the way, dumping her in a local horsepond!
- Finally, as Marlow's father arrives, all is put to right and Charles Marlow is mortified by his behavior.
- Forgiven by all, the two couples find happiness with each other.
- Tony successfully gains his rightful inheritance without an unwanted engagement.

The School for Scandal

- Written by Richard Brinsley Sheridan.
- First performed in 1777.
- Published in 1780.
- The play centers around the gossip and scandal, usually concerning sexual intrigue, which dominated the wealthy social circles of eighteenth-century England.
- Lady Sneerwell sets herself the target of ruining the lives and reputations of others for her own gain.
- She has set her cap at a young, rebellious man named Charles Surface. However, Charles is in love with Sir Peter Teazle's ward Maria, as is his scheming brother Joseph.
- Maria is faithful to Charles, but Lady Sneerwell and Joseph plot to ruin their relationship by creating rumors of Charles' infidelity.
- This complicated relationship plot is thickened when Sir Peter Teazle's young wife, Lady Teazle, wonders whether to embark on an affair with Joseph Scarface to relieve the frustration and petty arguments she must deal with in her new marriage.

- Hearing the rumors of his nephew's questionable behavior, Sir Oliver Surface comes to town to determine whether he is right to believe that Joseph is the honorable, deserving brother, whilst Charles has fallen into social ruin.
- Disguised as a money-lender, Sir Oliver does find that Charles has lavish tendencies that are pushing the family further into debt, but he realizes that his nephew is honorable, loyal and kind despite his faults.
- Meanwhile Joseph reveals his true nature when he refuses to help Sir Oliver, who has disguised himself as a family relation in need of financial help and support.
- Sir Oliver reveals his plot to his nephews and, when Lady Teazle is revealed hiding in the chambers of Joseph Surface, the group realize that the rumor about Charles' bad behavior were orchestrated by the malicious Lady Sneerwell.

The Rivals

- *The Rivals*, is a comedy of manners in 5 acts by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, produced and published in 1775.
- It was his first play.
- The play is set in 18th-century Bath.
- *The Rivals* concerns the romantic difficulties of Lydia Languish, who is determined to marry for love and into poverty. Realizing this, the aristocratic Captain Jack Absolute woos her while claiming to be Ensign Beverley.
- But her aunt, Mrs. Malaprop, will not permit her to wed a mere ensign, and Lydia will lose half her fortune if she marries without her aunt's permission.
- Among the play's many plot complications is the appearance of Sir Anthony (Jack's father). In the end, Lydia abandons her sentimental notions and agrees to marry Jack.

- Mrs. Malaprop proved to be one of the most popular caricatures in English drama. A term “malapropism” was also coined after her which means “inappropriate”.
- A successful musical production - titled *Rivals!*, with songs by Herbert Hughes and lyrics by John Robert Monsell - was staged by Vladimir Rosing at London's Kingsway Theatre in October 1935. The musical ran for 86 performances. Queen Mary attended one of the performances.

George Bernard Shaw

His Theory

- He was a didactic, a preacher who readily acknowledged that the stage was his pulpit. In startling contrast to his contemporary Oscar Wilde and Wilde’s fellow aesthetes, Shaw asserted that he would not commit a single sentence to paper for art’s sake alone.
- Though he preached socialism, creative evolution, the abolition of prisons, and real equality for women, and railed against the insincerity of motives for war, he did so as a jester in some of the finest comedy ever written.
- Shaw’s argument—that he who writes for all time will discover that he writes for no time—says that only by saying something to the age can one say something to posterity.
- A religious thinker, George Bernard Shaw saw the stage as his pulpit. His major interest was to advance the Life Force, a kind of immanent Holy Spirit that would help to improve and eventually perfect the world.

- Shaw believed that to help in this conscious purpose, human beings must live longer in order to use their intellectual maturity. They must be healthier, without the debilitating force of poverty, and—most important— they must be interested in purpose, not simply pleasure.
- According to Shaw, evolution is not merely haphazard but is tied to will. Human beings can know what they want and will what they know. Certainly, individuals cannot simply will that they live longer and expect to do so. Such desire might help, but it is the race, not the individual, that will eventually profit from such a common purpose. Ultimately, Shaw believed, this drive toward a more intelligent and spiritual species would result after aeons in human beings' shucking off matter, which had been taken on by spirit in the world's beginning so that evolution could work toward intelligence. When that intelligence achieves its full potential, matter will no longer be necessary. Humankind is working toward the creation of an infinite God.
- Common themes-
    - The false notion that people help criminals by putting them in jail or help themselves by atonement (*Major Barbara, Captain Brassbound's Conversion, The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*)
    - The need for tolerance (*On the Rocks, Androcles and the Lion*)
    - The superstitious worship of medicine and science (*The Philanderer, The Doctor's Dilemma*)
    - The superiority of socialism to capitalism (W*idowers' Houses, The Apple Cart, The Inca of Perusalem*)
    - The evils of patriotism (*O'Flaherty, V.C., Arms and the Man*)
    - The need for a supranational state (*Geneva*)
    - The necessity for recognizing women's equality with men (*In Good King Charles's Golden Days, Press Cuttings*)

Born: 26th July 1856, 33 Synge Street, Dublin, Ireland.

Education: Wesleyan Connexional School but claimed to be self-educated. His father had no money to send him to university.

Marriage: 1898 to Charlotte Payne Townshend a wealthy Irish protestant at Covent Garden Register Office, London. (Died 1943)

Death: 2nd November 1950, Ayot St. Lawrence, Hertfordshire, England, after an accident of pruning an apple tree.

Age at Death: 94.

Site of Grave: Ashes scattered in his garden at Shaw's Corner, Ayot St. Lawrence, Hertfordshire, England.

Early life and career

- George Bernard Shaw was the third and youngest child (and only son) of George Carr Shaw and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw. Technically, he belonged to the Protestant "ascendancy"—the landed Irish gentry—but his impractical father was first a civil servant and then an unsuccessful grain merchant, and George Bernard grew up in an atmosphere of genteel poverty, which to him was more humiliating than being merely poor.
- At first Shaw was tutored by a clerical uncle, and he basically rejected the schools he then attended; by age 16 he was working in a land agent's office.
- Shaw developed a wide knowledge of music, art, and literature as a result of his mother's influence and his visits to the National Gallery of Ireland. In 1872 his mother left her husband and took her two daughters to London, following her music teacher, George John Vandeleur Lee, who from 1866 had shared households in Dublin with the Shaws.

- In 1876 Shaw resolved to become a writer, and he joined his mother and elder sister (the younger one having died) in London. Shaw in his 20s suffered continuous frustration and poverty. He depended upon his mother's pound a week from her husband and her earnings as a music teacher.
- He spent his afternoons in the British Museum reading room, writing novels and reading what he had missed at school, and his evenings in search of additional self-education in the lectures and debates that characterized contemporary middle-class London intellectual activities.

Early Works

- His fiction failed utterly. The semiautobiographical and aptly titled *Immaturity* (1879; published 1930) repelled every publisher in London. His next four novels were similarly refused, as were most of the articles he submitted to the press for a decade.
- Shaw's initial literary work earned him less than 10 shillings a year. A fragment posthumously published as *An Unfinished Novel* in 1958 (but written 1887–88) was his final false start in fiction.
- Despite his failure as a novelist in the 1880s, Shaw found himself during this decade. He became a vegetarian, a socialist, a spellbinding orator, a polemicist, and tentatively a playwright.
- He became the force behind the newly founded (1884) Fabian Society, a middle-class socialist group.
- Shaw involved himself in every aspect of its activities, most visibly as editor of one of the classics of British socialism, Fabian Essays in Socialism (1889), to which he also contributed two sections.
- Eventually, in 1885, the drama critic William Archer found Shaw steady journalistic work. His early journalism ranged from book reviews in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885–88) and art criticism in the *World* (1886–89) to brilliant musical columns in the *Star* (as

"Corno di Bassetto"—basset horn) from 1888 to 1890 and in the *World* (as "G.B.S.") from 1890 to 1894.

- Shaw had a good understanding of music, particularly opera, and he supplemented his knowledge with a brilliance of digression that gives many of his notices a permanent appeal.
- But Shaw truly began to make his mark when he was recruited by Frank Harris to the Saturday Review as theatre critic (1895–98); in that position he used all his wit and polemical powers in a campaign to displace the artificialities and hypocrisies of the Victorian stage with a theatre of vital ideas. He also began writing his own plays.

First plays

- When Shaw began writing for the English stage, its most prominent dramatists were Sir A.W. Pinero and H.A. Jones. Both men were trying to develop a modern realistic drama, but neither had the power to break away from the type of artificial plots and conventional character types expected by theatregoers.
- The poverty of this sort of drama had become apparent with the introduction of several of Henrik Ibsen's plays onto the London stage around 1890, when *A Doll's House* was played in London; his *Ghosts* followed in 1891, and the possibility of a new freedom and seriousness on the English stage was introduced.
- Shaw, who was about to publish *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), rapidly refurbished an abortive comedy, Widowers' Houses, as a play recognizably "Ibsenite" in tone, making it turn on the notorious scandal of slum landlordism in London.
- The result (performed 1892) flouted the threadbare romantic conventions that were still being exploited even by the most daring new playwrights. In the play

a well-intentioned young Englishman falls in love and then discovers that both his prospective father-in-law's fortune and his own private income derive from exploitation of the poor. Potentially this is a tragic situation, but Shaw seems to have been always determined to avoid tragedy. The unamiable lovers do not attract sympathy; it is the social evil and not the romantic predicament on which attention is concentrated, and the action is kept well within the key of ironic comedy.

- The same dramatic predispositions control Mrs. Warren's Profession, written in 1893 but not performed until 1902 because the lord chamberlain, the censor of plays, refused it a license.
- Its subject is organized prostitution, and its action turns on the discovery by a well-educated young woman that her mother has graduated through the "profession" to become a part proprietor of brothels throughout Europe.
- Again, the economic determinants of the situation are emphasized, and the subject is treated remorselessly and without the titillation of fashionable comedies about "fallen women." As with many of Shaw's works, the play is, within limits, a drama of ideas, but the vehicle by which these are presented is essentially one of high comedy.
- Shaw called these first plays **"unpleasant,"** because "their dramatic power is used to force the spectator to face unpleasant facts."
- He followed them with four **"pleasant"** plays in an effort to find the producers and audiences that his mordant comedies had offended.
- Both groups of plays were revised and published in *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898). The first of the second group, Arms and the Man (performed 1894), has a Balkan setting and makes lighthearted, though sometimes mordant, fun of romantic falsifications of both love and warfare.
- The second, Candida (performed 1897), was important for English theatrical history, for its successful production at the

Royal Court Theatre in 1904 encouraged Harley Granville-Barker and J.E. Vedrenne to form a partnership that resulted in a series of brilliant productions there.

- The play represents its heroine as forced to choose between her clerical husband—a worthy but obtuse Christian socialist—and a young poet who has fallen wildly in love with her. She chooses her seemingly confident husband because she discerns that he is actually the weaker man.
- The poet is immature and hysterical but, as an artist, has a capacity to renounce personal happiness in the interest of some large creative purpose. This is a significant theme for Shaw; it leads on to that of the conflict between man as spiritual creator and woman as guardian of the biological continuity of the human race that is basic to a later play, *Man and Superman*.
- In *Candida* such speculative issues are only lightly touched on, and this is true also of *You Never Can Tell* (performed 1899), in which the hero and heroine, who believe themselves to be respectively an accomplished amorist and an utterly rational and emancipated woman, find themselves in the grip of a vital force that takes little account of these notions.
- The strain of writing these plays, while his critical and political work went on unabated, so sapped Shaw's strength that a minor illness became a major one.
- In 1898, during the process of recuperation, he married his unofficial nurse, Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress and friend of Beatrice and Sidney Webb. The apparently celibate marriage lasted all their lives, Shaw satisfying his emotional needs in paper-passion correspondences with Ellen Terry, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and others.
- Shaw's next collection of plays, *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901), continued what became the traditional Shavian preface—an introductory essay in an electric prose style dealing as much

with the themes suggested by the plays as the plays themselves.

- The Devil's Disciple (performed 1897) is a play set in New Hampshire during the American Revolution and is an inversion of traditional melodrama.
- Caesar and Cleopatra (performed 1901) is Shaw's first great play. In the play Cleopatra is a spoiled and vicious 16-year-old child rather than the 38-year-old temptress of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. The play depicts Caesar as a lonely and austere man who is as much a philosopher as he is a soldier. The play's outstanding success rests upon its treatment of Caesar as a credible study in magnanimity and "original morality" rather than as a superhuman hero on a stage pedestal.
- The third play, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (performed 1900), is a sermon against various kinds of folly masquerading as duty and justice.

International importance of George Bernard Shaw

- In Man and Superman (performed 1905) Shaw expounded his philosophy that humanity is the latest stage in a purposeful and eternal evolutionary movement of the "life force" toward ever-higher life forms.
- The play's hero, Jack Tanner, is bent on pursuing his own spiritual development in accordance with this philosophy as he flees the determined marital pursuit of the heroine, Ann Whitefield. In the end Jack ruefully allows himself to be captured in marriage by Ann upon recognizing that she herself is a powerful instrument of the "life force," since the continuation and thus the destiny of the human race lies ultimately in her and other women's reproductive capacity.
- The play's non-realistic third act, the "Don Juan in Hell" dream scene, is spoken theatre at its most operatic and is often performed independently as a separate piece.

- Shaw had already become established as a major playwright on the Continent by the performance of his plays there, but, curiously, his reputation lagged in England.
- It was only with the production of John Bull's Other Island (performed 1904) in London, with a special performance for Edward VII, that Shaw's stage reputation was belatedly made in England.
- Shaw continued, through high comedy, to explore religious consciousness and to point out society's complicity in its own evils. In Major Barbara (performed 1905), Shaw has his heroine, a major in the Salvation Army, discover that her estranged father, a munitions manufacturer, may be a dealer in death but that his principles and practice, however unorthodox, are religious in the highest sense, while those of the Salvation Army require the hypocrisies of often-false public confession and the donations of the distillers and the armourers against which it inveighs.
- In The Doctor's Dilemma (performed 1906), Shaw produced a satire upon the medical profession (representing the self-protection of professions in general) and upon both the artistic temperament and the public's inability to separate it from the artist's achievement.
- In Androcles and the Lion (performed 1912), Shaw dealt with true and false religious exaltation in a philosophical play about early Christianity. Its central theme, examined through a group of early Christians condemned to the arena, is that one must have something worth dying for—an end outside oneself—in order to make life worth living.
- Possibly Shaw's comedic masterpiece, and certainly his funniest and most popular play, is Pygmalion (performed 1913). It was claimed by Shaw to be a didactic drama about phonetics, and its antiheroic hero, Henry Higgins, is a phonetician, but the play is a humane comedy about love and the English class system. The play is about the training Higgins gives to a Cockney flower

girl to enable her to pass as a lady and is also about the repercussions of the experiment's success.

- *Pygmalion* has been both filmed (1938), winning an Academy Award for Shaw for his screenplay, and adapted into an immensely popular musical, My Fair Lady (1956; motion-picture version, 1964).

Works after World War I

- World War I was a watershed for Shaw. At first he ceased writing plays, publishing instead a controversial pamphlet, "Common Sense About the War," which called Great Britain and its allies equally culpable with the Germans and argued for negotiation and peace.
- His anti-war speeches made him notorious and the target of much criticism.
- In Heartbreak House (performed 1920), Shaw exposed, in a country-house setting on the eve of war, the spiritual bankruptcy of the generation responsible for the war's bloodshed.
- Attempting to keep from falling into "the bottomless pit of an utterly discouraging pessimism," Shaw wrote five linked plays under the collective title *Back to Methuselah* (1922).
- They expound his philosophy of creative evolution in an extended dramatic parable that progresses through time from the Garden of Eden to 31,920 CE.
- The canonization of Joan of Arc in 1920 reawakened within Shaw ideas for a chronicle play about her. In the resulting masterpiece, Saint Joan (performed 1923), the Maid is treated not only as a Roman Catholic saint and martyr but as a combination of practical mystic, heretical saint, and inspired genius. Joan, as the superior being "crushed between those mighty forces, the Church and the Law," is the personification of the tragic heroine; her death embodies the paradox that humankind fears—and often kills—its saints and heroes and will go on doing so until the very higher moral qualities it fears

become the general condition of man through a process of evolutionary change.

- Acclaim for *Saint Joan* led to the awarding of the 1925 Nobel Prize for Literature to Shaw (he refused the award).
- In his later plays Shaw intensified his explorations into tragicomic. For the next five years, he wrote nothing for the theatre but worked on his collected edition of 1930–38 and the encyclopaedic political tract "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism" (1928).
- Then he produced *The Apple Cart* (performed 1929), a futuristic high comedy that emphasizes Shaw's inner conflicts between his lifetime of radical politics and his essentially conservative mistrust of the common man's ability to govern himself.
- Shaw's later, minor plays include *Too True to Be Good* (performed 1932), *On the Rocks* (performed 1933), *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (performed 1935), *Geneva* (performed 1938), and *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939).
- After a wartime hiatus, Shaw, then in his 90s, produced several more plays, including *Farfetched Fables* (performed 1950), *Shakes Versus Shav* (performed 1949), and *Why She Would Not* (1956), which is a fantasy with only flashes of the earlier Shaw.
- When his wife, Charlotte, died of a lingering illness in 1943, in the midst of World War II, Shaw, frail and feeling the effects of wartime privations, made permanent his retreat from his London apartment to his country home at Ayot St. Lawrence, a Hertfordshire village in which he had lived since 1906. He died there in 1950.
- George Bernard Shaw was not merely the best comic dramatist of his time but also one of the most significant playwrights in the English language since the 17th century.

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1894: “Arms and the Man”.
1897: “Candia”.

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1905: “Major Barbara”. “Man and Superman”.
1906: “The Doctor’s Dilemma”.
1908: “Getting Married”.
1912: “Missalliance”.
1913: “Androcles and the Lion”.
1914: “Pygmalion”.
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1928*:* “The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism”.
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1932: “Too Good to be True”.
1936: “The Millionairess”.

1939: “In Good King Charles’s Golden Days”.
1950: “Far Fetched Fables”.

Arms and the Man

- The plot is written in 3 Acts. The play is set in Bulgaria and set during the brief Bulgarian-Serbian war in the 1880s. It opens with the young romantic Raina Petkoff and her mother Catherine talking excitedly about a successful cavalry charge led by the handsome and heroic Sergius, to whom Raina is betrothed.
- They are thrilled at his success. Their defiant young servant Louka comes in and tells them that there will be fighting in the streets soon, and that they should lock all of their windows.
- Raina’s shutters do not lock, and shortly after the gunshots start that night, she hears a man climb onto her balcony and into her room. He is a Swiss professional soldier fighting for Servia. Though he fights for the enemy and is not in the least heroic (he fears for his life, threatens to cry, and carries chocolates instead of ammo) Raina is touched by his plight.
- He angers her when he tells her that the man who led the cavalry charge against them only succeeded because he got extremely lucky—the Servians were not equipped with the right ammo. Raina indignantly says that that commander is her betrothed, and the man apologizes, holding back laughter.
- Raina nevertheless agrees to keep the man safe, saying that her family is one of the most powerful and wealthy in Bulgaria, and that his safety will be ensured as their guest. She goes to get

her mother and when they return he has fallen asleep on Raina's bed.

- In the next act the war has ended, and Major Petkoff (Raina's father) arrives home, and Sergius and Raina are reunited. They speak lovingly to one another about how perfect their romance is.
- But when Raina goes inside, Sergius holds Louka in his arms, clearly lusting after her. Louka believes he is taking advantage of her because she is a servant, and tells him she does not believe she and he are any different simply because he is rich and she is poor.
- They part just as Raina returns. Then, to make things more complicated, the man from Raina's balcony, announcing himself as Captain Bluntschli, arrives, to return a coat he was loaned the morning after he rested at the house. Catherine tries to keep him from being seen, but Major Petkoff recognizes him, and invites him inside to help with some of the last remaining military orders.
- In the final act, in the library, it comes out that Louka, though she had been assumed to be engaged to the head servant Nicola, is in love with Sergius, and he is in love with her. Raina eventually admits she has fallen for Bluntschli, who is at first hesitant, believing her to be much younger than she is. When he finds out her real age (23 rather than the 17 he had thought she was), he declares his affection for her. The play ends happily, with two new couples.

Candida

- *Candida* is set entirely in St. Dominic's Parsonage, and the action is ostensibly a very unoriginal love triangle involving the parson, James Morell, his wife, Candida, and a young poet, Eugene Marchbanks.
- The originality comes from the unique twist given this stock situation. Morell is a liberal, aggressive preacher, worshiped by women and by his curate. Marchbanks is a shy, effeminate eighteen-year-old, in manner somewhat reminiscent of a young Percy Bysshe Shelley, and he is possessed too of Shelley's inner strength, though this is not immediately apparent.
- The young poet declares to Morell his love for Candida, Morell's beautiful thirty-three-year-old wife. The self-assured Morell indulges the young man and assures him that the whole world loves Candida; his is another version of puppy love that he will outgrow.
- The ethereal Marchbanks cannot believe that Morell thinks Candida capable of inspiring such trivial love in him. He is able, as no one else is, to see that Morell's brilliant sermons and his equally brilliant conversation are nothing but the gift of gab; Morell is an inflated windbag. Marchbanks forces Morell to see himself in this way, and Morell shows that the poet has hit home when he almost throttles him.
- Morell broaches the subject of Marchbanks's love to Candida, at the young man's insistence, and Candida assures her husband that she already knows Eugene is in love with her. She is surprised, however, to find Morell upset by it. Nevertheless, the two foolish men force a crisis by making Candida choose between them.
- When she plays their game and asks what each has to offer, Morell offers his strength for her defense, his honesty for her surety, his industry for her livelihood, and his authority and

position for her dignity. Eugene offers his weakness and desolation.

Candida, bemused that neither offers love and that each wishes to own her, acknowledges that the poet has made a good offer. She informs them that she will give herself, because of his need, to the weaker of the two. Morell is desolate, but Eugene is, too, since he realizes that Candida means Morell.

- Eugene leaves with the now famous "secret in his heart." The secret the poet knows is that he can live without happiness, that there is another love than that of woman—the love of purpose.

Man and Superman; A Comedy and a Philosophy

- In an epistolary preface to *Man and Superman* (1903), Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw writes a letter to Arthur Bingham Walkley, his friend and a theatre critic for *The Times*, who had inspired the play by asking Shaw why he had never written a play based on Don Juan, the legendary fictional Spanish lothario.
- This presented a particular challenge for Shaw, who had been writing works that challenged the popular romanticism that dominated theatre at the turn of the century. Shaw complied by employing the Don Juan featured in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, a lover-turned-philosopher who has rejected romance in favor of higher thought.
- The plot is written in 4 acts.
- The highly respectable Roebuck Ramsden, distinguished in age with gray hair and the designer duds of the early 1900s, finds

himself in a predicament when his old friend Mr. Whitefield dies.

- Mr. Ramsden, along with the hotshot young Mr. John 'Jack' Tanner, is charged with the care of Mr. Whitefield's daughters, the beautiful Ann and her younger sister Rhoda. Mr. Ramsden disapproves of Mr. Tanner's Socialist political views, because he feels that the views are radical and dangerous.
- Mr. Tanner is also not thrilled to be Ann's guardian because he sees the young woman as nothing but trouble. Ann, however, intends to get the uninterested Mr. Tanner to marry her regardless of Mr. Ramsden's objections.
- One evening, Mr. Tanner, in the company of robbers and thieves with lively political views, dreams about an incarnation of Don Juan, the famous womanizer, and hears his explanation that, for the wicked, hell is actually not so bad.
- Marriage, explains the don, is a terrible institution, ruining the potential of creating superhumans. Don Juan's womanizing was the result of woman's scheming, for women made him believe that he loved each of them.
- He had become their prey. Mr. Tanner awakes from the dream, still against the idea of marrying Ann Whitefield. He agrees to her marriage proposal, though, because he feels that he has no other choice.
- Violet Robinson, a friend of the Whitefields, has married in secret. She is pregnant and sends a letter to her husband, Hector Malone Jr. However, the letter is mistakenly delivered to his father, who shares the same name.
- When her new father-in-law Malone finds out about the marriage, he confronts both Violet and his son Hector. At first, he disapproves of the marriage because she comes from a different social class. Malone gives them his blessing once he realizes that Violet is the perfect woman for his son.

Major Barbara

- Shaw's lengthy preface to the play sets out a good deal of his ethical philosophy: Poverty is the worst evil against which man struggles; religious people should work for the betterment of the one world they have and not turn from it for a vision of private bliss in the hereafter.
- The play is written in 3 Acts.
- The play begins in the household of Lady Britomart. She discusses with her son, Stephen how to supply her daughter Sarah, who is engaged to Charles Lomax, with enough annual salary to get them by until Charles comes into his family's money when he turns 35. S
- he also discusses the same topic for her second daughter, Barbara who is a Major at the Salvation Army and is engaged to Adolphus Cusins, a scholar of Greek philosophy.
- Lady Britomart convinces Stephen that the only way to do this is to ask her estranged husband, and father to all three children to supply the money. He left the family early in the children's lives and is a manufacturer and supplier of weapons of all kinds.
- He is one of the wealthiest men on earth and makes his fortune by designing ways to kill men. Stephen is sickened by this, but he doesn't know that his mother has already invited his father, Undershaft to the home and he will be there any minute.
- Undershaft arrives and Sarah, Lax, Barbara, Cusins and Stephen all speak to him. Undershaft takes to Barbara, even agreeing to come to the West Ham location of the Salvation Army to see what she does there. In return, he asks her to come to his factory to see his work. Barbara is I. The business of saving souls, her father the business of killing men.
- At the Salvation Army we see characters of the lower class appear and speak about how they use the Salvation Army for a free meal. Some are sincere in their giving their life to God, while others say it but continue to live by stealing—they only say what's necessary for a meal.

- We see Barabara command a man, Bill, who has come in and punched two women in the face, I. Such a way that makes him on the verge of giving his soul to God. That is until she rejects Bill's money, offered as a way to be even for striking the women, and the Salvation accepts Undershaft's money knowing he makes millions killing people. Thus, the Salvation accepts the money of a wealthy sinner but not a poor one. This turns Bill against Barbara and he leaves unsaved.
- After Undershaft's money is taken by the Salvation, Barbara leaves her post. She's lost faith in what they do. Later, Undershaft arrives at Lady Britomart's Home to take everyone to his factory. She demands he give his inheritance to their son Stephen, but the tradition of inheriting the Undershaft fortune is that it must be given to a foundling to be trained in running it, not a direct heir.
- Stephen says he wouldn't take it anyway, and at the factory Adolphus reveals he is a foundling. With this newly exposed, Undershaft offers the inheritance to him. It is against his morality to accept, but he does anyway. Stating that he desires to arm the Conan man against the intellectuals as he has lived his life to this point arming the intellectuals against the common man.
- His acceptance causes Barbara to agree to marry him rather than leave him. She stayed that she can save the souls of the fortunate men and women who work in the factory, and reveals if Cusins would have declined the offer she would have left him and married the man her father gave the inheritance to.

Saint Joan

- *Saint Joan* is divided into six scenes and an epilogue.
- The play is set between 1429 and 1431, with an epilogue set in 1456. During this time, the 100 Years War was raging between

England and France, and English forces had occupied a number of French cities and towns.

- The play begins with Joan asking a French nobleman, Robert de Baudricourt, to provide her with armor, a horse, and soldiers. Joan is an adolescent girl from a small country village, but she has had visions of saints telling her that it is her destiny to lead French forces to victory and ensure that the Dauphin (heir to the throne) is officially crowned as King. Robert is hesitant to support Joan, but he gives in when he sees that she is capable of inspiring men to fight for her.
- Joan travels to Chinon, where the Dauphin has set up an informal court. Despite an attempt to trick her, she easily identifies the Dauphin, which further encourages others to see her as guided by God. Joan persuades the Dauphin that she is going to free the city of Orleans (held under siege by English forces) and have him crowned at Rheims Cathedral. Leading troops, Joan goes to Orleans, where the French forces are frustrated. They need the winds to change so that they can sail upriver and attack the English from behind. Joan prays, and the wind immediately changes, allowing the French forces to win a triumphant victory.
- The French victory at Orleans changes the tide of the war, which worries English leaders. Earlier in the war, the English had formed an alliance with the Burgundians, a French faction who opposed the royal house to which Charles belonged.
- Warwick, an English nobleman, meets with Cauchon, a Burgundian Bishop. Both men agree that Joan is dangerous and must be eliminated. Meanwhile, Charles has been crowned at Rheims Cathedral.
- Joan is worried because she seems to be becoming unpopular, and several people accuse her of being proud, stubborn, and reckless. With Charles crowned, Joan wants to lead forces to try

to take back Paris, but no one supports this plan. Nonetheless, Joan insists that she has to follow God's orders.

- The action of the play then jumps ahead 2 years, to 1431. In the interim, Joan has been captured by Burgundian forces and sold to the English. She is now on trial on charges of heresy, with a number of Church officials questioning her.
- Undaunted, Joan defends her decision to wear men's clothes, and she insists that her voices are truly the voices of divine messengers. She only wavers when she is threatened with execution, at which time Joan signs a confession and recantation.
- However, she is horrified to realize that even though her life will be spared, she is still going to be imprisoned for life. Faced with this fate, Joan tears up her confession.
- She is immediately taken out to be executed. Other characters report that she showed great strength and courage during her painful execution.
- The epilogue to the play is set 25 years later. An inquiry has been held into Joan's trial, and the charges have been reversed: Joan is now declared innocent.
- Her spirit appears in a vision to Charles, who is now successfully ruling as a strong French king. The pair are joined by many other characters, showing that Joan has now been vindicated and that her enemies have been proven wrong.
- Eventually, a man dressed in 1920s-style clothing appears and announces that Joan has been declared a saint. Excited by all of the seeming praise and recognition, Joan suggests that maybe she should return to life.
- However, all of her seeming allies immediately abandon her, making excuses for why this is not a good idea.
- At the end of the play, Joan is left alone, wondering when the world will be ready to fully embrace her.

Oscar Wilde

- **Oscar Wilde**, (**Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde)** Irish wit, poet, and dramatist whose reputation rests on his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and on his comic masterpieces *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). He was a spokesman for the late 19th-century Aesthetic movement in England, which advocated art for art's sake, and he was the object of celebrated civil and criminal suits involving homosexuality and ending in his imprisonment (1895–97).
- Wilde was born of professional and literary parents. His father, Sir William Wilde, was Ireland's leading ear and eye surgeon, who also published books on archaeology, folklore, and the satirist Jonathan Swift. His mother, who wrote under the name Speranza, was a revolutionary poet and an authority on Celtic myth and folklore.
- After attending Portora Royal School, Enniskillen (1864–71), Wilde went, on successive scholarships, to Trinity College, Dublin (1871–74), and Magdalen College, Oxford (1874–78), which awarded him a degree with honours. During these four years, he distinguished himself not only as a Classical scholar, a poseur, and a wit but also as a poet by winning the coveted Newdigate Prize in 1878 with a long poem, *Ravenna.* He was deeply impressed by the teachings of the English writers John Ruskin and Walter Pater on the central importance of art in life and particularly by the latter's stress on the aesthetic intensity by which life should be lived. Like many in his generation, Wilde was determined to follow Pater's urging "to burn always with [a] hard, gemlike flame." But Wilde also delighted in affecting an aesthetic pose; this, combined with rooms at Oxford decorated with objets d'art, resulted in

his famous remark, “Oh, would that I could live up to my blue china!”

- In the early 1880s, when Aestheticism was the rage and despair of literary London, Wilde established himself in social and artistic circles by his wit and flamboyance. Soon the periodical *Punch* made him the satiric object of its antagonism to the Aesthetes for what was considered their unmasculine devotion to art. And in their comic opera *Patience,* Gilbert and Sullivan based the character Bunthorne, a “fleshly poet,” partly on Wilde. Wishing to reinforce the association, Wilde published, at his own expense, *Poems* (1881), which echoed, too faithfully, his discipleship to the poets Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Keats.
- Eager for further acclaim, Wilde agreed to lecture in the United States and Canada in 1882, announcing on his arrival at customs in New York City that he had “nothing to declare but his genius.” Despite widespread hostility in the press to his languid poses and aesthetic costume of velvet jacket, knee breeches, and black silk stockings, Wilde for 12 months exhorted the Americans to love beauty and art; then he returned to Great Britain to lecture on his impressions of America.
- In 1884 Wilde married Constance Lloyd, daughter of a prominent Irish barrister; two children, Cyril and Vyvyan, were born, in 1885 and 1886. Meanwhile, Wilde was a reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and then became editor of *Woman’s World* (1887–89). During this period of apprenticeship as a writer, he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), which reveals his gift for romantic allegory in the form of the fairy tale.
- In the final decade of his life, Wilde wrote and published nearly all of his major work. In his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (published in *Lippincott’s Magazine,* 1890, and in book

form, revised and expanded by six chapters, 1891), Wilde combined the supernatural elements of the Gothic novel with the unspeakable sins of French decadent fiction. Critics charged immorality despite Dorian's self-destruction; Wilde, however, insisted on the amoral nature of art regardless of an apparently moral ending. *Intentions* (1891), consisting of previously published essays, restated his aesthetic attitude toward art by borrowing ideas from the French poets Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire and the American painter James McNeill Whistler. In the same year, two volumes of stories and fairy tales also appeared, testifying to his extraordinary creative inventiveness: *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, and Other Stories* and *A House of Pomegranates.*

- But Wilde's greatest successes were his society comedies. Within the conventions of the French "well-made play" (with its social intrigues and artificial devices to resolve conflict), he employed his paradoxical, epigrammatic wit to create a form of comedy new to the 19th-century English theatre. His first success, *Lady Windermere's Fan,* demonstrated that this wit could revitalize the rusty machinery of French drama. In the same year, rehearsals of his macabre play *Salomé,* written in French and designed, as he said, to make his audience shudder by its depiction of unnatural passion, were halted by the censor because it contained biblical characters. It was published in 1893, and an English translation appeared in 1894 with Aubrey Beardsley's celebrated illustrations.
- A second society comedy, *A Woman of No Importance* (produced 1893), convinced the critic William Archer that Wilde's plays "must be taken on the very highest plane of modern English drama." In rapid succession, Wilde's final plays, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest,* were produced early in 1895. In the latter, his greatest achievement, the conventional elements of farce are

transformed into satiric epigrams—seemingly trivial but mercilessly exposing Victorian hypocrisies.

- In many of his works, exposure of a secret sin or indiscretion and consequent disgrace is a central design. If life imitated art, as Wilde insisted in his essay "The Decay of Lying" (1889), he was himself approximating the pattern in his reckless pursuit of pleasure. In addition, his close friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas, whom he had met in 1891, infuriated the marquess of Queensberry, Douglas's father. Accused, finally, by the marquess of being a sodomite, Wilde, urged by Douglas, sued for criminal libel. Wilde's case collapsed, however, when the evidence went against him, and he dropped the suit. Urged to flee to France by his friends, Wilde refused, unable to believe that his world was at an end. He was arrested and ordered to stand trial.

- Wilde testified brilliantly, but the jury failed to reach a verdict. In the retrial he was found guilty and sentenced, in May 1895, to two years at hard labour. Most of his sentence was served at Reading Gaol, where he wrote a long letter to Douglas (published in 1905 in a drastically cut version as *De Profundis*) filled with recriminations against the younger man for encouraging him in dissipation and distracting him from his work.
- In May 1897 Wilde was released, a bankrupt, and immediately went to France, hoping to regenerate himself as a writer. His only remaining work, however, was *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), revealing his concern for inhumane prison conditions. Despite constant money problems, he maintained, as George Bernard Shaw said, "an unconquerable gaiety of soul" that sustained him, and he was visited by such loyal friends as Max Beerbohm and Robert Ross, later his literary executor; he was also reunited with Douglas. He died suddenly of acute meningitis brought on by an ear infection. In his

semiconscious final moments, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church, which he had long admired.

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Analysis of Oscar Wilde's Plays

- Oscar Wilde completed seven plays during his life, and for the purpose of discussion, these works can be divided into two groups: comedies and serious works. The four social comedies Wilde wrote for the commercial theater of his day, *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband,* and *The Importance of Being Earnest,* brought him money and prestige but not artistic satisfaction. There were three plays intended as serious works of art: *Vera, The Duchess of Padua*, and *Salomé.* None of these three plays gained popular regard, critical acclaim, or theatrical success in Wilde's lifetime.

- **Salomé**

- The action of Wilde's *Salomé* takes place by moonlight on a great terrace above KingHerod's banquet hall. The simple setting is deftly conceived to heighten dramatic effects. On this spare stage, all entrances—whether Salomé's, and later Herod's and Herodias's by the great staircase of Jokanaan's from the cistern where he has been imprisoned— are striking. In addition, the play's ruling motifs, moonlight and the recurrent contrasts of white, black, and—with increasing frequency as the play moves toward its grisly climax—red, emerge clearly.

- As the play begins, a cosmopolitan group of soldiers and pages attendant on the Judean royal house occupy the terrace. Their conversation on the beauty of the Princess Salomé, the strangeness of the moon, and the rich tableau of the Tetrarch and his party feasting within sets a weird tone that is enhanced

by the sound of Jokanaan's prophesies rising from his cistern prison. Salomé, like "a dove that has strayed . . . a narcissus trembling in the wind . . . a silver flower," glides onto the terrace. The prophet's strange voice and words stir the princess as deeply as her beauty troubles the young Syrian captain of the guard, a conquered prince now a slave in Herod's palace. At her command, the Syrian brings forth Jokanaan from his prison. The prophet's uncanny beauty—he seems as chaste and ascetic as she has just pronounced the moon to be—works a double charm of attraction and repulsion on Salomé. His body like a thin white statue, his black hair, his mouth "like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory" all kindle the princess's desire. His disgusted rejection of her love only fans the flames of lust. She must have him: "I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan," she chants, as the Syrian who adores her kills himself at her feet and the prophet who despises her descends once more to his cistern.

- At this point, Herod and Herodias, attended by their court, enter. Their comments on the moon (toHerod, "She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is looking everywhere for lovers"; to Herodias, "the moon is like the moon, that is all") introduce the significant differences in their equally evil natures. Herod is superstitious, cowardly, obliquely cruel, a tyrannical yet vacillating ruler; Herodias is brutal with the callous directness of an utterly debased woman. Salomé's strange beauty tempts Herod just as Jokanaan's tempts Salomé. Despite Herodias's disapproval and Salomé's reluctance, Herod presses the princess to dance. He offers her whatever reward she may request, even to the half of his kingdom. Having exacted this rash promise of the infatuated despot, Salomé performs her famous dance of seven veils and for her reward requires the head of Jokanaan on a silver charger.

- As horrified by this demand as his ghoulish consort is delighted, the superstitious Herod offers Salomé a long and intricate catalog of alternative payments—the rich, rare, curious, and

vulgar contents of an Oriental or *fin de siècle t*reasure chest.With the sure instincts of the true collector, Salomé persists in her original demand. Unable to break his vow, the horrified king dispatches the Nubian executioner into the cistern. Presently, in a striking culmination of the play's color imagery, the Nubian's arm rises from the cistern. This ebony stem bears a strange flower: a silver shield surmounted by the prophet's bloody head. Delirious with ecstasy, Salomé addresses her passion to the disembodied lover-prophet she has asked for, silenced, and gained. "I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan," she concludes as a moonbeam falls on her. At Herod's cry, "Kill that woman!" the soldiers rush forward, crushing her beneath their shields.

- **Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, and An Ideal Husband**

- Wilde's first three comedies, although each has its particular charms and defects, are sufficiently similar to one another, and sufficiently inferior to his fourth, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, to be discussed as a group rather than individually. Always lazy about writing (which was an arduous process for a verbal artist with his high standards) but perpetually in need of money to pay for the great and small luxuries that were his necessities of life, Wilde agreed in 1891 to write a play for George Alexander, the actormanager of St. James's Theater.

- The result was *Lady Windermere's Fan,* a modern drawing-room comedy set in high society and frankly aimed to engage the interest of the London playgoing public. The financial results were gratifying enough to encourage Wilde to write three more plays in the same vein, though he never much respected the form or the products. Only in *The Importance of Being Earnest* was he to overcome the inherent weaknesses of the well-made society play, but each of the other three pieces is fine

enough to win for him the title of best writer of British comedies between Richard Brinsley Sheridan and George Bernard Shaw.

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- *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance,* and *An Ideal Husband* all center, as their titles suggest, on relationships between men and women, or more precisely between gentlemen and ladies. The plays were up-to-the-minute in providing fashionable furnishings and costumes to charm both segments of their intended audience. Late Victorian society people enjoyed seeing themselves reflected as creatures of such style and wit, while the middle classes delighted at being given a glimpse into the secret rites of the world of fashion. In fact, one might suspect that Wilde's stated concern for the Aristotelian unity of time in these plays springs less from belief in that classical standard than from the opportunity (or even necessity) that placing three acts of high life in a twenty-four-hour period provides for striking changes of costume and set.
- In each of these elaborate "modern drawing-room comedies with pink lamp shades," as Wilde termed them, one finds recurrent character types: puritanical figures of virtue (wives in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband,* an heiress soon to be a fiancé in *A Woman of No Importance*), mundanely fashionable hypocrites, and exceptional humanitarians of two types—the dandified lord (Darlington, Illingworth, and Goring) and the poised and prosperous "fallen woman," two of whom (Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and Mrs. Chevely in *An Ideal Husband*) go in for wit and the other of whom (Mrs. Arbuthnot of *A Woman of No Importance*), though equally unrepentant, specializes in good works. Clever, epigrammatic conversation is what these characters do best; guilty secrets and the situational intricacies they weave are the strings for Wilde's verbal pearls.
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- In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the initial secret is that Mrs. Erlynne, the runaway mother of whose continued existence Lady

Windermere is utterly ignorant, has returned to London to regain a place in society and is blackmailing Lord Windermere, who seeks to protect his wife from knowledge of the blot on her pedigree. Misinterpreting her husband's patronage of a mysterious lady with a hint of a past, Lady Windermere is led to the brink of unconsciously repeating her mother's error by eloping with another man, thereby prompting Mrs. Erlynne to the one maternal gesture of her life: The older and wiser woman sacrifices her own reputation (temporarily, it turns out) to save that of her daughter.

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- In *A Woman of No Importance*, Gerald Arbuthnot, a youth reared in rural seclusion and apparent respectability by his mother, happens to encounter the man who is his father: worldly Lord Illingworth, who when young and untitled had seduced Gerald's mother and, on learning of her pregnancy, refused to marry her. This complex situation allows Wilde to expose several human inconsistencies. Previously uninterested in the child he had begotten and also unwilling to marry the beautiful young mother, Lord Illingworth is now so full of paternal feeling that he offers to marry the middleaged woman to retain the son. Gerald, who has just vowed to kill Lord Illingworth for attempting to kiss a prudish American girl, on hearing of Illingworth's past treachery to his mother wants her to let the offender "make an honest woman" of her. Mrs. Arbuthnot professes selfless devotion to her son but begs Gerald to forgo the brilliant prospects Illingworth can offer and remain with her in their provincial backwater.
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- In *An Ideal Husband*, the plot-initiating secret is a man's property rather than a woman's, and political intrigue rather than romantic. Sir Robert Chiltern, a highprincipled politician with a rigidly idealistic young wife, encounters the adventuress Mrs. Chevely, who has evidence that Chiltern's career and fortune were founded on one unethical act—the selling of a political

secret to a foreigner—and who attempts to use her knowledge to compel him to lend political support to a fraudulent scheme that will make her fortune. Acting against this resourceful woman is Chiltern's friend Lord Goring, an apparently effete but impressively capable man who can beat her at her own game. In brief, then, all three of these plays are formed of the highly theatrical matter that, in lesser hands, would form the stuff of melodrama.

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- Wilde's "pink lamp shade" comedies are difficult to stage because of the stylish luxury demanded of the actors, costumes, and sets, but the plays are not weaker for being so ornate: They accurately mirror a certain facet of late Victorian society. Similarly, the pervasive wit never becomes tiresome. The contrived reversals, artful coincidences, predictably surprising discoveries, and "strong curtains" may seem trite—but they work onstage. The defect that Wilde's first three comedies share is the problem of unreconciled opposites, implicit in *Salomé.* In *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance,* and *An Ideal Husband*, part of Wilde is drawn to admire wit, style, vitality, and courage regardless of where they may be found, and part of him has a serious social or moral point to make. Even with this divided aim, Wilde wrote good comedies. When he solved the problem, he wrote a masterpiece: T*he Importance of Being Earnest*.
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- ***The Importance of Being Earnest***

- *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's greatest play, represents the high-water mark of his career. It was originally written in four acts, but while it was in rehearsal, Wilde accepted the advice of actor-manager George Alexander and reduced it to three acts, which is now the standard version. The play begins in the luxurious London fl at of Algernon Moncrieff, who is expecting his aunt, Lady Bracknell, and her daughter, Gwendolen

Fairfax, for tea. He is surprised by the arrival of his wealthy friend Ernest Worthing, who has come up to town to propose to Gwendolen.

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- Algy is curious about his friend's cigarette case, left behind after his last visit, inscribed by "Cecily" to "her dear Uncle Jack." Algy discovers that his friend's name is really John (or Jack) Worthing. Algy refuses to believe Jack's assertion of his real name: "You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying your name isn't Ernest." Jack explains that he has invented a wild, irresponsible younger brother called Ernest in order to justify his frequent visits to Lon-don to escape the moral duties imposed upon him by his guardianship of his 18-year-old ward, Cecily Cardew. This inversely corresponds to what Algy calls his "Bunburying," named after his own "double," an imaginary invalid, whose poor health requires Algy's presence in the country whenever he needs an excuse to leave London.

- Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen enter, and Algy takes his aunt into the music room so that Jack may proceed with his proposal. Jack haltingly declares his intentions to Gwendolen, who takes the initiative, proclaiming to him, "Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you," and adding that her ideal "has always been to love some one of the name Ernest. There is some-thing in that name that inspires absolute confidence." Since she refuses to con-sider "Jack" or "John" as acceptable alternatives, Jack is unable to tell her the truth. Lady Bracknell rejects Jack's suitability as a member of the family after she learns from him that he has "lost" his parents: "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like careless-ness."

- Jack explains that he has no known parents but was found as a baby, in a black leather handbag, in the cloakroom of Victoria Station, by Mr. Thomas Cardew, a wealthy and kindly old man who then adopted him and gave him the last name of "Worthing" because he had a first-class train ticket for Worthing. Lady Bracknell advises Jack to "try to acquire some relations as soon as possible" and sweeps out of the fl at with her daughter. Frustrated by events, Jack decides to eliminate the fictitious "Ernest." Gwendolen escapes from her mother briefly to declare her lasting devotion to Jack and asks for his country address, which Algy, already interested in meeting Cecily, notes with delight.

- The second act is set in the garden of the Manor House, Jack's country home. Cecily is being instructed by her governess, Miss Prism, a spinster who long ago once wrote a sentimental novel, the manuscript of which she mislaid, a fact that will figure later in the play. Dr. Chasuble, an unworldly cleric, lures Miss Prism away for a walk, leaving Cecily alone to greet a stranger who is announced as "Ernest Worthing." Cecily is already taken with the name and the reports of Ernest's wickedness: "I have never met any really wicked person before. I feel rather frightened. I am so afraid he will look just like everyone else." Enter Algy masquerading as "Ernest," and the couple hit it off at once. After they go into the house, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return in time to greet Jack, who is unaware of Algy's presence and is dressed in deep mourning: "Ernest," he claims, has died suddenly in Paris. He asks Chasuble to rechristen him Ernest.

- He is startled when Cecily reappears to inform him of "Ernest's" arrival and horrified to see Algy in the role. But Jack cannot unmask his friend without revealing his own deceit. Algy and Cecily declare mutual affection for each other, although he is disconcerted to discover that she finds him appealing in great part because of his name. He decides to become baptized as Ernest immediately. Gwendolen arrives unexpectedly, and the

two women quarrel over which of them is actually engaged to "Ernest." The truth is revealed when the men enter, and the women unite in a sense of outrage. They withdraw while Jack and Algy trade recriminations, many of which reach the heights of triviality since they revolve around Algy's continual consumption of muffins, Jack's favorite teatime treat.

- The third act, set in the morning room of Manor House, has the couples reconciled and a happy ending certain until the appearance of Lady Bracknell, who firmly forbids further communication between Jack and Gwendolen. She does, however, consent to the engagement of Algy and Cecily upon learning that Cecily has three addresses, a family firm of solicitors with "the highest position," and a large fortune. But Cecily must have her guardian's consent to the marriage until she legally comes of age at 35, and Jack refuses to give it unless Lady Bracknell will reconsider his engagement to Gwendolen. She refuses, prompting Jack to say, "Then a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to."
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- Enter Miss Prism, who, it is revealed, was once employed by Lady Bracknell and 28 years earlier had mysteriously disappeared with the baby boy entrusted to her, leaving behind only the pram and the manuscript of her novel. She admits that she absentmindedly left her novel in the pram and deposited the baby, in her black leather handbag, at Victoria Station. Jack excitedly produces the handbag and embraces Miss Prism, crying, "Mother!" A shocked Miss Prism reiterates her status as a respectable spinster and repulses him. Lady Bracknell steps in to solve the mystery of Jack's parentage: He is the elder son of her late sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and is Algernon's elder brother. To the ecstasy of Jack and Gwendolen, it is further revealed that Jack, as the elder son, was named after his father, General Ernest John Moncrieff.
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- Wilde's triumph was short lived. After unsuccessfully bringing a libel suit against the marquess of Queensbury, the father of his young lover Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, who accused Wilde of corrupting his son, Wilde was arrested and stood trial for indecency and immorality. In May 1895 he was found guilty and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labor. In Reading prison he wrote a long letter to Douglas, published in 1905 under the title *De Profundis*. Released from prison in 1897, Wilde immediately and permanently left England for France, where he died in Paris in 1900.
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- Wilde's plays were precursors to the drawing-room comedies of such playwrights as Noël Coward. Wilde's comedies continue to be performed and enjoyed by contemporary audiences, yet it is *The Importance of Being Earnest* that has, in particular, secured for Wilde a place in the history of the theater for having given the world one of the most singularly witty and clever comedies of all time, an achievement that is anything but trivial.