

FREEDOM

– *George Bernard Shaw*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1856-1950) was born in Dublin. From his father he learned how to laugh at life's tragedies, and from his mother a sound appreciation of music. In 1884 he became one of the founders of the Fabian society. He remained a lifelong champion of a highly individual economic faith, creative evolution, spelling reforms, and vegetarianism.

In recognition of his contribution to British drama, Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1926 for 'his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty.'

As an essayist and pamphleteer, Shaw advocates spiritual freedom, honesty, courage, and idealism.

Among his works are: *Plays Pleasant and Plays Unpleasant; Man and Superman; Saint Joan; The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism and Essays in Fabian Socialism.*

Unit 1

In 'Freedom' Shaw pleads for an, original and stimulating attitude towards the concept of Freedom—individual, social and political, and skillfully analyses the difference between the natural slavery of man to Nature and the unnatural slavery of man to man.

Now remember, ladies and gentlemen, I have no one to talk the usual old nonsense about freedom tonight. Let us come to business. What is a perfectly free person? Evidently a person who can do what he likes, when he likes and where he likes, or do nothing at all if he prefers it. Well, there is no such person: and there never can be any such person. Whether we like it or not, we must all sleep for one-third of our lifetime; wash and dress and undress we must spend a couple of hours eating and drinking; we must spend nearly as much in getting about from place to place. For half the day we are slave to necessities which we cannot shirk, whether we are monarchs with a thousand servants or humble labourers with no servants but their wives. And the wives must undertake the additional heavy slavery of child-bearing if the world is still to be peopled.'

These natural jobs cannot be shirked. But they involve other jobs which can. As we must eat we must first provide food; as we must sleep we must have beds and bedding in houses with fireplaces and coals; as we must walk through the streets, we must have clothes to cover our nakedness. Now, food and houses and clothes can be produced by human labour. But when they are produced they can be stolen. If you like honey you can let bees produce it by their labour, and then steal it from them. If you are too lazy to get about from place to place on your own legs you can make a slave of a horse. And what you do to a horse or a bee you can also do to a man or a woman or a child if you can get the upper hand of them by force or fraud or trickery of any sort, or even by teaching them that it is their religious duty to sacrifice their freedom to yours.

So beware! If you allow any person, or class of persons, to get the upper hand of you, they will shift all that part of their slavery to Nature that can be shifted on to your shoulders and you will find yourself working from eight to fourteen hours a day when, if you had only yourself and your family to provide for you could do it quite comfortably in half the time or less. The object of all honest Governments should be to prevent your being imposed on in this way. But the object of most actual Governments, I regret to say, is exactly the opposite. They enforce your slavery and call it freedom. But they also regulate your slavery, keeping the greed of your master within certain bounds. When chattel slavery of the Negro sort costs more

than wage slavery, they abolish chattel slavery and make you free to choose between one employment, or one master and another, and this they call a glorious triumph for freedom, though for you it is merely the key of the street. When you complain, they promise that in future you shall govern the country for yourself. They redeem this promise by giving you a vote and having a general election every five years or so. At the election, two of their rich friends ask for your vote and you are free to choose which of them you will vote for to spite the other—a choice which leaves you vote freer than you were before, as it does not reduce your hours of labour by a single minute. But the newspapers assure you that your vote has decided the election and that this constitutes you a free citizen in a democratic country. The amazing thing about it is that you are cool enough to believe them.

Unit 2

Now mark another big difference between the natural slavery of man to Nature and the unnatural slavery of man to man. Nature is kind of her slaves. If she forces you to eat and drink, she makes eating and drinking so pleasant that when we can afford it we eat and drink too much. We must sleep or go mad but then sleep is so pleasant that we have great difficulty in getting up in the morning. And firesides and families seem so pleasant to the young that they get married and join building societies to realize their dreams. Thus, instead of resenting our natural wants as slavery, we take the greatest pleasure in their satisfaction. We write sentimental songs in praise of them. A tramp can earn his supper by singing 'Home, Sweet Home.'

The slavery of man to man is the very opposite of this. It is hateful to the body and to the spirit. Our poets do not praise it; they proclaim that no man is, good enough to be another man's master. The latest of the great Jewish prophets, a gentleman named Marx, spent his life in proving that there is no extremity of selfish cruelty at which the slavery of man to man will stop if it be not stopped by law. You can see for yourself that it produces a state of continual civil war—called the class war—between the slaves and their masters, organized as trade unions on one side and employers' federations on the other. Saint Thomas More, who has just been canonized, held that we shall never have a peaceful and stable society until this struggle is ended by the abolition of slavery altogether and the compulsion of everyone to do his share of the world's work with his own hands and brains, and not to attempt to put it on anyone else.

Naturally the master class, through its Parliaments, schools and newspapers, makes the most desperate efforts to prevent us from realizing our slavery. From our earliest years we are taught that our country is the land of the free, and that our freedom was won for us forever by our forefathers when they made King John sign Magna Carta—when they defeated the Spanish Armada—when they cut off King Charles's head—when they made King William accept the Bill of Rights—when they issued and made good the American Declaration of Independence—when they won the battles of Waterloo and Trafalgar on the playing fields of Eton—and when only the other day, they unintentionally changed the German; Austrian, Russian and Ottoman Empires into republics. When we grumble, we are told that all our miseries are our own doing because we have the vote. When we say: 'What good is the vote?' we are told that we have the Factory Acts and the Wage Board, and free education and the New Deal and the dole: and what more could any reasonable man ask for? We are reminded that the rich are taxed a quarter, a third, or even a half and more, of their incomes; but the poor are never reminded that they have to pay that much of their wages as rent in addition to having to work twice as long every day as they would need if they were free.

Whenever famous writers protest against this imposture—say, Voltaire and Rousseau and Tom Paine in the eighteenth century, or Cobbett and Shelley, Karl Marx and Lassalle in the nineteenth, or Lenin and Trotsky in the twentieth—you are taught that they are atheists and libertines, murderers and scoundrels; and often it is made a criminal offence to buy or sell their books. If their disciples make a revolution, England immediately makes war on them and lends money to the other Powers to join her in forcing the revolutionists to restore the slave order. When this combination was successful at Waterloo, the victory was

advertised as another triumph for British freedom; and the British wage slaves instead of going into mourning like Lord Byron, believed it all and cheered enthusiastically. When the revolution wins, as it did in Russia in 1922, the fighting stops, but the abuse, the calumnies, the lies continue until the revolutionized State grows into a first-rate military Power. Then our diplomatists, after having for years denounced the revolutionary leaders as the most abominable villains and tyrants, have to do a right turn and invite them to dinner.

Unit 3

Now though this prodigious mass of humbug is meant to delude the enslaved class only, it ends in deluding the master class much more completely. A gentleman whose mind has been formed at a preparatory school for the sons of gentlemen, followed by a public school and university course, is much more thoroughly taken in by the falsified history and dishonest political economy and snobbery taught in these places than any workers can possibly be, because the gentleman's education teaches him that he is a very fine fellow, superior to the common run of men whose duty it is to brush his clothes, carry his parcels and earn his income for him; and as he thoroughly agrees with this view of himself, he honestly believes that the system which has placed him in such an agreeable situation and done such justice to his merits in the best of all possible systems, and that he should shed his blood, and yours to the last drop in its defense. But the great mass of our rack-rented, under-paid, treated-as-interiors, cast-off-on-the-dole workers cannot feel so sure about it as the gentleman. The facts are too harshly against it. In hard times, such as we are now passing through their disgust and despair sometimes lead them to kick over the traces, upset everything, and have to be rescued from more gangsterism by some Napoleonic genius who has a fancy for being an emperor, and who has the courage and brains and energy to jump at the chance. But the slaves who give three cheers for the emperor might just as well have made a cross on a British or American ballot paper as far as their freedom is concerned.

So far I have mentioned nothing but plain, natural and historical facts. I draw no conclusions, for that would lead me into controversy; and controversy would not be fair when you cannot answer me back. I am never controversial over the wireless. I do not even ask you to draw your own conclusions, for you might draw some very dangerous ones unless you have the right sort of head for it. Always remember that though nobody likes to be called a slave it does not follow that slavery is a bad thing. Great men, like Aristotle, have held that, law and order and government would be impossible unless the persons the people have to obey are beautifully dressed and decorated, robed and uniformed, speaking with a special accent, travelling in first class carriages or the most expensive cars or on best-groomed and best-bred horses and never cleaning their own boots or doing anything for themselves that can possibly be done by ringing a bell and ordering some common person to do it. And this means, of course, that they must be made very rich without any other obligation than to produce an impression of almost godlike superiority on the minds of common people. In, short, it is contended, you must make men ignorant idolaters before they will become obedient workers and law-abiding citizens.

To prove this, we are reminded that although nine out of ten voters are common workers, it is with the greatest difficulty that a few of them can be persuaded to vote for members of their own class. When women were enfranchised and given the right to sit in Parliament, the first use they made of their votes was to defeat all the women candidates who stood for the freedom of the workers and had given them years of devoted and distinguished service. They elected only one woman—a titled lady of great wealth and exceptionally fascinating personality.

Now this, it is said, is human nature; and you cannot change human nature. On the other hand, it is maintained that human nature is the easiest thing in the world to change if you catch it young enough, and that the idolatry of the slave class and the arrogance of the master class are themselves entirely artificial products of education and of a propaganda that plays upon our infants long before they have left their

cradles. An opposite mentality could, it is argued, be produced by a contrary education and propaganda. You can turn the point over in your mind for yourself; do not let me prejudice you one way or the other. The practical question at the bottom of it all is how the income of the whole country can best be distributed from day to day. If the earth is cultivated agriculturally in vast farms with motor ploughs and chemical fertilizers, and industrially in huge electrified factories full of machinery that a girl can handle the product may be so great that an equal distribution of it would provide enough to give the unskilled labourers as much as managers and the men of the scientific staff. But do not forget that when you hear tales of modern machinery enabling one girl to produce as much as a thousand men could produce in the reign of good Queen Anne, that this marvellous increase included things like needles and steel pens, and matches, which we can neither eat nor drink nor wear. Very young children will eat needles and matches eagerly—but the diet is not a nourishing one. And though we can now cultivate the sky as well as the earth, by drawing nitrogen from it to increase and improve the quality of our grass—and consequently of our cattle and milk and butter and eggs—Nature may have tricks up her sleeve to check us if the chemists exploit her too greedily.

Unit 4

And now to sum up, wipe out from your dreams of freedom the hope of being able to do as you please all the time. For at least twelve hours of your day Nature orders you to do certain things, and will kill you if you don't do them. This leaves twelve hours for working; and here again Nature will kill you unless you either earn your living or get somebody else to earn it for you. If you live in a civilized country your freedom is restricted by the laws of the land, enforced by the police, who oblige you to do this and not to do that, and to pay rates and taxes. If you do not obey these laws the courts will imprison you and if you go too far, kill you. If the laws are reasonable and are impartially administered you have no reason to complain, because they increase your freedom by protecting you against assault, highway robbery, and disorder generally.

But as society is constituted at present, there is another far more intimate compulsion on you; that of your landlord and that of your employers. Your landlord may refuse to let you live on his estate if you go to chapel instead of to church, or if you vote for anybody but his nominee, or if you practise osteopathy, or if you open a shop. Your employer may dictate the cut, colour and condition of your clothes, as well as your hours of work. He can turn you into the street at any moment to join the melancholy band of lost spirits called the unemployed. In short his power over you is far greater than that of any political dictator could possibly be. Your only remedy at present is the trade union weapon of the strike, which is only the old oriental device of starving on your enemy's doorstep until he does you justice. Now, as the police in this country will not allow you to starve on your employer's doorstep you must starve on your own—if you have one. The extreme form of the strike—the general strike of all workers at the same moment—is also the extreme form of human folly, as, if completely carried out, it would extinguish the human race in a week. And the workers would be the first to perish. The general strike is trade unionism gone mad. Same trade unionism would never sanction more than one big strike at a time, with all the other trades working overtime to support it.

Unit 5

Now let us put the case in figures. If you have to work for twelve hours a day, you have no freedom at all. If you work eight hours a day you have four hours a day to do what you like with, subject to the laws of the land and your possession of money enough to buy an interesting book or pay for a seat at the pictures, or, on a half holiday, at a football match, or whatever your fancy may be. But even here Nature will interfere a good deal; for if your eight hours' work has been of a hard physical kind, and when you get home you want to spend your four hours in reading my books to improve your mind, you will find yourself fast asleep in half a minute, and your mind will remain in its present benighted condition.

I take it, then, that nine out of ten of us desire more freedom, and that this is why we listen to wireless talks about it. As long as we go on as we are—content with a vote and a dole—the only advice we can give one another is that of Shakespeare's Iago: 'Put money in thy purse.' But as we get very little money into our purses on pay day, and all the rest of the week other people are taking money out of it, Iago's advice is not very practical. We must change our politics before we can get what we want; and meanwhile we must stop gassing about freedom because the people of England in the lump don't know what freedom is—never having had any. Always call freedom by its old English name of leisure; and keep clamouring for more leisure and more money to enjoy it in return for an honest share of work. And let us stop singing 'Rule Britannia', until we make it true. Until we do, let us never vote for a parliamentary candidate who talks about our freedom and our love of liberty; for whatever political name he may give himself, he is sure to be at bottom an anarchist who wants to live on our labour without being taken up by the police for it as he deserves.

And now suppose we at last win a lot more leisure and a lot more money than, we are accustomed to. What are we going to do with them? I was taught in my childhood that Satan will find mischief still for idle hands to do. I have seen men come into a fortune and lose their happiness, their health and finally their lives by it as certainly as if they had taken daily doses of rat poison instead of champagne and cigars. It is not at all easy to know what to do with leisure unless we have been brought up to it.

I will therefore leave you with a conundrum to think over. If you had your choice, would you work for eight hours a day and retire with a full pension at forty-five, or would you rather work four hours a day and keep on working until you are seventy? Now, don't send the answer to me, please! Talk it over with your wife.

NOTES

Chattel slavery of the negro : the old, practice of sale and purchase of negroes as movable articles of property.

Tramp: hobo a homeless wanderer.

Marx: Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-83), German philosopher and social economist. He is the author of *Das Capital* on which communism is largely based.

Saint Thomas More : *Sin* Thomas More (1478--1535) succeeded Wolsey as Lord, Chancellor under Henry VIII, but fell into disgrace by refusing to take the oath of Supremacy. He was ultimately executed. *Utopia* is his best known book.

Magna Carta : England's first charter of liberty granted under compulsion by King John (1167-1216).

Spanish Armada : a large fleet sent in 1588 by Philip II of Spain (1527-98) to subdue England. It was severely mauled by the British navy under the command of Lord Howard of Effingham.

King Charles : Charles I (1600-49), King of England, Scotland and Ireland. He was in continual trouble with his ministers and parliament. After the Civil War that ensued, he was beheaded on 30 January 1649.

American Declaration of Independence : drafted mainly by Thomas Jefferson, it was an Act by which the American Congress, on 4 July 1776, declared the American colonies to be independent of Great Britain.

Battle of Waterloo : fought on 18 June 1815. It ended in the rout of Napoleon's troops at the hands of the British and Prussian *forces* led by the Duke of Wellington. *Battle of Trafalgar*: in this encounter the English naval commander Horatio Nelson destroyed the French Fleet on 21 October 1805. He

lost his own life in the hour of victory when a: tray shell burst close to his command post on the flagship *Victory*.

Eton: English public school in the town of Eton in South. Buckinghamshire on the River Thames

New Deal : the measures taken in 1933 by President Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945) to overcome the great economic crisis in the United States. The New Deal comprised large-scale assistance to farmers, social insurance and an ambitious programme to reduce unemployment.

Voltaire: Francois-Marie, Voltaire (1694-1778), eminent French philosopher and writer.

Rousseau: Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), French philosopher, political writer and composer. He laid down the principles of government and conduct which bore fruit in the French Revolution.

Tom Paine : Thomas Paine (1737-1809), English deist and radical. He wrote *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*.

Cobbett : William Cobbett (1763-1837). In 1802 he started editing *Cobbett's Political Register*, a weekly newspaper which was at first Tory, but he altered its politics in 1804 to propagate Radicalism.

Lassalle : Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-64), founder of the German socialist movement.

Lenin: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1876-1924), Russian revolutionary and statesman. His faction of Russian Marxists came to be known as the Bolsheviks. After the fall of the Czar in February 1917 his followers dominated the workers, 'peasants' and soldiers' councils (soviets). Lenin seized power at the end of October 1917, but for the three years Russia was torn by a civil war of immense brutality which left the Bolsheviks victorious but the country devastated.

Trotsky : Leo Trotsky (1879-1940) was the only Russian Marxist who could approach Lenin in intellectual grasp and leadership. As commissar of War he created the Red Army. He was the chief architect of Soviet victory in the Civil War. Expelled from the Party in 1927 and from the U.S.S.R. in 1929, he tried unsuccessfully to build an international socialist revolutionary movement opposed to Stalinist Communism (the Fourth International)

Byron : George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), English Romantic poet. Some of his poems are marked by an intense republican sentiment. He died at Missolonghi, where he had gone with a view to aiding the Greeks in their battle for national independence.

Enfranchised : admitted to the privileges of a citizen, particularly voting rights.

Queen Anne : Anne (1665-1714), Queen of England.

Iago : the villain in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Britannia : the figure of a seated woman with trident and helmet, used as a symbolic representation of Great Britain and the British Empire.

Conundrum : a riddle.

Vocabulary practice :

1. He was jailed for two years for fraud which means that he was jailed for beating/ cheating/ teasing other people.
2. If you get upper hand of them you will have your hand on your head/ more power than others. Put your hand higher than others.
3. They redeem this promise means they repeat/ revise/fulfil it.

4. They abolish chattel slavery. The underlined phrase in this sentence means the practice of selling and purchasing/ beating/ exploiting slaves.
5. The expression cast-off-on-the-dole workers refers to those workers who are very rich/poor /well-behaved.
6. They elected only one woman-a titled lady means they elected a woman with a title/beauty/fame.
7. You must make men ignorant idolators to make them obedient means you must make them worshippers of idols/smugglers of idols.
8. Nature may have tricks up her sleeve means nature will have mercy/cruelty/secret/trick.
9. He is sure to be an anarchist. The underlined word means a person who favours peace/disorder/freedom.
10. Your mind will remain in its present benighted condition. The underlined word means being a knight/a leader/without the light of knowledge.

Comprehensions:

1. Who, according to Shaw, is a perfectly free man?
2. What should be the object of all honest governments?
3. What is natural slavery according to Shaw?
4. How is nature kind to her nature?
5. What is unnatural slavery?
6. What facilities were provided under the Factory Acts?
7. What steps does the working class take against its exploitation?
8. Why did they cut off King Charles head?
9. How do laws of the land protect the citizens?
10. What power does a landlord have over his tenant?
11. How do workers tend to lose in a general strike?
12. What is meant by 'Put money in the purse'?
13. What should the workers do to have this kind of freedom?
14. Why does Shaw advise Englishmen against voting in the elections?
16. How is man's slavery to Nature pleasant?
17. How can slavery be ended?
18. Why do most workers or women vote for their social superiors?
19. How does a civilized society protect its citizens?
20. What are Shaw's views on working hours and retirement?

Discussion questions:

1. What is the importance of freedom in human life? What will be the effect of the lack of freedom in our personality development?
2. If you were a slave, what sort of freedom would you expect to enjoy from your owners?
3. What do you think about the conditions of the misuse of freedom in the universities in Nepal?
4. As a son or a daughter, what type of freedom do you want to enjoy at home and in your personal life from your parents?

Composition:

1. Write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper stating how your freedom is being curbed in present-day society.
2. Suppose you are now twenty-one. You are going to cast your vote in the elections to the Indian parliament. What would be your reasons for voting in favour of a particular candidate or a party?