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The Veil that Separates the Survivors and the Killed

ESSAYS ON LITERATURE AND CULTURE

STEPHEN MURRAY KIERNAN

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The Veil that Separates the Survivors and the Killed

ESSAYS ON LITERATURE AND CULTURE

INDEX

Wilde and Shaw: Parallel Lives

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854; George Bernard Shaw was born two years later in the same city. Their families were members of very different social classes and, in that peculiarly intense environment of rigid separation by class, they were never destined to meet each other in the small city that was the Irish capital. By good fortune of birth, Wilde belonged to what was almost the top rank of Irish society, with rents from property and the income of his father, one of the most eminent surgeons in the land. He went to an elite private school (where Samuel Beckett was also to study some generations later) and from there to Trinity College and Oxford, with glory in his exams and prizes for his poetry. Shaw on the other hand had a very different early life. Though also a member of the ruling Protestant Anglo-Irish portion of the population, he left school while still a teenager, never took university studies, and entered work as an apparently very efficient office assistant.

But what I wish to describe here is that their very different routes took them to the same destination, to the rebirth of a genuinely high-quality theatre in the English-speaking world. One might have to return as far back as two other Irishmen, Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, to find dramatic works of an equal merit written by men born in the British Isles. And like the earlier pair, both Wilde and Shaw found that they had to leave their native land to find a stage big enough to welcome their talent: the capital of the empire itself, London. They were never to become genuine friends – Shaw said that Wilde “was incapable of friendship” though a kind man and Wilde in his turn invested his time to a section of society and pastimes that were neither to Shaw’s tastes nor within his financial reach.

Oscar Wilde 1882.
Image: Napoleon Sarony – photo from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division, digital ID ppmsca.07757.

Wilde had prepared himself well to wage a campaign of self-promotion. Physically a very impressive man, tall and well-built, he took elocution lessons to improve his enunciation, though it is not certain that this was done to diminish his Irish accent. Shaw on the contrary seemed to thrive on his especially Irish tone of voice and quirks of phrase. Wilde impressed his fellow (and well-connected) students at Oxford and graduated to a London that had heard rumours of a remarkable talker, classicist and promoter of the highest sensibility to art and the beautiful. The young man undoubtedly had charm: while on a speaking tour of the United States, he gave a talk in a mine that elicited such a warm and animated reaction that he himself reported that the dust of precious metal fell from the roof of the shaft. The 1880s saw him in great demand as a guest at the big London houses; he produced some plays of no serious value, poetry of lesser worth, and two sons through his marriage to a very pretty young Irishwoman, something that is not so well-known about him (it was also said that Bram Stoker had previously stolen his first love back in Dublin). He even went on to edit a woman's magazine for two years in this period but a life of strict office hours was not one that would have appealed to Wilde.

In the meantime, Shaw had decided to abandon his promising career of office-boy and pursue his mother and sister to London. His education was to be a rich amalgam of musical studies and reading principally at the British Library. He was not lazy in these activities and reached a high ability: he wrote studies of both Wagner and Ibsen, two great iconoclasts at the time. This showed his individualism and lack of fear of peer pressure, a combination that is very present in his later campaign to attack what he termed "bardolatry" and assess Shakespeare without placing his works above normal standards of criticism. He also did a lot of journalism – about paintings, music and theatre – and wrote novels. But there was little or no income in these pursuits and he later recalled deliberately returning home in the evening shadows to hide the fact that his clothes were dirty and needed repair.

George Bernard Shaw 1879.
Image: Uncredited, published in *Bernard Shaw* by Holbrook Jackson.

He also became a vegetarian in part for want of money but mostly for ethical reasons. He grew the famous beard – at that time flaming red – perhaps to hide the scars of his youthful affliction by pox. As his novels were not published and much of his journalism was written in the name of other people or under pseudonyms ("Corno di Bassetto" was his name for a series of some of the best musical criticism in the language), the name Shaw was not as well known as that of Wilde in the 1880s. He later described the long reviews that he and Wilde wrote in those years as possessing a "distinctly Irish quality". And like his contemporary, Shaw also made his first attempts at playwriting

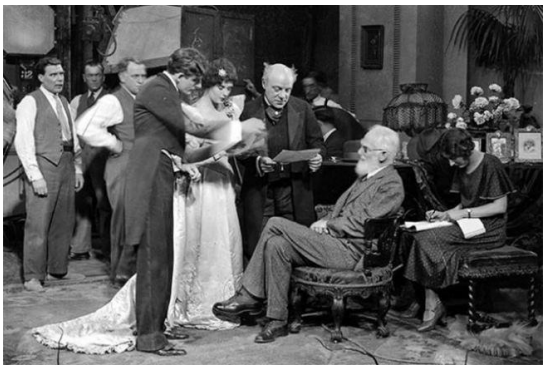
– indeed he wrote more interesting material than Wilde in this decade – but with a similar lack of success of making a career at it for the moment.

As a first-rate conversationalist, it was almost inevitable that Wilde would devote a more serious effort to writing plays in the early 1890s. The theatre had certainly been improved by the contributions of Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, but they lacked the special charisma of fascinating personalities speaking excellent dialogue within well-crafted story-lines. This is exactly what Wilde introduced through his plays: Shaw himself defended Wilde against an attack by a dramatic critic, telling him in a letter that "Wilde's wit and his fine literary workmanship are points of great value."

The Importance of Being Earnest, first staging 1895.
Image: Alfred Ellis, *The Sketch*, pp. 412-414.

Wilde wrote a short series of comedies located among members of high society – the rich had recently returned to the theatre while the poorer patrons had migrated to the music-hall and variety palaces. They were a huge success and brought Wilde some wealth and probably that expectation among art-lovers that here at last was a great comedic dramatist. That great fantasy of high comedy presented in early 1895, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, confirmed this hope. But the tiny card left by the father of Wilde's principal lover, the Marquis of Queensbury, and the absurd attempt to have him prosecuted for defamation led to the arrest and imprisonment of Wilde, and the complete destruction of his career and reputation.

In the meantime Shaw had also finally devoted himself to writing plays, some like *Widowers' Houses* very critical of current social prejudices (in this case prostitution), others like *Arms and the Man* equally critical in their own way but made more palatable through their lighter humorous touches. Wilde expressed admiration for the type of realism and socialist empathy that he found in these works: about this first play, he wrote in a letter to Shaw, "I like your superb confidence in the dramatic value of the mere facts of life," and continued, "I admire the flesh and blood of your creatures." Whether this habit of injecting humour into strong topics leads to a weakening of the works is a question that continues to this day. They are certainly not works of the overwhelming seriousness of Ibsen; instead they are the work of a man with a natural tendency to seek consolation within difficult situations through a joke.



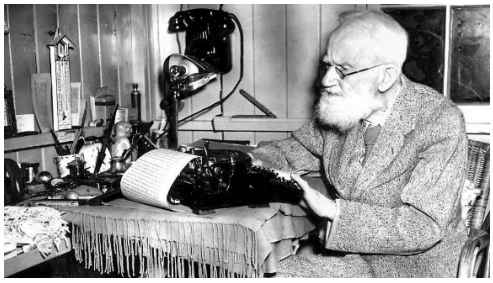
Shaw consulting with some actors at a rehearsal.
Image: https://mirfaces.com/bernard-shaw-british-playwright/#google_vignette.

All this leads me to say that the theatre in English had a great chance to have two brilliant playwrights working at the same time, perhaps in fertile competition. There exist letters between both writers that speak of these two Irish intruders taking over the stage of their time and showing the English how to write great drama. They would occasionally meet at a social event and even at a lecture by Shaw. At the personal level, there was a form of discomfort (what Shaw called an "odd difficulty") and perhaps rivalry between them, and Wilde even went so far as to remark, in that provocative

and yet good-natured manner of his, that Shaw "is an excellent man: he has no enemies and none of his friends like him." Shaw, a tough critic of people and of works of art, was on the other hand often heard to praise Wilde:

> In a certain sense Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre...

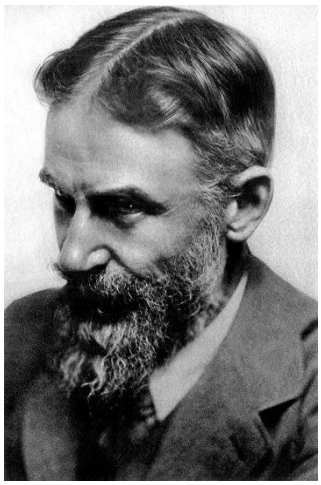
That opportunity to create what Wilde playfully called a "Celtic School" was to end definitively with the two years Wilde spent doing hard labour and his inability upon release in 1897 to find the uncontaminated creativity to write anything of worth again. Shaw had shown remarkable courage in attempting to organise a petition to bring about his early release and, with H. G. Wells, even nominated him to become a founder-member of a planned British Academy of Letters. However, after November 1900 and the death of the destitute Wilde in Paris, Shaw was to be on his own to develop his middle period of plays: *Man and Superman*, *Pygmalion* and others. Shaw was to live long enough to witness the resuscitation of Wilde as a commercially successful playwright and as an ethical, aesthetic and sexual icon. As it turned out, the two contemporaries from Dublin, separated by two years at birth, were finally separated by fifty years at death. Shaw was to pass away in November 1950.



The older Shaw, playwright and political thinker.
Image: https://victorian-era.org/george-bernard-shaw-writer-playwright-and-political-activist.html.

Shaw the Serious Writer of Comedy

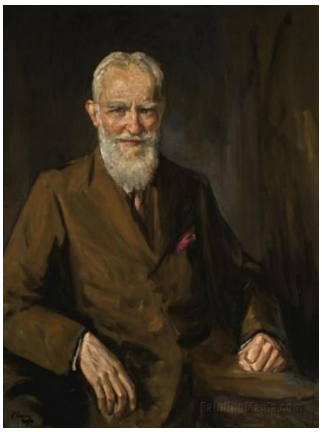
Looking from the outside, there appears to be a great deal of difference in the personalities of the great Irish writers. But what might be termed the exterior evidence can be an oversimplification or even duplicitous: is the person fooling us in a deliberate way or are we not really that clever or sensitive when it comes to a character analysis of a certain individual? Those who write very well may persuade us that they are heightened in their personality and therefore not easy to evaluate but finally they are human beings like, not to be misunderstood as somehow superhuman. The typical person is part of that manufacturing process involving parents, schooling, peers, and the good and the bad that life surrounds us with. There is no doubt that certain people are born with a relatively developed character, equally there are those who are resilient o the most disagreeable influences, ones which would profoundly change another person in a similar set of tribulations. The subject involves the interior – the sentiments and mentality which inhabit us and through which we react to the outside world – and the exterior – that mass of our fellow men and women and the entire panorama of forces that we experience in everyday life.



Shaw in 1905.
Image: Unknown author – *New York Times*, Current History, Vol 1, Issue 1, From the Beginning to March, 1915.

The dramatist Bernard Shaw had quite a unique personality. The unmitigated sense of humour should really have not existed. His father appears to have been a man made utterly passive by failure in life and dependence on alcoholic beverages, present like a sack of potatoes in the corner of the room. His mother, a much stronger character, became fascinated by a rather suspect theorist and trainer of music and abandoned husband in Dublin and son to follow her hero to London. She would spend the rest of her life denigrating Shaw as lazy and wasteful of opportunities. His surviving sister felt the same about him, even when it was he who was a success, earning a good income and paying their rent and expenses. Shaw was also brought up as a member of the socially elite Christian grouping in his country, the protestant Church of Ireland, a peculiarly self-satisfied collection of the ruling class whose shallowness of belief made Shaw's early journey to atheism a skip rather than a jump.

Throughout these early years of intense familial pressure and failure to be noticed by the public, the great and central consolation for Shaw was a comic perspective: he would see the terrible conditions for certain members of society, the enormous difference between rich and poor, and *translate* the visually ghastly to the textually comic and ironic. Keeping afloat in an ugly world that refused to see sense and change for the better – Shaw found buoyancy for himself and his literary discipline in placing hard facts and despairing circumstances in clever games of humour. His reaction of comic obstinacy would even appear when he attended funerals: at the cremation of the wife of H. G. Wells, Shaw stubbornly insisted on joking until the weeping "H. G." finally smiled. The smile however didn't last long as Wells admitted he was hurt by Shaw's attempts at levity.



Portrait of Shaw by his fellow Irishman, Sir John Lavery, completed in 1929.
Image: https://www.paintingmania.com/
george-bernard-shaw-203_48075.html.

The very elements that Shaw described as essential to his evolution as a writer – the five big novels that he wrote in his youth and couldn't get published, rejection quickly followed by the beginning of a new novel; the years of critical journalism, sometimes paid but generally not (and, even worse, often anonymous) – all this made the man hard and drove him on to even more writing that was still not certain of publication and performance. It is a hardness dressed in fancy-dress of a boyish and charming joke. But the seeming incompatibility between the message and the manner of expressing it would mean that Shaw had a difficult time persuading people of the grave seriousness of his view.

There is a great contrast here between Shaw and Joyce. James Joyce was also born in that small city of charisma and jealousy called Dublin but thirty years later and to a Catholic family of the "native" stock of the lower middle-class. His parents were ambitious for their son and arranged for him to study at two very fine but highly doctrinaire Jesuit schools. The naturally very individualistic character of Joyce would inevitably push him to react against both family and Church, but against his country of birth his reaction was very complex indeed. Shaw wrote only three plays more or less directly about Ireland, the most well-known being *John Bull's Other Island* – out of nearly sixty works for the theatre. Like Shaw, Joyce had *physically* emigrated in his

twenties and also with a sense of release but *creatively* he continued to hear the people, see the streets and smell the aromas of butcher-shops and pubs; and wrote this down with photographic, sensory and aromatic accuracy in all of his novels and short stories, with a perspective and tone that is more cynical-humorous rather than ironic-humorous as was the case of Shaw.

It is obvious that both writers had a degree of affection for Ireland and occasionally they would state a great pride in their country. But they had nothing like the interest that Yeats had in remaining and directly participating in the rapidly evolving changes both before and after independence in 1921. Shaw had a childhood that contained little parental love, forced to work like Dickens at an early age and subject to that special and intense snobbery of a small isled colony hiding deep fears and doubts. It is astonishing to read that he was still remembered as an office-boy, and placed there socially, when he returned to Ireland in his late forties at a time of great success as a playwright.

The writer's home, Shaw's Corner at Ayot St Lawrence in England.
Image: Jason Ballard.

The final geographical divorce between Ireland and Joyce was due to a number of matters. One can list very clearly the failure he had in attempting to publish his first works there. There was a very strong consciousness in Joyce of the quality of his work and its consequences for literature in general ... at a time when publishers absolutely refused to print his material. Shaw was certain of the value of his own works and was impressively patient for people to arrive at the same view. But Joyce had a type of religious fervour

about his productions: they were iconoclastic and (for the times) immoral and even pornographic but the world had eventually to become more mature, curious and self-confident through discovering his ground-breaking stuff and opening its eyes to the realities of life, there to be seen but not to be read.

There is a recurring tactic in Shaw of presenting his opinions in a vocabulary and with an emphasis that make the spectator and reader wonder what exactly is being expressed. A good example of this is when he advised the Allies to stop bombing German cities during the Second World War, so that there would be more civilians requiring more food with the result that Germany would surrender for reasons of simple starvation. A comment like this appears to be without human empathy, even diabolical, and yet knowing the man it is also strong attack against the murder of innocent people on both sides. The endless series of donations and support that people and organisations received, from the establishment of the London School of Economics to payments to his translators in enemy lands, clarify that there was a good heart in what sometimes appeared to be a clownish monster.

The creation of the theatrical Shaw only finds its equal in that marketing entity of aestheticism called Oscar Wilde. It was an element of Shaw's character that he found diverting to play, while the serious matters belonging to other aspects of his personality were presented in the middle of the merriment. The point is that people did listen and read when there was fun but the key question then arises, do you take the man and his view seriously? Humour in itself does not necessarily indicate superficiality or insincerity. Quite the contrary, it may reveal great accumulated pain, timidity and attention-seeking; and indeed one could argue that it shows individuality and intelligence of a kind that is both charming and persuasive. Inevitably the argument will continue.

Gertrude Elliott and Johnston Forbes-Robertson in Shaw's
Caesar and Cleopatra in 1906.
Image: Uncredited - *Illustrated London News*.

One-Act War Plays About the First World War

Introduction

An examination of any area of drama during the years of the First World War must be undertaken in the light of the general poor fare and retardation of developments in dramatic writing and theatrical production occasioned by the hostilities. The initial reaction of theatres, particularly those in London, to the war was to resort to popular revivals, and even the new plays were generally lightweight pieces, particularly when one considers the serious, socially-committed drama produced during the Edwardian era. Within a short time, the regular theatre had discovered that the old civilian public of the pre-war years had now to a large extent been replaced by a clientele of soldiers on leave, and the demands of this new body of patrons had to be met if a particular theatre wished to have a long-running success (which became essential as, first, rents began to be increased enormously and then the Entertainments Tax – 5s. per £1 charged at the box office – was introduced in May 1916).

The West End theatre responded to these circumstances with such genres as patriotic drama (such as Louis N. Parker's three-act spectacular *Drake*), comedies concerning youth (the American import, *Peg O' My Heart*), and revivals of military dramas (*Cheers, Boys! Cheers!*, *The Soldier's Wedding* and *The Flag Lieutenant*). But more innocuous fare appeared to attract the largest audiences: the three-act 'Musical Tale of the East', *Chu Chin Chow* (His Majesty's, 31/8/1916) by Oscar Asche and Frederick Norton, ran for an unprecedented 2,238 performances, and other musical plays had similar runs. This demonstrates quite clearly that the public wanted escapist entertainment during the conflict.

Those full-length plays which did deal with the war overwhelmingly had a jingoistic bias which made them palatable to a highly excitable public and a vigilant censor: these included *La Kommandatur* (Criterion, 25/ 1/ 1915) by Jean Francois Fonson, *For England, Home and Beauty: or, Comrades in Arms* (Princes, 22/5/1915) by Andrew Emm, and *Kultur at Home* (Court, 11/3/1916) by Rudolf Besier and Sybil Spottiswoode. The mood of the country was against the serious depiction of warfare at the front and even of civilian life in its reaction to the conflict. As one critic wrote in a review of Stephen Phillips' full-length verse drama *Armageddon* (New, 1/6/ 1915), "lt is like the dragging of a thorn across an unhealed wound to see enacted on the stage the horrors of which we all read."

Naturally, many of the one-act plays produced during this time, especially on the variety stage, reflected this emotional fervour: beginning very early in the war (one example from October 1914 is *The Siege of Berlin* (Little, 1/ 10/1914), an adaptation by M. McNally and Philip Carr of a play by Alphonse Daudet), the category included Max Pemberton's *The Bells of St. Valoir* (Coliseum, 30/11/1914), Maxime Zlatogar's *For Serbia* (Lyric, 16/3/1915), J. B. Fagan's *The Fourth of August* (Coliseum, 3/7/1916), and *A Touch of Blighty* (Queen's, 30/ 1/1917), an all-woman comedy by Evelyn Glover. These pieces could be very blunt in their identification of villainy and heroism. George Cornwallis-West's *Pro Patria* (Coliseum, 12/2/1917), for instance, has a French governess raped by a German officer (the theme of feminine resilience against brutal enemy treatment is a recurring element; it is found in Pemberton's play as well).

Leslie Ward's caricature of Max Pemberton, adventure novelist, journalist and dandy: perhaps appropriately the caption reads "A Puritan's Wife" (*Vanity Fair*, 1897).

The uncritical patriotic nature of many short dramas on the variety stage was not, however, entirely welcome. In a review of *The Bells of St. Valoir*, the *Stage* critic expressed the hope that "managers should exercise a kind of censorship with a view to preventing the production of pieces whose principal merit is that they dear with a phase of the war." However, many patriotic dramas had worked so well as propaganda that it was noted that they had an effect on recruitment and the government set up its own playwriting section to commission dramatists by the end of 1914, an example followed by Oswald Stoll at the Coliseum, and the army in 1916 (the Entertainments Department of the Navy and Army Canteen Board). Dramatists would also allow revivals of their one-act pieces at fund-raising events or even write new short plays for charitable purposes. One example is Rupert Brooke's *Lithuania*, a piece criticised for what was considered to be its excessive violence, presented at a matinée at His Majesty's Theatre in aid of the City of Westminster Health Society and Day Nursery for the Children of Soldiers and Sailors on 19 May 1916.

Other than the special tastes of the audience during the war, there are a number of reasons why the real subject and events of the conflict were avoided during and, for a remarkably long period, after the war, except

principally in a small group of one-act plays. Against a background of public apathy with plays dealing realistically with the war, one must ask why did dramatists use the one-act form to deal with the current and very affecting conflict? Part of the answer is to do, quite obviously, with the modifications made to the general theatrical system as it adapted to the war-time conditions. Longer runs meant that many of the leading actors and actresses found that they had time to take advantage of the lucrative salaries at the variety theatre, and the war years saw a very large increase in the number of straight players on the variety stage. Consequently, more one-act pieces were produced there.

Longer runs also meant that the demand for new full-length work was reduced and thus many dramatists turned to one-act drama for which there was a market. Some dramatists also found that the type of play now required was not one they were willing or capable of writing. Barrie, for instance, compromised with the prevailing tastes and his full-length 'fancy', *A Kiss for Cinderella* (1916), ran for 156 performances; but he still managed to write what is probably the best of all full-length plays produced during the war, *Dear Brutus* (1917), a piece highly reminiscent of a one-act play he wrote in 1908, *The Will* (Duke of York's, 4/9/1913), and owing much to the one-act war play he had just written, *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* (New, 7/4/1917). On the other hand, Shaw did not have one new full-length play produced from April 1914 (*Pygmalion*) to February 1922 (*Back to Methuselah*), explaining that this was so because the war-time theatre did not want new examples of his longer work (he was, however, engaged in writing *Heartbreak House* during the war).

There are, furthermore, less tangible reasons for the preference for the one-act form among many dramatists. The circumstances of the on-going hostilities, at home and on the battlefield, had not gone on long enough, allowing a more objective distance in time, for dramatists to give the war-time period the considered and synthetic view required for full-length

playwriting. The drama of a late narrative beginning, in a way, facilitated this distance, in its presentation of a culminant incident abstracted from the horrific action of the war. Thus, one comes across self-contained episodes in dramatic form concerning an incident to do with the war, such as Miles Malleson's *'D' Company* (written 1914, produced 1917) and J. M. Barrie's *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* (1917). Extending this notion a bit further, much of the explanation can be found in the psychological effects of the war. The war marked a fundamental separation from – in some respects a repudiation of – the society whose character and imperfections had once given dramatists the material with which to write their plays. This relatively secure reservoir of subject-matter had been superseded by conditions of violence, extreme anxiety and remorse, and overall social disruption, so much so that the creative reaction of many dramatists was bound to be lyrical and thus on a small scale.

Cynicism about what was later called the Great War started early.
"After the war a medal and maybe a job," a charcoal and crayon drawing by John Sloan, 1914 (Library of Congress). The cartoon shows a World War I veteran walking on his hands, dragging his entrails behind him. He approaches a fat capitalist, who sits on a chair and leans over to give him a medal for his service as a soldier.

Such was the importance of the better one-act plays dealing with the conflict that quite a few full-length plays written during the 1920s which are concerned with the effects of privation and anguish associated with the hostilities on the individual, such as Harry Wall's *Havoc* (Regent, 4/11/1923, Repertory Players), J. R. Ackerley's *Prisoners of War* (Court, 5/7/1925, 300

Club) and H. B. Trevelyan's *The Dark Angel* (pubd. 1928), can be related to the earlier serious short war plays in terms of subject-matter and treatment. The new departure in full-length war drama in the 1920s took the form of the mixing of realism and symbolism, probably beginning with Hubert Griffith's *Tunnel Trench* (Prince's, 8/3/1925, Repertory Players) and including R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (Apollo, 9/12/1928, S.S.). This indicates both the continuing pain of the subject and the new attitude of introspection and wary anticipation of the future which the war brought about. However, even this half-realist, half-fantasy perspective on the Great War had been attempted in a number of one-act dramas, largely written near the close of hostilities or just afterwards, such as Barrie's A *Well-Remembered Voice* (1918) and A. A. Milne's *The Boy Comes Home* (1918).

One last point should be made about the area of the theatre which presented probably the largest number of short drama dealing with the war: the variety stage. After the widening of the Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction in 1912 to include stage-plays to be performed in the variety theatre, for a short time the variety stage itself finally came into its own as a centre of one-act drama. This came about at a time when the one-act play was losing ground in the repertory theatres; was present on the commercial stage largely in the form of those matinées, mostly for charity, not devoted to meeting the vastly increased day-time patronage there; and was no longer in great demand by play-producing societies, amateur or otherwise, most of which were now extinct or dormant (with the very significant exceptions of the Incorporated Stage Society and the Pioneer Players).

The Plays

The Kaiser was used on a number of occasions as a character in a one-act play; for example, in Barrie's *Der Tag* (Coliseum, 21/12/1914) and Shaw's *The Inca of Perusalem* (Repertory, Birmingham, 7/10/1916). Barrie's play,

which takes its title from the toast employed by the German army and navy (something which was common knowledge at the time), was the result of a request by the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, that Barrie drop the ragtime revue he was engaged in writing and compose instead a propaganda piece. He finished it by mid-November 1914. The play is a very simple piece which first of all presents a dream in which the German emperor weighs up the arguments for and against going to war. While he would like to rule a peaceful world, declaring that it is his God-given purpose ("Germany must expand. That is her divine mission. I have it from on high"), the Spirit of Culture cautions him, showing him the strength of his adversaries and especially the danger of invading Belgium, and he decides to remain at peace. He is awakened, however, by the sound of guns and the sight of the Spirit of Culture "with a wound in her breast", who speaks of "a flaming sword", which is coming now that Belgium is overrun. While the play strongly implies that the Allies will win the war, the people of Germany are said to be supporting the conflict and, a little confusingly, that Germany will not be ruined, "If God is with the Allies."

The play is interesting because, at a time of virulent anti-German feeling, Barrie has elected to portray the German emperor sympathetically. There is an absence of militarism and malignant caricature in the characterisation of the emperor, though not of his two advisors, who are clearly identified as war-mongers in a way which just about exonerates the emperor himself. *Der Tag* shows the chancellor and an army officer advising military action, and the emperor at first willing and then firmly against pursuing a self-evidently disastrous conflict with Britain, France and Russia. The manager of the Coliseum at the time, Arthur Croxton, remembered that its effect was far-reaching.

> The sketch, slender in construction and short as it was, played no mean part in moulding an opinion far removed from mere vindictiveness, and raised War plays to the highest place of morality and literature. And in those tragic days

> of the dying year … it was well that the quiet voice of a Barrie went forth with its message of reason and order.

At the time of its first production, there was some confusion over whether the German emperor was supposed to be Wilhelm II, because of this even-handed depiction and because the actor playing the character, Norman McKinnel, was not made up to look like the real Kaiser. In all, its subtlety and the lack of a clearly defined argument arise because of Barrie's indecision about the war at that time and his aversion to a narrow-minded presentation of evil intent. Croxton recalled that the "work aroused the greatest interest, for it was a powerful sermon, which went straight to the heart of a moved audience."

However, the piece left critics feeling that it had failed as "a helpful contribution for the plain man when attempting to solve the questions arising from the War." The play is, as such, a weak dramatic piece containing a commendable vision of the might-have-been; and by its mingling of realism with symbolism in its treatment of the war (creating "a semi-reality", as E. A. Baughan described it), it seems to anticipate later one-act war plays and those full-length plays dealing half-fancifully with the war which appeared in the 1920s. The lesson it demonstrated to others was to avoid placing staid dialogue and ideas in a confusing way in this context of semi-reality.

A more irreverent but nonetheless likeable portrait of the Kaiser is found in Shaw's *The Inca of Perusalem* (1916). The piece was written in response to the Government's call for dramatists to produce plays encouraging war savings – Sutro contributed *The Great Redding Street Burglary* (Coliseum, 31/7/1916) to the campaign, for instance – but Shaw wrote the play specifically for the wife of a Belgian socialist minister, Mme. Vandervelde, in August 1916, for a matinée performance to aid Belgian war relief. As a result of various difficulties, most significantly the objections of the censor, the piece was not produced until October and only then at the Birmingham

Repertory Theatre. Though Shaw openly declared in his preface to *Heartbreak House* (1919) his misgivings about treating the war in a comic way, *The Inca*, along with all his other one-act plays set during the war, is an example of his satirical comic style (the play is subtitled 'An Almost Historical Comedietta'). He did not, for instance, forget the original impetus for the play, but references to war economies are invariably couched in comic terms which joke about their less constructive side-effects: a waiter, once a doctor, reveals how his patients "gave up their doctors, but kept their week-end hotels, closing every career to me except the career of a waiter".

The Inca, who has come dressed as a Captain Duval to question a princess about marriage, is said to be at war with every country but, again, his subjects, who have placed him "in a position of half divine, half paternal responsibility", are duty-bound "to die for him at the word of command". He tells Ermyntrude, whom he has in turn taken to be the princess he is to meet, that his military aides had advised going to war against his wishes: "They know now that they had better have relied on the sword of the spirit: in other words, on their Inca's talk, than on their murderous cannons." He had agreed to the conflict because it would lead to his country becoming a republic, and he voices a wish to become "Superpresident of all the republics" when all other countries have followed suit. At the end of the play, he defends himself against the false accusation of newspapers that he was the principal architect behind the war, but also marvels at the paradoxical nature of peace and war in the enthusiasms they arouse in people.

> For years I gave them [his subjects] art, literature, science, prosperity, that they might live more abundantly; and they hated me, ridiculed me, caricatured me. Now that I give them death in its frightfullest forms, they are devoted to me.

In many ways this view, and the characterisation of the Inca himself, remind one of the Devil in Act III of *Man and Superman* (1905). At one point in that

play, the Devil states, “This marvellous force of Life of which you boast is the Force of Death: Man measures his strength by his destructiveness.”

Some critics felt that Shaw had chosen an appropriate satirical style in dealing with the subject; in particular, they commended what they judged to be Shaw’s achievement in making the Inca representative of the “blasphemous, treacherous, callous, assertive spirit of modern Prussia.” Others felt that Shaw’s mode of paradoxical drama was inept and indeed misplaced when dealing with the subject of the current conflict. His main occupation during the 1914-1918 period was in writing pamphlets and articles assessing, and often criticising, the prosecution of the war, for which there was inevitably a certain degree of prejudice against him. *The Inca*, like his other short plays during this period, is not in many respects a particularly good drama, but it encapsulates in a dramatic context some of Shaw’s theories concerning the rise, operation and future effects of the war, enunciated by a single male character with a strong female character as a foil, a typical Shavian touch. What the critics generally avoided mentioning in their reviews of the piece (whether for reasons of public morale or whatever) was the notion of the emergence of republics brought about because of the war (a prophecy which, to a large extent, came true) and the recognition of the primitively violent appetites in the general run of humanity, brought to the surface by military aggression. In a self-consciously ludicrous scenario of disguise and marital arrangement, these very serious points are undermined, however, as they would be in addition by what was, for most English people at the time, an over-generous characterization of the Inca.

One-act plays dealing directly with the war itself or the life of the soldier were predominant among the different examples of war plays in the first years of the war. The curious observation to be made about this genre is that most of the more established playwrights avoided this subject or at least had difficulty in addressing it. Barrie, for instance, who had written only one previous war

scene in his full-length burlesque *Rosy Rapture* (1915), went through six different versions of *La Politesse* (Wyndham's, 28/6/1918, mat.), in the process changing the two characters from a Scotsman and an Oxford don to two Cockneys, even though the original idea had not been his but had come from a 1917 translation of Henri Berbusse's *Le Feu* (1916). Naturally, given the initially clear prejudices of the country at the time, the pieces set the heroism of Allied soldiery and the chaste purity of the women who helped them against the treachery and deceit of the enemy.

Accordingly, the theatre saw a late flourish of melodrama during the war, as again the simplistic formula was employed of having the clearly recognisable virtuous oppose the villainous in an uneven trial of intelligence and strength leading inexorably to the victory of the brave and good man and the dispatching of his enemy. Max Pemberton's *The Bells of St. Valoir* (Coliseum, 30/11/1914), for instance, follows this traditional story-line faithfully. A captain of Belgian lancers, Marcel de St. Remy, arrives at a chateau to deliver a message to the father of his beloved Louise, telling him that the English forces will advance if the bells are rung. However, he is captured by a group of German soldiers led by Major Wilhelm von Galtz who have been stationed at the home of the count and he reveals to them that to ring the bells will inform the English that they should remain where they are. They do so and are overrun by the English soldiers. Much of the story is characterised by an exemplary selflessness in the cause of the national danger and by platitudinous exclamations of contempt for the Germans (here especially one should keep in mind that the piece was written for a variety audience). Before fulfilling his vow to shoot the German major, St. Remy prefaces his act of execution with:

> Ah, butcher of women, you who make war on children, you whose Iron Cross was forged in hell, you whose laurels are covered with the blood of the weak and the helpless...

The reader of plays, G. S. Street, was pleased to see that it was "without the violence and piled-up brutality of some others." But if its goal as a drama was to engender hatred of the enemy and consolidate patriotism, it did not clearly attain this objective. The distinction between heroic and vicious characters, so important to the moral-based system of narrative and characterisation in melodrama, is upset by the sympathy one feels for the German major. The *Stage* critic discerned this but went further to say that the Belgian himself was not entirely likeable.

> … the German villain makes a stronger appeal on the score of conviction than does the French [sic] hero ... The easy cheerfulness of the hero is rather overdone; if we must have war pictures, let them be as near the truth as possible.

Other one-act melodramas relating to the war deal with such topics as the tenacity of a naval officer even when confronted by imminent death (Edward Knoblock's *Long Live England* (Actors' Orphanage Garden Party, Regent's Park, 20/7/1915)) and the loyalty of colony-states to the Empire at a time of supposed temptation from German agents (J. B. Fagan's *The Fourth of August* (Coliseum, 3/7/ 1916)). Concerned as they are with the representation of martial glory and the strengthening of morale, plays of this type are composed, as the *Stage* critic said of *The Bells of St. Valoir*, of "topical matter that has little dramatic value" but much dramatic tension. They contain a simplicity but strong iconography of situation, characterisation and dialogue, which would win the attention of the audience quickly, allow the pace of the play to advance swiftly and communicate its patriotic message pointedly.

However, one early exception to the general character of jingoism, subserved by stereotypical characterisation and a simple morality, is Miles Malleson's *'D' Company*. Written at the end of 1914, when the author was a private in a

Territorial battalion in Malta, the play was given a production at the New Theatre, Oxford, on 10 February 1917, a remarkable event in light of the subject-matter and its treatment, which had ensured the destruction of its first print-run in 1916.

Though the author of some very serious drama, Miles Malleson was better known for playing bumbling characters on stage and screen, as here in the 1935 Hitchcock movie, *The 39 Steps*.
Image: https://hitchcock.zone/1000/18/0981.jpg.

It is not, however, as comprehensively and unequivocally critical of the war as the other drama in that collection, *Black 'Ell* (written 1916); as Malleson admitted, his "view of this colossal catastrophe of the war" had changed in the interval between writing the two plays. *'D' Company* was written during the early months of the war and is concerned with the sense of anticipation at this time of the war's effects and with arguing that many territorials went to war out of necessity, not patriotism. The soldiers at one stage are discussing among themselves why they had joined up and come to Malta. Their participation, it seems, was not a matter of free choice.

> **Corporal.** … I'm a navvy, I am. With a nold woman and five kids. That's why I come out. I see the Red Lamp up ahead – danger. Me out 'er work – and them to feed. Now she's gettin' a tidy bit for me bein' 'ere – and I'm not at 'ome eatin' …
> **Alf.** They jus' chucked us out 'ere, didn't they, Jim? Get sacked out of our jobs, or come 'ere and 'ave 'em kept.

They are in turn baffled when Dennis Garside, recently graduated from Cambridge, tells them that he had no other reason for joining up than that "one felt one ought to do something" (19). In this sense, the piece pits naïve idealism against compulsion as motives for signing up. On the other hand, the play also suggests that the experience of bereavement was universal and devastating.

The play is structured around three letters, the first from the wife of Alf, a twenty-two year old Cockney '*blackguard*', the second from his mother, and the last from the refined Dennis Garfield to his girl in England. This epistolary device allows the drama to have domestic and romantic perspectives, retailed in some descriptive detail, which widens the compass of the play beyond the limits of the mess-room and the local concerns of the men. The characters are numerous and, with the exception of Garside, are working-class men; however, even the vestiges of a class system, revealed in the men's self-patronising interest in the upper-class fellow private among them, is left intact. Alf and Jim are friends since before the war, working together as van-boys in the city, but they are much given to youthful and inconclusive argument. In certain respects, their quarrelling comes from the same comic tradition as the precisely matched trivial debate one finds in, say, *Box and Cox*. However, it gives one a vision of the calm before the storm: its suggestion of a good-natured unpreparedness for the later tragedies strengthens the pathos of the drama.

When the rumour is spread that they are to go to the Front the following month, the corporal, Alf and Jim argue that this is probably untrue since the Germans are said to be losing so badly, either killed, diseased or starving. The corporal poses this theory, "'Ow long ju think the war'll last? ... why, they kills thousands of Germans every day – every *hour* almost." Malleson is here taking a jibe at the exaggerations disseminated by the propaganda machinery of the government. Then, while reading the football scores (Jim says, "…

Them's Germans – the barsterds! Never mind the war-er. 'Oo beat – Chelsea or Arsenal?"), Alf reads that his brother has been killed. The abrupt change in atmosphere which this brings about is an example of the ironic departure in story-line so often employed in the one-act play and so useful given the economies of dramatic effect in this form.

> 'E was the only one bar me. We was mates, we was … Coo blimey! Young Tom … young Tom. 'E can't be dead … you can't seem ter think. I shan't never see 'im no more.

He then reads the letters he had received from his wife and his mother. His wife speaks of Tom's girl being inconsolable and wishes for his safe return, with pathetic digressions to say that the baby has a cold and that she is managing reasonably well on his pay. The letter from his mother is, however, an advance in detail of Tom's suffering and her anguish.

> He was hurt something horrible in the stomach, and didn't die for two days afterwards. They tried not to tell me that part, but I knows because old Mrs. Hayes had a letter from a pal of Tom in his regiment.
>
> Oh, dear Alf, do not go to the Front. If you have any love for me do not go. They says in the papers here mothers ought to be proud to give their sons, but them what writes that ain't mothers with sons to give. Alf, I have given one and I have only you left.

This adds a terrible dimension to the attitude of a proud 'mother' such as Barrie presented in *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* (1917). Alf attempts to begin a letter to his mother, with Garside's assistance, but he does not possess the vocabulary to say what he feels. Instead, he asks Dennis to read his letter to his girl.

In this letter, Garside has set off poetic declarations of love against the realities of their task in a somewhat precious way: “From 5 in the morning till 5 at night, learning to avoid getting a piece of red-hot lead into oneself, and how best to put it into somebody else.” (26) The news that they are going to the Front is confirmed, and Alf is certain, just as Harold Gould would report the German soldiers in a nearby trench of being certain, that they will all be killed in the fighting. Curiously, Alf feels only pity for the Germans they are to face. The play ends with the orderly Corporal giving letters to the men.

> *They all sit on their beds, drinking in their letters like a thirsty soldier at a pot of beer. Of a sudden all the lights go out. From the blackness comes a howl of execration.*

This suggestion of fatalities relayed from home uses an image of collective shock which was well prepared beforehand by the fatalistic mood of the closing part of the play (the method is reminiscent of Maeterlinck’s in pieces like *Les Aveugles* (*The Blind*)).

As an image of the fatalism of war, the ending to *D’ Company* is quite powerful. This is the culmination of the references in the piece to the events outside the mess-room which have happened but which seem to identify the destiny of the men: they are to perish, just as Alf’s brother has perished; their loved ones will experience misery, just as Alf’s family is suffering it. Malleson’s method is to employ contrasting extremes of contentment and pain to enhance the sense of malevolence and fatalism in the play; this is not a drama of the old melodramatic school of just deserts and omniscient moral retribution.

Along with this, however, Malleson is unable to resist venting his fury at the idiocy with which he thought the war was being conducted. This is obvious, of course, in his use of letters to state plainly, as an expression of individual

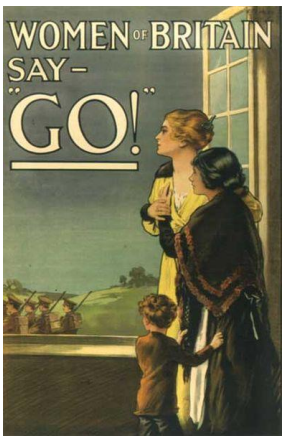
remorse and thus with some dramatic credibility, the awfulness of the war. Occasionally, he introduces apostrophes which are topical and reflect something essential in the psychology of a character and in the drama itself. "And among these strange surroundings," Dennis writes in his letter,

> I sometimes have to remember very hard about 'The Rights of Little Nations and the Sacredness of Treaties' and Asquith, and the Houses of Parliament…

This sort of personal anger can be central to the composition of good drama, but here it seems to detract somewhat from the dramatic integrity of the piece: he is, one might argue, combining the role of dramatist with that of disillusioned platform speaker. *'D' Company* is, however, a fine dramatic picture of the realities of a soldier's life during the war.

On the other hand, dramatists did attempt to deal with the war in terms of its effect on individual members of the domestic population. Many one-act war plays were written from the perspective of a tense England in which the war was presented as news or, more forcefully, in visions of injuries suffered or loss of life. Frequently, the battlefield was brought to the home in the form of a son or husband returning from the Front. The story of a husband arriving home from the war is present in a number of one-act dramas. An example which deals with a number of significant issues is Gwen John's *Luck of War* (Kingsway, 13/5/1917, P.P.). A young wife, Ann Hemingway, has married Amos Crispin and has had a baby in the belief that her husband, George, was killed in the fighting. When, however, George returns, she explains that, having received the black-edged note reporting George's demise, she was only too glad to marry Amos because of the three children she had to support. George was very much blameworthy since he had never written to explain that he had only been injured (he had lost a foot). The situation is further complicated by the inability of the children to remember their father.

However, the difficulty is resolved when Amos agrees to live with his sister, leaving George and Ann to recommence their marriage.



Women were encouraged to support the signing-up of their men:
May 1915 poster by E. V. Kealey, from the Parliamentary
Recruiting Committee (Georgetown University).

The most interesting ingredient in the play is the presence of a definite feminist element, in the attention it pays to the hardships suffered by women during the war. The pressures inflicted on wives whose husbands are fighting are suggested in Ann's defence against the complaint of her own husband that she should have waited longer before remarrying.

> There's plenty'll blame me, but 'oo made all this trouble? I 'aven't meant to do no wrong. I can't ´elp t´ way the world's made mysen. You can't do more nor try to do right, no matter what folks say. Let them judge theirsen!

The play shows how the war had not altered the standing of women very much: Amos, a recovering alcoholic, very easily abandons Ann; George is contemptuous of her highly pragmatic remarriage and of the problems she has encountered; and Ann is, by all appearances, not particularly enamoured of either of them. The play is, thus, a considerable advance on the celebration of patriotic stoicism which is the ironic background to works like Barrie's *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* (1917).

The return of a soldier-son is, however, represented in a larger group of one-act plays. The drama of these pieces finds its special character in the clash of battlefield experiences with the calm but now equivocal atmosphere of home. The resulting atmosphere might be classified as, for instance, comic cynicism (as in Shaw's *O'Flaherty* V. C.), shameful remorse (as in Malleson's *Black 'Ell*), casual but ironic terror (as in A. A. Milne's *The Boy Comes Home*), and nostalgia (as in Barrie's *A Well-Remembered Voice*). Other plays treated the attitude of the returning soldiers symbolically. In Constance Holme's *The Home of Vision* (King's Hall, 9/2/1919, P.P.), an old man, Christopher Sill, returns to his former home to live with his son and daughter-in-law in order to escape his wife. But unable to abide the changes which have been made during his absence from the house, he returns to his wife with the parting line, "Happen there's no so strange as them that comes home". Sill's incapacity to find contentment where he had once been so happy is Holme's way of suggesting the experience of some soldiers who, after returning from the Front, were unable to find peace after the dreadful events of the war. The theme also appeared in plays during the war: Miles Malleson, for instance, had already taken up this exact point almost three years earlier, but in a more disarmingly direct approach, in his banned play *Black 'Ell.*

However, the theme of the returned soldier was usually given a less critical note, carrying as it does optimism about the cessation of hostilities and the safe return of the country's young men. Plays in this group generally appeared during the later stages of the war, in 1917 and 1918. All the same, what these soldier-characters could say and do would not under normal conditions be expected or, for that matter, generally accepted from a character whose experiences had not been so terrible – indeed, whose journey from late boyhood to adulthood had not taken place in such unusual circumstances – and whose personality had been carefully formed by societal conventions. As Dennis O'Flaherty remarks, "Knowledge and wisdom has come over me with

pain and fear and trouble." Given, then, that the principal character has been significantly affected by recent experiences as a soldier, the plays frequently express critical views, stated by this character, justified and understood because of the situation he has just left. Thus, even in a relatively light comic piece like Milne's *The Boy Comes Home* (Victoria Palace, 9/9/1918), there are satirical references to such topics as war-time profiteering and armchair militarism, and the threat, as the soldier-character Philip says, of the "hundred thousand people who own revolvers, who are quite accustomed to them and – who have nobody to practise on now."

The device of introducing a catalytic stranger into the household (as was indicated in chapter three) became common in English drama after 1900: these strangers came in diverse guises – as poverty-stricken men, burglars (as in detective dramas), and so on. In Barrie's *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* (New, 7/4/1917), it is a soldier who is persuaded to confirm Mrs. Dowey's pretence that she has a son righting in the war.

The play is rather sentimental but for all its pathos, there is no denying that it has a deeply-felt basis: this might have been due to the effect on Barrie of the death of George Llewellyn-Davies, Barrie's favourite among the godsons he was guardian of, in action in March 1915. Reminiscent of *Lonesome-Like* in its theme of mutual adoption to bring about reciprocal contentment, it builds poignantly from initial unease between the two main characters to unaffected intimacy to a subtly tragic suggestion of bereavement at the close. As one of Barrie's biographers has written, "the main theme has come from somewhere deep down in him, and the deadly peril of mawkishness... has failed this time to trap his pen."

Barrie's godson, George Llewellyn Davies, three years before he became another casualty of the Great War in March 1915.
Photo from the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children's Charity.

The play opens with a scene in which a number of working-class women ('*Three old ladies and a criminal*' (3), as the stage directions teasingly inform the reader) are in open competition with each other, using their degree of involvement and insight into the war as the means to gain the upper hand. Their demeanour is in stark contrast to that of Alf's mother, but then they have not lost a son. Mrs. Twymley, for instance, upstages the others by boasting that she "has a son a prisoner in Germany", the only one among them "that has that proud misfortune". The others are stung into reply.

> **Mrs. Dowey.** My son is fighting in France.
> **Mrs. Mickleham.** Mine is wounded in two places.
> **The Heggany Woman.** Mine is at Salonaiky.

This opening scene is one which finds Barrie very much at home. He preferred characters from this stratum of society when writing his fiction and drama, and was always quite strong in his female characterisation, especially older women in their relations with younger men (as in *Rosalind* (Duke of York's, 14/10/1912)). The women then go on to compete in their analysis of military strategy, with all the time a pervasive tension of peer pressure: "I swear to death I'm none of your pacifists," protests Mrs. Dowey after she has called for her guests to put themselves in the place of "women in enemy

lands", only to break off rapidly to argue about the latest fashions. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Dowey's son arrives, a soldier named Kenneth Dowey of the Black Watch, the Fifth Battalion. He enters, scowling at her impudence in telling everyone that he was her son: "'Do you recognise your loving son, missis?' ('Oh, the fine Scotch tang of him,' she thinks.) 'I'm so pleased I wrote so often.' ('Oh, but he's raized,' she thinks)." Barrie uses here in the printed version the narrative methods of short fiction to give some sense of the thinking going on in Mrs. Dowey's mind, which would be suggested by the face and movements of the actress on the stage.

Alone, she explains to him that she had never married and had called herself "Missis to give me a standing." But he wants to know why she had also lied that she had a son fighting. "I wanted it to be my war too"; the war, she goes on,

> … didn't affect me. It affected everybody but me. The neighbours looked down on me. Even the posters on the walls, of the woman saying, 'Go, my boy', looked down at me.

Unable to stand her isolation from the common responsibility, she had invented a son but chose Kenneth Dowey from the newspapers, even guessing his first name correctly from the 'K' in the report. But as the fraud went on, she had longed to see him. Giving in to her genuine show of feeling, he in turn tells her that, though he had said he had parents, "This party never even knew who his proud parents were." The two agree to carry on with the sham relationship, with Mrs. Dowey being placed on "probation" by the soldier. By the time Kenneth has to depart, the two Doweys have become very affectionate towards each other "*for some reason that he cannot fathom*". But he must return to his battalion and the two part in a very touching scene of filial affection.

> 'For a long time, Mrs. Dowey, you cannot have been unaware of my sonnish feelings for you.'

> ‘Wait till I get my mop to you!’
> ‘And if you’re not willing to be my mother, I swear I’ll never ask another.’

There is then a second black-out and the final wordless scene shows Mrs. Dowey about to go to work as a charwoman, looking at his medals and stowing his things away, indicating that he is dead.

Barrie has here attained a powerful emotional resonance in his dialogue (and in the final simple scene), which he had failed to do in the heavy-handed and less sympathetic symbolism of *Der Tag*. What he does is not to overburden the characterisation with pathos (or humour, for that matter) but to give the entire situation, firstly, a certain degree of pity; followed, secondly, by the emergence of a sincerely felt affection; and ended, finally, with a death which is not tragic but is, rather, an event arousing sorrow and pride. The structure of the play endows the brief encounter with a concentrated emotional force which was not lost on those who saw it in April 1917. J. T. Grein wrote of the piece,

> A Barrie cameo, tender, fanciful, real; a delicate touch of pathos and humour... Altogether a little fragment of perfection which will bring tears to the eyes and smiles to the lips of all the patrons of theatre land.

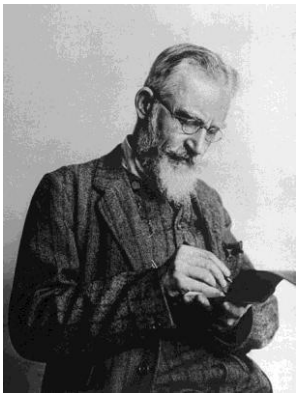
It is too simplistic to accuse Barrie of evading the current problems created by the war by rendering his material in a sentimental way. The realistic elements of the play are invigorated rather than falsified by the more fanciful elements. The piece, furthermore, does not avoid some social comment. In the second part of the play, two of Mrs. Dowey’s neighbours are discussing the effect of the conflict on themselves.

> ‘The war’, says Mrs. Mickelham, ‘has wakened me up to an understanding of my own importance that is really astonishing.’

> **Mrs. Twymley.** Same here. Instead of being the poor worms the like of you or me thought we was, we turns out to be visible departments of a great and haughty empire.

There is implicit in this discussion the hope that the general social system will not revert to the way it was before the war. On the other hand, there does not seem to be an irony of frustration here as there was when the same subject was brought up in Chapin's pre-war *It's the Poor that 'Elps the Poor* (1913), a hint of the idealism which was part of Barrie's defence against his own insecurity and occasional black pessimism.

Shaw employed a more critical stratagem in his *O'Flaherty V. C.* (Belgium, 17/2/1917). The origins of the play lie again in another call for propaganda plays, this time to assist in the recruitment of Irishmen for the British Army, but Shaw also wished to help the Abbey during a period of severe financial difficulties. However, much of his purpose, just as it is in *The Inca* (he wrote both at about the same period in 1915) was to point out to the audience "the lusts and lies and rancors and blood thirsts that love war," as he wrote in 1919, "For unless these things are mercilessly exposed they will hide under the mantle of ideals of the stage just as they do in real life."



Shaw, the quintessential hands-on playwright, writing notes at rehearsals in the 1910s. Photo originally published in *Life.*

At the same time, this was tempered by his respect for the simple courage of many of the soldiers who served in the British Army, which is partly responsible for giving the play a charmingly simple central character devoid of real bitterness. It is Shaw's argument in the play, as he declares openly in the preface which accompanies it, that men enlist for such ordinary reasons as boredom, curiosity and feelings of entrapment in family life, rather than from more noble motives (the contrast of these with the reasons for enlisting which Malleson gives shows that Shaw's piece is underpinned by comic possibilities, in striking contrast to the graver motives given in *'D' Company*). The characterisation of Dennis O'Flaherty, returned war hero and recipient of the Victoria Cross, is subservient to bringing this out in an often stage-Irish way. This means that there is both an irreverence and an essential goodness underlying the truths he declares. For instance, at the beginning of the play, O'Flaherty is in conversation with Sir Pearce Madigan, the local landowner.

> **O'Flaherty.** Arra, sir, how the devil do I know what the war is about?
> **Sir Pearce.** … you tell me you dont know why you did it!
> **O'Flaherty.** Asking your pardon, Sir Pearce, I tell you no such thing. I know quite well why I kilt them. I kilt them because I was afeard that, if I l didn´t, theyd kill me.

Occasionally, Shaw comes close to the hard-hitting sense of grievance found in Malleson's *Black 'Ell* but he stops short of it and, instead, uses the contradictions which have beset O'Flaherty to create a strongly comic situation.

The young Irishman tells how he had joined up to escape his mother and because the English pay "the biggest allowance" (85), and how Mrs. O'Flaherty had been very supportive of him, having been deluded into thinking that he was fighting against the English and not for them. But the context can still accommodate a very perceptive critique of the circumstances of the war, especially on the malevolence and fraud of a great deal of

patriotism. O'Flaherty tells Sir Pearce quite plainly that he could have no conception of how O'Flaherty had changed, since he had never gone through what O'Flaherty had endured.

> What use is all the lying, and pretending, and humbugging, and letting on, when the day comes to you that your comrade is killed in the trench beside you, and you dont as much as look round at him until you trip over his poor body ... Dont talk to me or any soldier of the war being right. No war is right; and all the holy water that Father Quinlan ever blessed couldnt make one right.

O'Flaherty, like the Inca, has come to the same feelings of derision towards the war-mongering of civilians back in England that soldiers like Wilfred Owen were to come to: "You'll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of the human race". The play comes to a close with a flourish, as O'Flaherty, his mother, Sir Pearce and Teresa Driscoll, a parlour-maid and O'Flaherty's former love, argue loudly all at the same time. This convinces O'Flaherty that he should return to the relative quietness of "war's alarums".

Shaw tackles the issues of the war in a juxtaposition of serious and inconsequential subject-matter and tones which in many ways do take away from the important points he wishes to disclose. These fragment the unity of theme and mood. But the context and characters of the play are more agreeable than those found in *The Inca,* a piece which deals with a similar subject. Frank Swinnerton was to praise the play in the *Nation,* stating that "among all its seriousness and its nonsense there is much wisdom, and so much that is reserved to a racy and unsentimental understanding of human bedevilment, that the play belongs to dramatic literature." Shaw was not actually to visit the Front until January 1917 but he manages to convey some sense of the dissatisfaction felt by soldiers to the war, and to win some sympathy for the impudence and clear-sightedness of the changed soldier. "O'Flaherty's experience in the trenches," he wrote to his fellow playwright

Lady Augusta Gregory in September 1915, “has induced a terrible realism and an unbearable candour.”

The positivist side of Shaw has him declaring that O’Flaherty has been transformed profoundly by the war, that he has consequently a sense of restlessness when back home, and that he genuinely wishes to return to the conflict. Here, the issues are integral and explained in overview: there is no evolution of situation or character as such, merely a revelation which principally originates in war-time experiences. Miles Malleson’s *Black ‘Ell* is a more serious treatment of the same subject of the irrationality of patriotism. Malleson wrote the play in the summer of 1916 but it was not given a professional production for another ten years, when the most innovative of the London art theatres of the 1920s, the Gate, produced it on 21 June 1926. The play is a strong, biting attack on the stupidity of the war where both sides use the same propaganda to explain their participation in the conflict, a conflict which has brought out a single-minded faith among the people of the opposing countries in the justness of their cause; and a conflict in which men of a similar background, and thus probably a like character, will kill each other to satisfy the cravings for victory of those back home. The same notion is found in Dennis Garside’s fear of shooting a man “with many an idea in common with me”, but *Black’ Ell* expands this theme of the refutation of mutual personal hostility. As such, it presents a parallelism of circumstance and philosophy which denies either side moral superiority, and brings out the absurdity and the individual personal tragedy of this opposition.

The play opens to the middle-class, wholly ordinary dining-room of Fred Gould and his wife, on an August morning in 1916. This situation is deceiving because very quickly a quiet but highly-strung tension is introduced when the Goulds are handed a telegram, which at first horrifies Mrs. Gould and discernibly upsets her stoical husband: “Nothing to do with the boy at all, you bet your life … somebody wants to meet me at the club”. To their relief, they

read that the note was sent to inform them that their son, Harold (his father remembers him as "Master Harold" (38)), is returning home on leave. Very soon, Harold's uncle, Colonel Eric Fane, obviously a thorough militarist, comes in and, after some teasing, informs them that Harold had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.) for gallantry. Even Mr. Gould is moved and begins to cry. They all leave for the railway station, except for the recently arrived Jean, Harold's sweetheart, who prefers to remain to greet him at home. The eldest of a large family, she is a resourceful *'mother-child'* whose steady personality counterpoints the despairing Harold when he arrives. He had avoided the reception party at the station and come straight to his house. Jean can see immediately that not all is well and he tells her that he feels haunted by the ghost of a young German soldier he had killed.

> There isn't anything any more after you've been killed … Only, if there is, would they go on haunting you for the rest of your life … there are so many of them … and yet (*a greater fear comes into his voice*) he spoke to me on the boat ... I heard his voice.

The idea of a soldier killed in the war haunting someone is also found in Barrie's highly emotional *A Well-Remembered Voice* (1918). Barrie explained the basis of this play in a letter of February 1918.

> I had an odd thought to-day about the war that might come to something ... That in the dead quietness that comes after the carnage the one thing those lying on the ground must be wondering is whether they are alive or dead. But there the veil that separates the survivors and the killed must be very thin, and those on one side of it get very much jumbled up with those on the other ... You could even see some going with the wrong lot …

> I expect the lot on the other side had as many Germans as British, and that they all went off together quite unconscious that they had ever been enemies.

But Malleson in his play, on the contrary, is principally engaged in presenting the obsessive psychological state of Harold Gould, rather than a context where actual supernatural visitation can occur. Harold introduces the emotional pivot of the play when he describes, at some length, the attack in the trenches and how he finally had to strangle an enemy soldier whose face, because they were so close, he cannot forget. The family come home to find that Harold is ashamed of what he has done, preoccupied more with the thought of his victim's girlfriend than of the German soldiers and by the fact that meeting working-class soldiers had brought home to him how little interest there is among the richer members of society in them. As in many other one-act war dramas of this period, the social issues which the conflict highlighted cannot be avoided. Margery Willis had already spoken of a St. John Bullock whose pro-war lectures had "brought all classes and people together" – the irony here is that this is unity on a national scale; at the international level, it creates singular groups inexorably opposed to one another. Harold continues on with the theme near the close of the play.

> I mean, what have you, or any one in this whole street of great big houses, ever really done about the beastly little streets just behind at our back-doors?

He wishes that some of the politicians and others, of all the belligerent countries who advocate the war, be placed in a room to stab themselves agonisingly. Finally, he insists that he will suffer any punishment but will not return to the battlefield, a vow which precedes and renders hollow the fervent congratulations of the jingoistic feminist Margery Willis.

The play, with its tendency to speechify (particularly in Harold's dialogue) and its expertly timed but artificial contrasts (the scene of the maid, Ethel, cursing the enemy soldiers who killed her boyfriend is the concrete illustration of Harold's vision of the grieving and vengeful family of the young man he had killed), is the work of an unpractised playwright. One also feels assured that the animating ideas behind the piece could well have sustained, and indeed have merited, a longer treatment – the sheer number of points made and the possibilities they offer for elaboration at least point to this. However, the drama presents a passionately felt record of one incident in battle which, in a newspaper, was "magnificent work [by a] young hero" but to the soldier himself was "too awful!" The essential purpose of Malleson's play is to communicate the gruesomeness of warfare and to put across an anti-heroic characterisation and tone in the play, concluding with a pacifist call which, taking into account Harold's experiences, is an entirely understandable resolution.

Harold's description of trench warfare and anti-militarist opinions show up the earlier tirades by Margery and Ethel (interestingly, by two women, not men) against conscientious objectors as flawed by a lack of appreciation of the real conduct of the war. Its appearance has a far graver impact than the similar recollection expressed by Dennis O'Flaherty.

> He was just a grey thing at first coming at me ... I hadn't a shot left and I hit at him, with something in my hand … a sort of knife into his face … into his mouth … against his teeth … and my hand came out with a lot of blood and things …

But the final moments of the German were even more dreadful, in part because the killing was not something Harold had intended to do and because he had the time and consciousness to empathise with his victim.

> Oh, I didn't do it! you see, I'd fallen on him; it wasn't my fault exactly … and then he began to cry out … and I knew it must be hurting him something horribly…

The play has this long, sustained climactic recollection at its centre, with the patriotism and occasional jingoism of the beginning and the pacifism at the close framing the story as images of domestic ignorance and loss of innocence respectively. In effect, the play is a self-contained portrait from the patriotic stance to the pacifist one, and shows a character angry and in revolt against the loss of individuality and the blindness of a national cause and patriotic fervour. On the way, *Black 'Ell* puts forward a forceful criticism of the war by contrasting the different attitudes to it in an integral way, by having the forces which are behind the war in each country revealed as careless of human life, and by reserving most credibility for Harold's belief that the war is "mad".

Conclusion

That many playwrights wrote about the First World War in the form of one-act plays during the course of the conflict is a reflection both of the reorganization of the theatre during the same time and the personal feelings of dramatic authors to the dreadful happenings. Dramatists had their own way of facing the awfulness of the situation: Shaw, for instance, would set it in comic terms by having, say, domestic disharmony overshadow the "alarums" of the Front; Miles Malleson would see war as the consummation of fatalism and contrast the psychological state of those participating in it to those remaining back home. Many of the plays have an equivocal atmosphere which finds its source in the difference in attitude between returning soldiers and their families in England, and in the disorientation about old values and allegiances felt by many after their fighting experiences.

This essay has argued that there was a development in theme among one-act plays dealing with the First World War written during the 1914-1918 period. The initial reaction to the conflict was overwhelmingly an uncritical jingoism which was reflected in a large number of short dramas. However, a number of later plays would attack this insular patriotism. In addition, the typical play produced during the early stages of the war concerned the life of the soldier in battle or doing his duty, rendered in a melodramatic way. At a later stage in the war, the focus would change somewhat to the situation back in England when the soldiers returned home. These latter plays in general were less dynamically in favour of the conflict than others dealing directly with military action. The clarity of melodrama was often employed to help identify villainy and heroism in the quickest and most definite way. However, characterisation was not always so straightforward, especially as the war continued. Characters would be revealed as having changed considerably during their time on the battlefield. They are shown as being disgusted with the contradictions of killing enemy soldiers, the fraudulence of patriotism, the continuing inequalities of class and gender, the fact that the source of idealism is often compulsion.

Set against this is the prevalence at home of militarism, profiteering and one-up-manship, and the distaste, amounting almost to a fear, felt by those conducting the war, of pacifism and the anti-heroic stance. The plays contain a friction, on the one side between the processes of the collectivity – of patriotism and country at war with another country – and on the other, the conclusion that the hostility, and the animus behind it, is not at an individual level. The late point of attack of the one-act play allows the distance in *narratory* space and time by which a character might reach an evaluation of moral and social conditions, as might happen when a soldier returns from the Front. When the plays end, the individual is often shown in his or her personal anxiety: Mrs. Dowey stowing away the medals of a ‘son’ she had known for a few days, Harold Gould promising “to stop at home and say it’s all mad”.

Best of Friends: James Joyce and Leopold Bloom

The famous novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce tells the story of one day in the life of a seemingly very ordinary man, Leopold Bloom, in an odyssey of eighteen hours in the city of Dublin. However, the word "ordinary" is not entirely appropriate as this same man is effectively separated from his fellow Irishmen both by his own way of thinking and by the habits and prejudices of the people he meets. He displays a level of support and understanding of individuals he recognises to be confused and outcast, such as the character Stephen Dedalus, that no-one else in the book comes near to equalling. The main tendency he possesses is that of entering naturally and with a fullness of curiosity the minds of others, an action that might have been developed by his experience as the target of bullies. This is a description of him thinking from the perspective of a blind man walking in front of him on the street:

> Mr. Bloom walked behind the eyeless feet … Poor young fellow! How on earth did he know that van was there? Must have felt it ... something blacker than the dark.… Queer idea of Dublin he must have, tapping his way round by the stones. Could he walk in a beeline if he hadn't that cane? Bloodless pious face like a fellow going in to be a priest.

Joyce at about the time when *Ulysses* is set.
Image: Original photograph from the C. P. Curran Collection,
UCD Library Special Collections; digital images courtesy of the IVRLA, UCD.

Bloom keeps his distance from people both because of his own desire to do so and because other people whom he meets sometimes react to him with discomfort, scorn and even sarcasm. It is petty because the perpetrators are themselves the victims of prejudice and snobbery, and find a degree of relief for this in belittling a man perceived to be an outsider. He is thought to be a Jew, a very rare thing in Ireland then as now, and according to the caricature created principally by long-standing Catholic approbation, he represents a tradition that they have been conditioned to be wary of and not to trust. For some of the characters the enemy are the English ruling the country at the time – a loathing that one of them, the Citizen, expresses with stirring but finally pathetic enthusiasm – but this doesn't stop them from occasionally thinking and speaking the worst about Bloom.

In formal terms, the unfair aspect of this is that he is two-times removed from Judaism, as his father had been born Jewish and had then become a Protestant and Bloom himself had then changed religion again to enter the Catholic Church to marry "Molly" Tweedy. Nevertheless, one always has the impression that Bloom has perhaps spent a lifetime suffering the consequences of this misunderstanding. There is, after all, a certain pleasure in attacking the easy target.

Once we know this to be the case, what is surprising is that Bloom is an admirably decent man. Not that successful as an advertising salesman, the husband of a woman he knows will later share her bed with Blazes Boylan, the father of an adolescent girl but one haunted painfully by the death of his baby son. More or less devoid of rancour and aggression, he has no passion for nationalism, has a liking for voyeurism and achieves unconsummated infidelity in a number of letters he has written. He is someone we can respect even when we are not blind to his weaknesses and sometimes annoying passivity; this is so because there is present a quiet resilience that stubbornly

helps him survive all the pressures, in contrast to his father who had killed himself. Bloom himself was not entirely a fictional creation. Joyce partly based the character to a great extent on a friend of his from Trieste, the Italian novelist Aron Ettore Schmitz ("Italo Svevo"). The simple sketch he made of Bloom is an undeniable likeness of Schmitz.

Bloomsday is named after the main character of *Ulysses* and takes place every year on the same day that the novel is set, the 16th of June. It is in fact the commemoration of an anniversary, as the date was chosen by Joyce because it was the first time that he went out with his future wife, Nora Barnacle. In some way, it is a monument to the love affair that began on that day and that gave Joyce the domestic stability to go on to write three novels of lasting value and short stories comparable to those of Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov. A man prone to heavy drinking and later to health problems, particularly with his eyes, the presence of this woman in his life was absolutely essential to the discipline and normality required when writing works of such enormous creative and intellectual pressure. She was also a first-hand source of material concerning the views, appetites and sensuality of that being, the modern woman, still relatively unknown in literature at that time.

But Bloomsday is of course an annual festivity that deals in other considerations along with the beginnings and benefits of the author's relationship with his life-long partner. The publisher of *Ulysses*, Silvia Beach, had a celebratory lunch on the 16th of June as far back as 1929, seven years after the publication of the book. But Bloomsday was properly initiated later by another gathering back in Dublin.

Fifty years after the real date of the fictional events in the novel, a group of quite fascinating men arranged to meet to start a pilgrimage on a route that would take them to some of the places mentioned in the book. The novel had

by then reached a level of veneration as possibly the great work of fiction in the twentieth century, such that the idea itself was neither a pointless celebration of a book of questionable worth nor some sort of parade promoting an undervalued masterpiece. It was done because the work and its very human messages really did merit a celebration. The group itself consisted of the publisher John Ryan (who helpfully was also the owner of a pub), the great experimental novelist Flann O'Brien, the poet Patrick Kavanagh, the poet and critic Anthony Cronin, Joyce's dentist cousin Tom (whose services were not required), and the registrar of Trinity College, A. J. Levanthal.

Celebrants of the first Bloomsday pause for a photo in Sandymount, Dublin on the morning of June 16, 1954. From left are John Ryan, Anthony Cronin, Brian O'Nolan (a.k.a. Flann O'Brien), Patrick Kavanagh and Tom Joyce, cousin of James Joyce.
Image: Biblioklept/Antoine Malette and https://www.openculture.com/2013/07/the-first-bloomsday.html.

Their plan on that mid-summer morning in 1954 was to follow the route in two old-fashioned horse-drawn cabs, of the type that had brought Bloom and his acquaintances to the funeral of Paddy Dignam, as described near the beginning of the novel. Each participant had agreed to truly enter the world of the novel by taking on a particular role from the book. Their journey was to take them to several of the venues mentioned in the story – many of course still existed at the time – and end up in the brothel area of the city, what Joyce had named Nighttown, a rather dangerous destination in light of the amount of booze they also planned to imbibe during the trip. The inevitable inebriation took place and about half way through the journey the group

surrendered to the temptations of Ryan's tavern, the Bailey, and to a certain amount of argument perhaps not out of keeping with the events and personalities in the novel.

A pub that appears in Ulysses, "Davey Byrne's".
Image: DanMS at the English-language Wikipedia.

Bloomsday as it developed over the years has maintained this lack of over-formal reverence, this habit of dressing in Edwardian clothes and eating the peculiar gastronomic delights:

> Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liverslices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencods' roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.

There is no denying the fact that, for many, it is an excuse to pass the time in good and jovial company, made up in clothes that were fashionable one hundred years ago, and dine on food that experts might say will shorten our lives if eaten in sufficient quantities over sufficient time.

Members of the public celebrating Bloomsday in period costume.
Image: Public Domain, File:BloomsdayDavyByrnes.jpg.

There is also a smaller grouper that perhaps makes the majority feel that they are out of place – lacking respect, inadequately serious and perhaps even ignorant. These are the people who know the story and characters well, regard the event as a *bona fide* literary commemoration, and even do something that many others have never done though they are proud of the book and its author – actually read the novel. As a diverting event that above all celebrates the ordinary human and the great civilized act that is reading, Bloomsday is an exemplary achievement of a work of fiction that many fear to tackle because of its reputation for scale and difficulty.

A reading of Ulysses at the top of the Martello tower where the book begins.
Image: CC BY 3.0 File:James Joyce Tower and Museum2.JPG.

Joyce was a writer born in a minor part of that linguistic empire called the English-speaking world. His eminence as a writer would arguably have been even greater had he come from the United Kingdom or the United States – celebrity is after all often a question of birth. However, he is not himself a minor author or someone who lacks respect and imitation worldwide and in

different languages. As a writer sometimes you wish that Joyce had never been born, or had finally finished his medical studies and become a respected surgeon, or even had been hit by a large and eminently destructive bus on the 15th of June 1904. I say this because, when an author tries to write about a topic that does not often appear in print or on the stage, or attempts to express himself in a way that is ground-breaking and yet sincere, there are often voices that will say that the topic and the style are a poor derivative of the great man. Joyce said a lot and deliberately made the achievement of novelty quite difficult for the rest of us. In terms of his achievement and as a reminder both of the challenge to say something different in a new way and the great effort required to actually do this, Bloomsday is a celebration of a great novel and a recurring invitation for other writers to step up to the challenge to write a great work of fiction.

Celebrants outside the Joyce Museum, North Great George's Street, Dublin.
Image: Public Domain, File:Bloomsday GtGeorgeSt.jpg.

The odd thing about Bloomsday, normally a joyous few hours, is that *Ulysses* was written when Joyce had emigrated to continental Europe and, because of his strong feelings against the pettiness and disappointments in Dublin, naturally depicted the city with an emphasis on its shabbiness and duplicity. Perhaps then it is a good thing that most of the revelers have not read the work and seen this truthful but dark side. There is no doubting that the bright atmosphere that always pervades the day is a product of pride in the work of a local hero – arguably the winner of what could be called the competition to

find Ireland's greatest writer – and a ready-made opportunity for the tourism industry. Bloomsday has been adopted as almost a second Irish national day, along with St. Patrick's Day, and has been taken up in many countries abroad, from Szombathely in Hungary (where Bloom's father was born) to Trieste and even Mexico City, where the celebration is now more than a decade old. One can only see it growing bigger, a living tribute to a fine book and a decent character of fiction.

Grave of James Joyce in Zürich-Fluntern; sculpture by Milton Hebald.
Image: Lars Haefner - de:Grab James Joyce.jpg

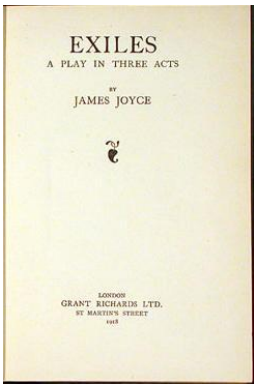
The Death of The Spirit: James Joyce's Play *Exiles*

It is obvious to anyone who reads his works that James Joyce wrote progressively more unconventional prose. The stories in *Dubliners* and the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* were ground-breaking in terms of subject-matter and storytelling technique at the time they were first published but they were perfectly accessible in terms of vocabulary and style. There were however signs in the final pages of *A Portrait* that Joyce desired to move on to a more complex way of portraying his characters and relating their histories and current lives. So it is no surprise that we read the restless changes of narrative styles in *Ulyses* and the hyper-creativity in word invention in *Finnegan's Wake.*

At the same time, he very often took advantage of the simple procedure of including in the same works certain acquaintances in his real life, as well as events and even writings he had received from people (such as a comic poem about Jesus that his former friend Oliver St. John Gogarty had sent him as a peace offering after a row they had). Using resources like this and in this way made the process of writing in difficult prose a little easier perhaps.

It appears that Joyce wrote his only full-length play *Exiles* between *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* just before the start of the First World War. The elements in his biography that I think are pertinent to the play are that he had been living unmarried (or "in sin" as the Irish would have said at the time) with his partner Nora Barnacle in Trieste and Rome, had had two children with her, had returned to Ireland for various reasons involving such matters as the publication of his works and the opening of Ireland's first cinema, had refused like his brother to kneel in prayer as his mother died vomiting green matter on her death-bed, and had displayed his deep distrust of erratic but I would argue well-meaning friends like Gogarty, cutting them out of his life in a type of neurotic punishment.

In general it is a piece that could be classed as belonging to the school of Ibsen and Chekhov, and indeed is the type of play that might have been written at the time by Harley Granville Barker or John Galsworthy. It is unexpectedly humourless except for some comments by the Gogarty-like character Robert Hand: “The buzz of the harmonium in her father’s parlour…. The asthmatic voice of protestantism.”


EXILES
A PLAY IN THREE ACTS
BY
JAMES JOYCE
LONDON
GRANT RICHARDS LTD.
ST MARTIN'S STREET

Title Page of the first edition of Joyce's *Exiles*, 1918.
Image: Indiana University Libraries, http://www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/joyce/exiles2.html.

The dialogue is a series of short comments and does not present profundities expressed in brief monolgues, so in this sense it is very different to a typical play by Shaw. As often in Joyce’s oeuvre, the centre of people’s attention is a complicated, highly sensitive, confused and confusing, constantly testing young man, in this case Richard Rowan. Richard is a well-regarded writer (but we understand with very few sales) and has returned to his native city of Dublin with his partner Bertha and their son, who would have been seen by people in that city and epoch as illegitimate. Early in the play he lays blame for his departure on his mother:

> She drove me away. On account of her I lived years in exile and poverty too, or near it. I never accepted the doles she sent me through the bank. I waited, too, not for her death but for some understanding of me, her own son, her own flesh and blood; that never came.

> ... There were tongues here ready to tell her all, to embitter her withering mind still more against me and Bertha and our godless nameless child.

We understand he has returned from his self-imposed exile at the urging of his friend Robert Hand, who in previous years had shared a small house with him where they would drink and seduce women. Richard confesses to Bertha at one point, "Where we used to hold our wild nights, talking, drinking, planning – at that time. Wild nights; yes. He and I together. …And sometimes I alone… But not quite alone." Richard is breathtakingly open about this and other indiscretions – both in the past and the present – with Bertha, and she likewise is very confessional with him. Earlier he had reminisced with his old friend:

> RICHARD. It was not only a house of revelry; it was to be the hearth of a new life. [*Musing.*] And in that name all our sins were committed.
> ROBERT. Sins! Drinking and blasphemy [*he points*] by me. And drinking and heresy, much worse [*he points again*] by you…

Robert is encouraged in this endeavour to bring Richard home by his cousin Beatrice. His desire to have Richard stay and invest his talents in a changing Ireland is apparently so genuine and strong that he even has an interview arranged with a university vice-chancellor for the "chair of romance literature", a situation that Richard responds to with some sarcasm.

> ROBERT. I saw the vicechancellor this morning. He has the highest opinion of you, Richard. He has read your book, he said.
> RICHARD. Did he buy it or borrow it?
> ROBERT. Bought it, I hope.
> RICHARD.... Thirtyseven copies have now been sold in Dublin.

He has committed to a campaign of articles about Richard that would help re-establish his reputation, something necessary since Richard is known mostly for having abandoned his native land with a woman far inferior to him in

terms of intelligence and social standing – Robert tells him in no uncertain terms, “Everyone knows that you ran away years ago with a young girl... How shall I put it?... with a young girl not exactly your equal”. But while Robert is volunteering all this support he is also attempting to seduce Bertha while she at the same time keeps her lover up to date with Robert’s manoeuvres. Outwardly Richard is calm about what is going on, he even regards it as an activity he can examine dispassionately, but Bertha cannot believe that deep down there is no jealousy or hurt.

> BERTHA. … Dick, does all this disturb you? Because I told you I don’t want that. I think you are only pretending you don’t mind. I don’t mind.
> RICHARD. [*Quietly.*] I know, dear. But I want to find out what he means or feels just as you do.

Richard wants to know the details of the reactions of Bertha and Robert in their moment of seduction, with an almost scientific distance that comes across as unfeeling, disloyal and even manipulative.

James Joyce's *Exiles* in London, August 2006. The actors are Peter McDonald (Richard) and Dervla Kirwan (Bertha). Image: Nigel Norrington/Camera Press/Retna Ltd., https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Photo-Flash-James-Joyces-Exiles-in-London-20060803.

The whole mix of purposes, manipulations and repercussions involved in this adult game is what gives the play its complex human interest. In themselves, the structure of the work and the vocabulary through which the characters

explain themselves are quite simple. But such matters as the reasons why Richard does not react although he is aware of the activities of his so-called best friend with his romantic partner, these are harder to understand and would certainly test a spectator in the theatre. The play centres on Richard, and the others generally think and perform actions that are related to him, for better or worse. He is unquestionably not a simple man: the house servant Brigid has known him for years and calls him a "curious bird", in her charming and unsophisticated manner.

Right from the beginning it is clear that he is deeply anxious about affairs in his life: "O, if you knew how I am suffering at this moment! … And how I pray that I may be granted again my dead mother's hardness of heart!" Arguably there are even reasons to question his actual sanity: at one stage he returns from a walk on the beach speaking wildly about voices he had heard:

> … There are demons [*he points out towards the strand*] out there… made the sign of the cross upside down and that silenced them.

What does Richard learn about his companions? It would be too simple to say that Robert is merely a shallow sensualist, considering a kiss even to the wife of a friend as "an act of homage". He is a deeper thinker than this and much more progressive than might first appear. Richard allowed him to continue with his attempts with Bertha because he felt sorry for him but also for other motives:

> … in the very core of my ignoble heart I longed to be betrayed by you and by her—in the dark, in the night—secretly, meanly, craftily. By you, my best friend, and by her. I longed for that passionately and ignobly.

But once it is revealed that Richard had been observing these infidelities, Robert feels upset about being in an "experiment" but is glad the "terrible trial" is over. He expresses the opinion that women also have the right to move

from lover to lover in order to find the right one – topics like this, presented on a public stage, would have been profoundly upsetting for the Irish theatregoer of that era and it is no wonder the poet W. B. Yeats, head of the Abbey Theatre at the time, rejected it. Close to the end of the play, Robert succinctly describes how fidelity (for Richard) and friendship (for Robert) are central factors in their lives and also how escape through ”irresistible” passion is possible for the man whom he is obsessed with:

> A battle of your soul against the spectre of fidelity, of mine against the spectre of friendship. All life is a conquest, the victory of human passion over the commandments of cowardice… The blinding instant of passion alone—passion, free, unashamed, irresistible—that is the only gate by which we can escape from the misery of what slaves call life.

The former amour of Richard, Beatrice, I find to be a rather underdeveloped character: she appears to be still recovering from her past experiences (“[*Calmly and bitterly.*] I am convalescent”) and her practice now is to keep a distance from people: “It is a terribly hard thing to do, Mr Rowan—to give oneself freely and wholly—and be happy”. On the other hand Bertha has a pivotal position in the drama of the play. Richard has told her of his infidelities and she dutifully reports to him about Robert’s actions, even up to how they felt when they kissed and their “sacred night of love”. She asks him for guidance, he leaves the decision to her. But she is not blind to why Richard does things in this manner: there is the heartless way he treated his mother and the encouragement he gives their son to turn against his own mother (it is interesting that when the son wants permission for something, he asks his mother, not his father). But Richard accuses Bertha of exactly the same project (concerning Beatrice):

> RICHARD. … You have driven her away from me now, as you drove everyone else from my side – every friend I ever had…
> BERTHA. [*Warmly.*] No such thing! I think you have made her

> unhappy as you have made me and as you made your dead mother unhappy and killed her. Womankiller! That is your name.

(It is interesting to recall that Joyce's wife, Nora Barnacle, was nicknamed by some as a "mankiller" in her youth owing to the early death of two of her boyfriends). In their final conversation together, Richard proposes a way they can stay together in the most utterly simple relationship even though a colossal doubt eats at him:

> RICHARD. It is not in the darkness of belief that I desire you. But in restless living wounding doubt. To hold you by no bonds, even of love, to be united with you in body and soul in utter nakedness—for this I longed. …
> BERTHA. … Forget me and love me again as you did the first time. I want my lover. … You, Dick. O, my strange wild lover, come back to me again!
> [*She closes her eyes.*]

There are occasions when the dialogue is quite akin to a type of theatrical melodrama – the main theme pushes the writing in that direction. But the topic is too close to the writer's heart for a stale, artificial genre of dialogue to appear. Joyce presents a gravely tortured soul, suffering because he cannot love simply, cannot trust a friend who wants him to think about his future, cannot give peace to another lover – above all, cannot come to terms to his own internal damage. His torment is so ingrained and powerful it can only be called a spiritual torment. Duns Scotus is quoted on two occasions speaking about a death of the spirit and, while this refers to the sexual act, it could also be used to understand Richard himself. Perhaps then the article that Robert wrote about his friend helps us a little to understand the final meaning of the play:

There is an economic and there is a spiritual exile. There are those who left her to seek the bread by which men live and there are others, nay, her most

favoured children, who left her to seek in other lands that food of the spirit by which a nation of human beings is sustained in life.

A Mirror Turned to the Depth of the Sky, Holding its Lights and Colours: An Appreciation of John McGahern

In terms of his career as a writer, and of success as measured by fame and financial prosperity, the place of birth of the novelist John McGahern was not very advantageous. He has good company: great masters of the short story, for example – compatriots of McGahern like Sean O'Faolain, Liam O'Flaherty and Frank O'Connor, lack the global prestige of writers of a similar standard because their country is unimportant and their supporters small in number and lacking in literary potency.

He was born and later chose to live most of his adult life in the world of small farms in the midlands of Ireland. But a writer is not just a mechanical manufacturer of character, dialogue and setting. If he is clear in his purposes as a creator of fiction, it is to be hoped that he will equally be aware that certain circumstances – the sights and atmospheric energies and language that surround him – can be used as a source of inspiration he can receive and mix with his creative talent.

McGahern as a young man.
Image: Fay Godwin, British Library/National Portrait Gallery, London.

McGahern knew his locality very well: the eldest of seven children born to a mother who combined running a farm with teaching at a primary school and a father who was absent most of the time working as a policeman in that place with a military name peculiar to Ireland, the "barracks". His early experiences

are so stereotypical of Irish writers of his place and time that they seem like a series of obligatory tests for a young novelist: “safe” public-service job as a teacher, loss of this job because his first novel was considered pornographic, emigration to England to work on building sites, and then return to live on a farm and to full-time writing.

This brief introduction will help the reader, who is not familiar with Irish rural society of the second half of the twentieth century, to understand the attention that McGahern paid to what can only be described as the small and everyday personal matters of his characters, all expressed with quiet lyricism within the cyclical panorama of both agriculture and nature.

> When all the meadows were cut they looked wonderfully empty and clean, the big oak and ash trees in the hedges towering over the rows of cut grass, with the crows and the gulls descending in a shrieking rabble to hunt frogs and snails and worms.
>
> The berries on the rowans along the shore glowed with such redness that it was clear why the rowan berry was used to praise the lips of girls and women … The sheep and cattle were heavy and content on grass. Radish, lettuce, scallions, peas, broad beans were picked each day with the new potatoes.

I would like to address these topics by looking at McGahern’s final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, published in 2002 fours years before his death from cancer at the age of 71. As always the book is not trying to show off: the volume of the narration is low, the characters have eminently ordinary duties, ambitions and restrictions. However, what stands out is the description of the place. It is a land full of insects, birds and fish, of big trees, grass and above all the lake, the place of rainbows, reflections and plenty.

> The water was like glass, reflecting the clear sky on either side of a sparkling river of light from a climbing sun.

> The rainbows were as broken as the weather, appearing here and there in streaks or brilliant patches of colour in the unsettled sky. When rain wasn't dripping from leaves or eaves, the air was so heavy it was breathing rain.
>
> The lake was an enormous mirror turned to the depth of the sky, holding its lights and colours.

In the middle of all these populations, busy at their necessities of eating, reproduction and self-protection, the typical people of the Irish countryside are carrying out their tasks with careful and traditional dignity.

She lost her good husband after bringing up her family and like myself did not think it good to live alone… Young people sometimes find it hard to understand that older people need the same little things and comforts and enjoyments that they need.

There is such a strong emphasis on the tactility, sight, voices and aromas of the region that it becomes a celebration, though McGahern keeps control by remaining with the concrete and maintaining a prose that is beautiful but not exaggerated, and consequently it is a celebration that is more realistic than romantic, though some level of romance is definitely present.

McGahern in the countryside where he lived, 1990.
Image: Frank Miller, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/reflections-on-the-literary-legacy-of-john-mcgahern-1.3864866.

There is so much plenty that people are often not required to work as the farm animals grow fat unattended eating the succulent grass. And at the same time even those with money now can remember that times were very bad in the recent past. Some of the people have a sense that they are in a good place at

a bountiful time but there remains a skepticism, a doubt that is part of the definition of incomplete human happiness. Indeed at one point two characters are described as vaguely becoming aware that "there was no certainty as to what constituted the happiness or unhappiness of another."

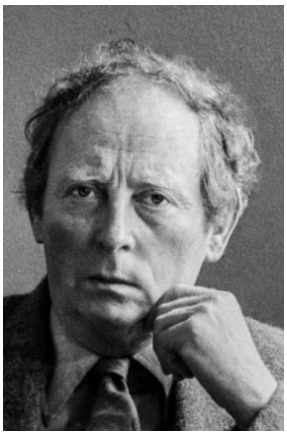
Later another character, helped by whiskey to think that a walk around the lake with good company gave him the experience of deep contentment, argues against this feeling by thinking that "happiness could not be sought or worried into being or even fully grasped; it should be allowed its own slow pace so that it passes unnoticed, if it ever comes at all." Probably there is in this tendency – not to accept happiness so easily – a discipline learned from the teachings of the Church. Inevitably there are also the outward signs of Catholic custom, present as much as a social obligation as a mark of piety and belief; there is mention of the traditional home and its "… smiling Virgin, the blood-drip from the Crown of Thorns".

Even the fact that people have had neither the resources nor the inclination to change their furnishings means that, in a strong physical sense, domestically at least they still partly live in a past time. Many of the people would prefer for things to stand still – it is the perennial yearning of parents who would like to see their children remain the same.

> Across her face there seemed to pass many feelings and reflections: it was as if she ached to touch and gather in and make whole those scattered years of change. But how can time be gathered in and kissed? There is only flesh.

The novel is a journey through the cycle of time, but rather than mention chronological formalities of days, months and seasons, it presents a series of scenes, luxuriously full of the beginnings, maturity, decline and rest of plants, animals and atmospheres. This is the description of spring that almost closes the novel:

Birds bearing twigs in their beaks looped through the air. The brooding swan resumed her seat on the high throne in the middle of the reeds... In shallows along the shore the water rippled with the life of the spawning pike and bream … the black cat sat as studious as a scholar amid all the spawn and stirring of the pool…

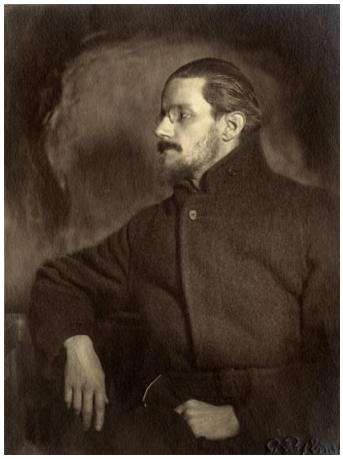


John McGahern.
Image: Madeline Green, https://www.swediteur.com/auteur/john-mcgahern/.

The Great Novel – The Unread and the Unreadable

There are strong, well-supported rumours that certain novels are definitively "great", an accusation that in some cases has been going on for many decades, even centuries. Who are the authors of these rumours? There are certain men and women who apparently have a tremendous amount of free time, combined with an extraordinary evaluative stamina, to scrupulously read through works of enormous creativity, originality, uniqueness and iconoclasm, all this to finally communicate to ordinary mortals with little critical ability and even less spare time which are the novels, old or new, that are really worth reading, and then of course which ones make it into the list of all-time greats. Many of these same readers are very grateful for this excellent service that, in a clear and irreproachable manner, provides them with the titles of the superlative works of fiction.

There is a flaw in this system. It is like a religion based on faith in the prophets and belief in their enunciations, but without then passing from the recommendation to actually reading the works. I am inspired to write about this because I read that Joyce's *Ulysses* has been described as the great unread novel (and just as provocatively his *Finnegan's Wake* has been deemed the great unreadable novel). I would like to say in passing that Ulysses is a tremendous work of what could be called microfiction with a whole writer's programme of techniques contained in a very long book. But it produces fear in the hearts of readers: too difficult, too big, it was in former days even thought to be too pornographic. And the fear factor has stopped many people from reading it.



James Joyce, Zurich, ca. 1918.
Image: Camille Ruf - Cornell Joyce Collection,
http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/joyce/writingchaos/index.html.

Joyce is not the only member of this club, indeed the membership of this elite society is multilingual and from different epochs. Cervantes is a long-time member, as are the Russians Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and the Frenchman Proust, among others. They are sitting in the college of cardinals of the church of great achievements in fiction. The obvious questions then are, what is the quality of the books that got them admission and who are the people who put them there? After all, it can be argued with a great deal of credibility that the fact that works are not read denies them the appellation of greatness. Dickens wrote what are undoubtedly some marvellous novels, they were greeted positively by critics when they came out, they were best sellers then and even today they are read with pleasure, though their prose style, highly developed narrative and moral mission are very much of their time, indeed of their particular author.

This could be one way to argue against the idea that certain "great" novels are not read because they would take so long to read and are too complicated for the regular person. Certain works are consistently praised and recommended … but they have a "reputation" and this puts the general public off; they see them on the library shelf like big, fat temptations of text but given the choice between an epic of a quarter of a million words dealing ponderously with the

lives of dozens and a work of two hundred pages with simpler vocabulary, concepts, personalities and story, they prefer the thinner option.

The Irish are very proud of their compatriot who, according to many, wrote one of the great novels – perhaps the great novel – of the twentieth century. The process of literary favouritism involves a mode of selection mixed with what is effectively very persuasive marketing practices undertaken by literary critics and academics, who now regard themselves as so professionalised that the opinion of the common man in the street is classed as inferior and untrained, and quite probably heretical, if he is in disagreement with the "canon" or proposes other candidates.

Most Irish people have not read *Ulysses* but its greatness – though unverified – is without question. There is even a day in the middle of June each year when people dress up in Edwardian fancy dress and eat unhealthy breakfasts to celebrate a work many have never even attempted, some have tried to read and abandoned. Recently Paolo Coelho described the book as "pure style" with "nothing there" whose purpose was to impress other writers, and in short he argued that its influence as a model "great" novel is harmful; while the Irish writer Roddy Doyle described it as over-long, overrated and unmoving. How did the custodians of Joyce's eminence respond? By attacking the speakers and what they considered their limited talent, a reaction that in some way signals that the book cannot be used convincingly to defend itself.

Novelist Roddy Doyle.
Image: John Kay, public domain.

This system of identifying which novels stand above the competition in each epoch is without doubt useful and economical in terms of time and effort. Is it doctrinaire and bullying? Yes, but it purports to guide the reading public to the best examples of fiction. However, it is a rather flawed method if the persons involved in choosing and promoting have their own special prejudices or, being humans, have not chanced upon genuinely superb pieces of literature that were never identified in the midst of so many publications, and nowadays in so many media. A key aspect of this whole debate, I would argue, is on the contrary to endow each individual with the right and power to make his or her own decisions. This is not just being democratic in a paternalistic way; in fact it is a very healthy habit because it prevents a self-appointed police force from telling us – indeed ordering us – to respect a given list of books.

This situation is provocative: it leads inevitably to the expression of discordant opinions. On occasion these comments perform a pivotal service in demoting works that cannot now be classed as "great", as earlier champions had said, or in promoting new works or earlier books that were overlooked for some reason. The task is relentless, perennial and on a massive scale. The author once visited the library of the University of Cambridge. The institution is a copyright repository for publications, in other words it receives as a matter of legal obligation almost all copies of books, magazines, pamphlets and such like that have been issued in the British isles (Great Britain and Ireland) during a given year. Something like two kilometres of shelving are occupied during the course of the same twelve months – which is to say, given the thickness of each sheet of paper, an enormous amount of reading.

Is it then no surprise that wonderful material is not even read given the sheer volume of stuff that gets printed? Alternatively one could think about past publications – for example those monsters of Victorian times, the three-volume novel. There is absolutely no guarantee that a novel that was released

to little critical attention in the dark winter of 1868 (for instance) is not in fact the great achievement of fiction in English of the nineteenth century, better than anything by the Brontës, Austin, Hardy and the rest. Who wants to enter the dark passages of bookshelves in Cambridge to make the discovery and prove the critics (both the living and the dead) inept in their monitoring?

Literature and Home Economics

The business of literature is as much an economic undertaking as an artistic and intellectual one. There is something unworldly about it, especially in the sense that, if for example a person takes up poetry, there cannot be a clear financial reason for doing so, keeping in mind that in no place on this planet is it possible to make a regular and decent income through the composition and publication of poems. One normally has to combine this activity with work as a librarian (one thinks of Philip Larkin) or something similar that results in a wage, some free time and the opportunity to rehearse themes and phrases before getting down to composition in the evening.

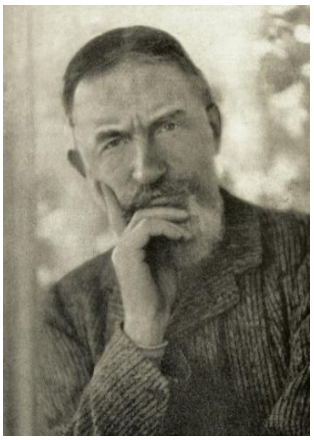
Literature as a means to make money might also be an activity that has fatal consequences. A writer can feel deeply physically exhausted through the effort of many hours at a play or novel, or through that peculiar and unexpectedly taxing work of writing shorter but intense works like an essay or a sonnet. There are examples of authors who quite literally killed themselves for their art: Dickens it appears to me had an early death caused by an insane commitment to novel-writing, public-speaking and other work. Sir Walter Scott was also crushed by the sheer weight of those immense novels he wrote, although in his case there was also involved a rather admirable gentlemanly effort to pay off his debts by writing new material.

I would like to look at some of what – for want of a better phrase – can be called the Anglo-Irish authors to see how they operated as writers in terms of what could be termed domestic finances. A practical way of addressing this topic is to keep in mind that a central explanation why there are not more people dedicated to writing is the fact that they must earn a living and the offer of a good job and the stability that it brings is a forceful temptation and a great cure for that malady called artistic ambition. There might exist a number of situations that allow a person to dedicate his or her time to authorship. One is through inheritance, as in the case of Byron and Shelley

for instance; another is through a profitable marriage, or the adoption by some admirer who elects to finance a chosen writer over a certain period of time.

A good example of this is the case of James Joyce, whose current fame and adulation by the academic world (more so of course than the "normal" reading public) contrasts very interestingly with his isolation but inviolable sense of Jesuitical vocation through the many years of poverty, manuscript rejection and doubts concerning whether he was wasting his time and brains. He managed to keep going through the funds he received from Harriet Shaw Weaver – one gets the impression in photographs of him and his family dressed in formal wear that the cheque had just arrived a day before the picture was taken. Nowadays the same man would be the darling of campuses in the United States amassing a fortune on the lecture circuit of Departments of English Literature, but who would blame him for taking advantage?

Shaw is an outstanding example of stubborn resolution and fidelity to the artistic calling in the face of years of little or no income and recognition. Again the contrast between his status and riches in the last decades of his very long life, and the absence of success even with massive production (of novels, journalism and unstaged plays) up to his mid-forties, is very clear and his tenacity deserves great praise. The question of whether it also merits emulation can be left to the conscience of each aspiring author, since one respects his choice and discipline above all because it did indeed finally lead to the triumph *he* knew was going to happen. In this sense self-belief is a marvellous attribute basically because there was talent present that produced great works that were ultimately recognised. On the other hand if there is a lack of real talent then the situation attracts more pity than admiration. One thinks of Scott Fitzgerald pasting his rejection slips on his wall to encourage himself to keep trying, but at the time there must have existed the practical question, is this all folly and shouldn't I be an office manager?



Bernard Shaw.
Image: Alvin Langdon Coburn - *Illustrated London News*, 1911.

Another Irishman, slightly younger than Shaw, who again faced the perennial pressure of irregular income and limited early success, is the poet and dramatist W. B. Yeats. I suspect that a central source of his confidence to dedicate himself to what is arguably the least remunerated of the literary arts, namely poetry, was his father, a portraitist who worked at no great speed, earned money at an equally slow pace and spoke to his children (who it should be remembered also included the great painter Jack Yeats) of the necessity of artists and the self-confidence required to adhere to this calling.

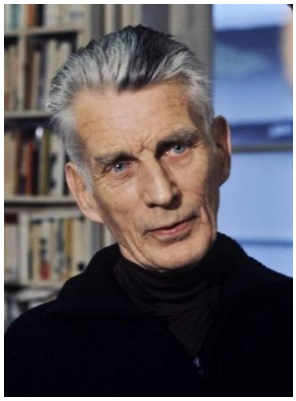
Part of the reason for Yeats' ability to devote himself to such an impecunious line of work has also to do with his personal charm. Throughout his life there was a succession of tender-hearted women who saw the value of the work he was doing and also recognised that he would need support to achieve this. One category of admirers could be called the maternal group, from the Irish aristocrat Augusta Gregory to the heiress Annie Horniman; another group compromised his lovers, though one must admit that by modern rock-star standards he was not particularly voracious in the sexual sense. In monetary terms he was fortunate like Joyce to have been recommended to a woman of means, or (in his special case) to have made a strong enough impression of his theatrical dreams to secure funding to initiate his projects and have them financed through their difficult first years.

The final case I'd like to look at is of a different and sadder kind. Oscar Wilde lived on a small inheritance and some income from occasional work (among other labours as the editor of a magazine for women), and then finally started to make large sums of money in his late thirties with the great commercial success of his high-society comedies. However, as things turned out at the age of forty, his most brilliant success coincided with the trials and incarceration that made him a social untouchable, lost him his two sons and led to his bankruptcy. After prison, he passed his final three years surviving on money given by friends but all the time in a state of precarious though still elegant penury.

Wilde, his wife and one of his sons (another casualty of the Great War a few years later).
Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Several authors from this group were offered very respectable and secure posts, what a person without the literary compulsion we have been discussing would describe as well worth accepting and idiotic to reject. I can think of one very good example of that involving the dramatist and novelist Samuel Beckett. A first-rate student of modern languages at the University of Dublin, he was offered a lectureship there in what was then and even now still is the best university in Ireland, embracing all the elements of prestige and professional security that would win over men and women of a different species. Admittedly Beckett did accept but went on to spend less than a year there, uncomfortable with the confines of Ireland and his countrymen's narrow vision, and restless to travel abroad (as all the great writers of Ireland

did with the exception of Yeats and some recent writers) to devote himself to his apprenticeship as a literary-man and the works that would follow. It is a contract with one aspect of the true nature of the artist, not very comprehensible or practical to the ordinary man, and without the road-signs that accompany the route travelled by others and that also measure their success in life: markers like promotion, increase in salary and conventional respect among one's peers.



Samuel Beckett. Image: Roger Pic - Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

There are of course some writers who have made astonishing amounts of money, but J. K. Rowling and Stephen King are among the very few who have made fortunes in the literary field (and in their case other media but particularly the cinema are responsible for a large part of their gigantic wealth). The contemporary Irish novelist, John Banville, a master of character, story and especially prose, remarked not so long ago that winning the Booker Prize with his work *The Sea* gave him an amount of cash he had never had in all of years of so-called success. In effect this had been a critical and not a financial success, and the difference between the two states meant that he had had to dedicate most of his time to journalism in order to pay the bills. Now in his late fifties he could invest close to all of his time in writing novels, in the same way and at the same age Yeats could set aside financial worries after winning the Nobel Prize in 1923. For a few – very few – there can be a sort of happy ending in literature.

Séamus Heaney, the fourth and most recent Irish Nobel Laureate for Literature.
Image: Franck Ferville, Agence VU, Redux.

Welles the Financial Wizard

In the late 1950s, 18 years after he made *Citizen Kane*, the director Orson Welles was replying to questions in an interview about his career, with the inevitable accusations that he had wasted his talent and that he had little to show since his brilliant cinematic debut when he was 25 years old. As usual he was pulling his right ear lobe and nervously massaging his rather pasty face, his ways of showing restlessness and self-consciousness. What he didn't like, he explained, was that he had not had the opportunity to do 18 more movies of a quality even higher than Kane. He was being sincere: he was convinced that he had the ability within him, and could muster the required technicians and actors, to do this.

Welles by this time was in his mid-forties, plump but by comparison with his obesity of a decade later, not particularly rotund. He had not been able to operate as a "normal" director as people had witnessed his immense visual and editing talent. His name had the especial status almost of a brand – "Welles means great films" – in the same way that Einstein equated to "genius scientist". However, this positive view coexisted (without mutual contradiction) with a thinking that the same over-rich ability slowed his film-making down, causing costs to go up and resulting in a picture that was too sophisticated for the average film-goer. Kane had hit the brick-wall of the Hearst media empire – this is a well-known fact – but as a movie entertainment it was also not easy to take in by the normal office-worker or brick-layer who found "Casablanca" much more satisfying and accessible.

Orson Welles the radio actor, in the 1930s.
Image: *New York Sunday News*, colour portrait photograph by Harry Warneke and Elkins – Source final version from the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery.

Thus he had a reputation in the industry that was a mix of high and individual creativity and self-sabotage. He found within four or five years after making Kane that his deeply autonomous personality and manner of making films could not operate at its fullest capacity within the studio system, dominated as this then was by a small group of remarkable men (many originally from Europe) who did give the green light to many artistic projects but who still had profit as their priority. The Welles brand became synonymous with iconoclastic originality but also, fatally, with very limited ticket sales.

In this way, Welles had the personal triumph of finding a type of liberty but it was, in many ways, simply an exchange of one creative prison for another. Released from the restrictions of Hollywood, he now entered a period of spending a lot of his energy, and sometimes literally most of his time, in negotiations with investors trying to get the finances to create his movies. There were interesting anecdotes: on one occasion Welles let Churchill know that he would meet a possible partner in the hotel they shared and when subsequently Churchill duly saw them in discussion, he bowed deeply to show the great respect he had for Welles, upon which the financier enthusiastically agreed on an investment. There were other extremes: Welles would accuse a Spanish producer of disappearing with a fortune that had been

destined to finish another project of his, one that would consequently never be completed.

The director knew that this was a diabolical distraction from his real work: a week before he passed away in 1985, Welles admitted in a television interview that he greatly regretted wasting his life in this activity – the emphasis on the verb was expressed in a powerfully tragic way. The two minor movies *Macbeth* and *Mister Arkadin* were made for very little money and, as a consequence, they looked poor in production value and quality of film stock, and audio clarity, but at the same time wealthy in visual technique and acting quality. The backers were probably small in number and low in funds at the time. During the same period in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he spent four years earning money as an actor and meeting investors, all this in order to make his marvellous *Othello*. Four years of fund-raising, not four years of movie-making, but many in the industry thought that the latter was the case.

As actor and director in his own films.

When he did that interview in the late ‘50s, he had just finished *Touch of Evil* finally this time with cash from an American studio. It is a truly superb demonstration of Welles’ talent: in terms of camera use, sound effects of voice, street noise and music, and scene placement and speed, as well as management of actors, it is a return to his old brilliance. But the brilliance was always there, what was missing was the necessary budget, to pay costs, move things along promptly, and perhaps above all allow the director to

concentrate his full powers on the actual film. But as usual bad luck intervened and the movie was hardly shown in the US, although in France and elsewhere it was immediately lauded as a masterpiece. The French new-wave directors were rubbing their eyes and wondering if their American colleagues could be so philistine as to not recognise its doubtless quality.

After he finished *The Trial* – a lot of which was made in the Gare du Nord in Paris, close to his biggest fans – he made a movie in the mid-1960s based on an adaptation for the stage he had done of several of those plays by Shakespeare that featured John Falstaff or were associated with him. One must recall that Welles as an adolescent edited Shakespeare in a highly successful publication. He was an author Welles knew well and deeply loved. *Chimes at Midnight* has some elements that are annoying, beginning with audio that is not perfectly in synchronisation with the lips of the actors. But it is a roundly charismatic work of art and perhaps the greatest achievement by Welles in cinema. It has never been widely distributed: the logic here is, if you haven't seen it, you can't know how good it is. Welles himself and critics like Pauline Kael thought it was his best movie.

The atmosphere is perfectly created by lighting and stage design, costume, busily spoken dialogue, and camera angle, focus and movement, As usual the casting is excellent and the fluid narrative takes us on a journey from stable and inn to intimate battle scenes and grand royal occasions. The desperately frail human story is at the centre of everything, and this gives the entire movie its greatest power: there is a gaiety at the start, followed by terrible and crushing experiences, the death of old friends, and the final rejection of Falstaff by his young companion, genuinely like a son to him and a student, who by becoming king must wilfully terminate the most human of all experiences, friendship with his old mentor. The huge wooden box within which Falstaff's body is placed at the close of the film proves how grave this decision was.

What is finally perhaps the most inspiring aspect of Welles the film-maker is arguably not the actual movies he managed to make but rather the sheer tenacity to find sufficient resources to get them made and, when eventually the opportunity was presented, to create something superlatively good. But what also happened – and it was inevitable in these circumstances – was that fewer movies were started, several were never finished, and just about all those which were completed were not as good as they could have been because funds were sporadic and limited anyway, and the orchestrator of the entire enterprise – the director Welles himself – was often not fully engaged in the day-to-day movie-making process. He proved one can do miracles with little money and much improvisation, yet his works perhaps also show that they could have been even better and more in number. But there is a final doubt: maybe this poverty and constant wrangling were precisely what was needed to impose on him that creative discipline to produce his best work.

Orson Welles in Mexico City in 1942.
Image: https://www.reddit.com/r/OldSchoolCool/comments/girdi8/orson_welles_in_mexico_city_1942/.

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