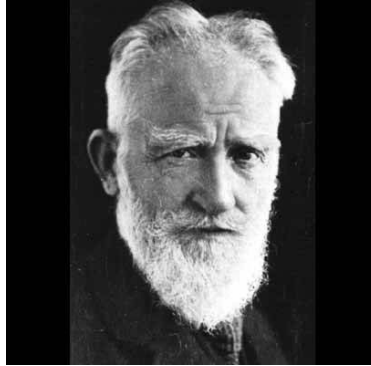


# MAJOR BARBARA

by George Bernard Shaw



## THE AUTHOR

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was born into a lower-middle class Protestant family in Dublin, Ireland. His father was an alcoholic failed merchant, while his mother was a professional singer. When Shaw was sixteen, his mother ran off with her voice teacher, leaving him at home to complete school, which he despised. In 1876, he joined his mother in London and took up a career in journalism and writing, beginning with a string of five unsuccessful novels. Meanwhile, he became interested in political causes, especially socialism. This led him to become one of the founders of the Fabian Society, which had as its stated goal to transform Britain into a socialist society by means of education and legislation, while scorning the revolutionary violence of some of the Continental socialists.

His first success as a writer came through his works of art, music, and dramatic criticism. It was not until 1891 that he wrote his first play, but once he started, he rarely stopped until his death at the age of 94, eventually producing a total of sixty plays. During his first twelve years as a playwright, he wrote a number of plays that are now highly esteemed (*Arms and the Man*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Candida*), but found that London theaters were unwilling to stage them. But in 1904, the Court Theater in Chelsea came under new management, and Shaw's plays found a home among people interested in experimental drama. Here, he was able to direct his own works, and quickly became wealthy as a result of their success, culminating with the production of *Pygmalion* in a major London theater in 1914.

The arrival of World War I almost proved Shaw's undoing, as he spoke out strongly against the war, which he saw as the last gasp of imperialism, squandering the lives of the young under the guise of patriotic impulses. He became a social pariah, and was able to produce only one play, *Heartbreak House*, during the war years. When the war ended, he resumed his play writing efforts with a five-play series on evolution called *Back to Methuselah* and the production of *Saint Joan* (1923), which led to the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925. By this time, his plays were being produced all over the English-speaking world (in the United States, production of Shaw's plays was spearheaded by the Hedgerow Theater in Rose Valley, PA, which gained an international reputation for its productions of Shavian dramas). Shaw continued to write plays for the remainder of his life. He died a few days after falling off a ladder while trimming a tree in his yard, at the age of 94.

Shaw's personal life was somewhat of an enigma. He married Charlotte Payne-Townsend in 1898 and remained married to her until her death 45 years later, though according to sources close to the couple, their marriage was never consummated. Meanwhile, he carried on affairs and flirtations with many women, including two famous actresses (Mrs. Patrick Campbell, for whom the part of Eliza in *Pygmalion* was originally written, and Ellen Terry). He was a socialist but not a communist, though he was taken in by the public persona of Josef Stalin; a feminist, a vegetarian, and a believer in the Life Force (a sort of pantheism, though early in life he had been an avowed atheist).

*Major Barbara* was first performed in 1905. Thought by many to be a satire on the Salvation Army, it was really a vehicle for expressing Shaw's political philosophy - that poverty is the only true crime, and that the only way to save society is to guarantee every individual all the money he needs to live comfortably. The munitions factory in the story is no more than a means to provide the money needed to support the workers (and a plot device to pry Barbara free from an other-worldly morality that Shaw despised). Shaw, in fact, respected the Salvation Army because it did much more practical good than most churches, in his opinion.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Lady Britomart Undershaft - A society matron, separated from her husband because he insists on leaving his munitions factory to a foundling rather than to his son.
- Stephen - Her son, a momma's boy who finally finds his independence near the end of the play.
- Sarah - Her daughter, a weak upper-class caricature.
- Charles Lomax - Engaged to Sarah, he is patently silly and never says anything throughout the play that is not totally idiotic.
- Barbara - The other Undershaft daughter, she has renounced her wealth to join the Salvation Army. She becomes disillusioned and resigns when the Army accepts money from her father, but ultimately comes to realize that the true means of saving souls is by eliminating poverty and giving people the power to control their own lives.
- Adolphus Cusins - An impoverished tutor of Greek, he joins the Salvation Army out of love for Barbara. Ultimately, he inherits the family business, and Barbara marries him so they can be partners in saving the world by empowering everyone in it.
- Andrew Undershaft - The father of the Undershaft children, his bizarre philosophy of life - that poverty is the only true crime, and that eliminating it is the only true virtue - makes him the playwright's mouthpiece.
- Rummy Mitchens, Snobby Price, Peter Shirley - Mendicants at the Salvation Army shelter, each one has faked conversion in order to gain their paltry meals.

- Bill Walker - A brutal man who resists the blandishments of the Army despite Barbara's persuasive approach.
- Jenny Hill - A teenage girl who works for the Salvation Army, she is an enthusiastic supporter of the work of the shelter.
- Mrs. Baines - Salvation Army commissioner, she scandalizes Barbara when she accepts Undershaft's money to save the shelter from closing.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“It is only in the middle classes, Stephen, that people get into a state of dumb helpless horror when they find that there are wicked people in the world. In our class, we have to decide what is to be done with wicked people; and nothing should disturb our self-possession.” (Lady Britomart, Act I)

“I really cannot bear an immoral man. I am not a Pharisee, I hope; and I should not have minded his merely doing wrong things: we are none of us perfect. But your father didn't exactly do wrong things: he said them and thought them: that was what was so dreadful. He really had a sort of religion of wrongness. Just as one doesn't mind men practising immorality as long as they own that they are in the wrong by preaching morality; so I couldn't forgive Andrew for preaching immorality while he practised morality. You would all have grown up without principles, without any knowledge of right and wrong, if he had been in the house.” (Lady Britomart, Act I)

“I don't know how Barbara will take it. Ever since they made her a major in the Salvation Army she has developed a propensity to have her own way and order people about which quite crows me sometimes. It's not ladylike: I'm sure I don't know where she picked it up.” (Lady Britomart, Act I)

“I am not one of those men who keep their morals and their business in watertight compartments. All the spare money my trade rivals spend on hospitals, cathedrals, and other receptacles for conscience money, I devote to experiments and researches in improved methods of destroying life and property. I have always done so; and I always shall. Therefore your Christmas card moralities of peace on earth and goodwill among men are of no use to me. Your Christianity, which enjoins you to resist not evil, and to turn the other cheek, would make me a bankrupt. My morality - my religion - must have a place for cannons and torpedoes in it.” (Andrew Undershaft, Act I)

“There is only one true morality for every man; but every man has not the same true morality.” (Andrew Undershaft, Act I)

“There are neither good men nor scoundrels: there are just children of one Father; and the sooner they stop calling one another names the better.” (Barbara, Act I)

“Really, Barbara, you go on as if religion were a pleasant subject. Do have some sense of propriety.” (Lady Britomart, Act I)

“My religion? Well, my dear, I am a Millionaire. That is my religion.” (Andrew Undershaft, Act II)

“Have you ever been in love with Poverty, like St. Francis? Have you ever been in love with Dirt, like St. Simeon! Have you ever been in love with disease and suffering, like our nurses and philanthropists? Such passions are not virtues, but the most unnatural of all vices. This love of the common people may please an earl’s granddaughter and a university professor; but I have been a common man and a poor man; and it has no romance for me. Leave it to the poor to pretend that poverty is a blessing: leave it to the coward to make a religion of his cowardice by preaching humility: we know better than that.” (Andrew Undershaft, Act II)

“That’s Andrew all over. He never does a proper thing without giving an improper reason for it.” (Lady Britomart, Act III)

“He knows nothing and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career.” (Andrew Undershaft, Act III)

“Come, come, my daughter! Don’t make too much of your little tinpot tragedy. What do we do here when we spend years of work and thought and thousands of pounds of solid cash on a new gun or aerial battleship that turns out to be just a hairsbreadth wrong after all? Scrap it. Scrap it without wasting another hour or another pound on it. Well, you have made for yourself something that you call a morality or a religion or what not. It doesn’t fit the facts. Well, scrap it. Scrap it and get one that does fit. That is what is wrong with the world at present. It scraps its obsolete steam engines and dynamos; but it won’t scrap its old prejudices and its old moralities and its old religions and its old political conventions. What’s the result? In machinery it does very well; but in morals and religion and politics it is working at a loss that brings it nearer bankruptcy every year. Don’t persist in that folly. If your old religion broke down yesterday, get a newer and better one for tomorrow.” (Andrew Undershaft, Act III)

“Yes, the deadly seven. Food, clothing, firing, rent, taxes, respectability and children. Nothing can lift these seven millstones from Man’s neck but money; and the spirit cannot soar until the millstones are lifted.” (Andrew Undershaft, Act III)

“Every true Englishman detests the English. We are the wickedest nation on earth; and our success is a moral horror.” (Adolphus Cusins, Act III)

“This power which only tears men’s bodies to pieces has never been so horribly abused as the intellectual power, the imaginative power, the poetic, religious power that can enslave men’s souls.” (Adolphus Cusins, Act III)

“My father shall never throw it in my teeth again that my converts were bribed with bread. I have got rid of the bribe of bread. I have got rid of the bribe of heaven. Let God’s work be done for its own sake: the work he had to create us to do because it cannot be done except by

living men and women. When I die, let him be in my debt, not I in his; and let me forgive him as becomes a woman of my rank.” (Barbara, Act III)

## NOTES

**Act I** - The first act takes place in the home of Lady Britomart Undershaft, a middle-aged society matron of the upper class. As the play begins, Lady Britomart is conversing with her son Stephen, who cowers before her. She insists that he should take over management of the family affairs, though it is plain that she has no intention of relinquishing any control whatsoever. His sister Sarah is engaged to Charles Lomax, who will one day inherit wealth, but his sister Barbara has run off to join the Salvation Army and is engaged to an impoverished professor of Greek, Adolphus Cusins. Lord Undershaft is a wealthy armaments manufacturer, a foundling who inherited the business from his adopted father (apparently it has been the tradition of the Undershafts to pass on the business to foundlings ever since the reign of James I). When Sir Andrew announced his intention to continue the family tradition and leave the business to an adopted heir, he and his wife quarreled and separated, but now she wants to ask him for more money for their daughters as they approach their weddings, but is reluctant to do so. She has stooped to ask him to dinner that evening, however, so he can meet the girls and their fiancés and discuss financial matters.

The girls and their suitors come down for dinner, and Lady Britomart announces that their father is to arrive shortly, and warns them to behave themselves and make a good impression. When Andrew arrives, he not only doesn't recognize his children, but also doesn't remember how many he had, and proceeds to get everyone all mixed up. After a little awkward conversation, Andrew expresses interest in the Salvation Army, whose motto, "Blood and Fire," seems quite similar to his own business. Barbara then invites him to join them for a march the following day. He agrees to visit her shelter if she will accompany him to his munitions factory the following day, and they strike their bargain. They then adjourn to another room so Barbara can lead an impromptu Salvation Army service.

**Act II** - This act takes place in the yard of the West Ham Salvation Army shelter, and begins with a conversation between two down-and-out types who are there for a free meal - a young man and a middle-aged woman. The man, an out-of-work painter named Snobby Price, justifies his layabout ways in much the same way Alfred P. Doolittle does in *Pygmalion*. The woman, Rummy Price, is married, but is pretending to be homeless in order to get a meal. They discuss the phony testimonies they intend to give at the coming meeting. A young Salvation Army worker named Jenny then brings in Peter Shirley, another laid-off worker, and the other two commiserate with him. Bill Walker then arrives, treats Rummy and Jenny roughly, and threatens to do worse unless they bring out his girl, who had taken shelter inside. The others leave, but Shirley rebukes him for being nothing more than a cheap bully, beating women and drunks, and challenges him to fight a local boxer, Todger Fairmile.

Barbara then comes out, briefly interviews Shirley, and assures him that they will be able to find work for him. She then begins to interview Bill Walker, but he resists and threatens at every turn. When he finds that his girl has gone to another shelter, he prepares to leave so he can find her there and break her jaw for her, but Barbara tells him that, now that she has been converted and cleaned up, she has a new man who is courting her - the same Sergeant Todger Fairmile. Bill decides not to go to the other shelter after all.

At this point, Andrew Undershaft arrives, and sits to the side to watch Barbara at work. She then begins to work on Bill, who almost becomes persuaded until Cusins comes out and interrupts with a big bass drum. Bill then decides he is going to the other shelter to confront Todger Fairmile and get his face punched just like he had punched Jenny's. Barbara then goes inside, leaving Cusins to show her father around. Undershaft has seen through Cusins and realizes that he is only pretending to be saved for love of Barbara. Cusins readily admits it, and claims to be a collector of religions. Undershaft then states that the chief tenets of his religion are money and gunpowder, since without these people would have no ability to practice the more conventional virtues of standard religions. The two soon come to a mutual understanding, though both admit that Barbara would not like it were she to find out what they truly are. They then conspire to win Barbara to their value system. Undershaft proposes to do it by buying her - through a large contribution to the Salvation Army.

Barbara then returns from a meeting in which they received four shillings ten pence in donations; Undershaft offers to kick in the other two pennies to make it an even five shillings, but Barbara refuses to take money earned through her father's violent business. She then bemoans the fact that the shelter may have to close for lack of funding, since there are so many people out of work and so few to contribute to the cause. She then asserts that they will get the needed funds by praying for them. Bill Walker then returns, bemoaning the fact that Todger had refused to fight him, even when he spit in his face, but instead threw him to the ground, kneeled on him, and began to pray for his soul. Bill wants no more to do with such goings-on, and offers to pay Jenny a pound for the clout he gave her, but she refuses, and Barbara insists that the Army is not to be bought - even when her father offers to donate a hundred pounds. Bill tosses his pound on the ground, from where Snobby quickly pockets it. Mrs. Baines, the commissioner of the local Army outpost, then arrives to tell everyone that Lord Saxmundham has offered to donate five thousand pounds to meet the needs of the poor if five other men would donate a thousand each. The name is unfamiliar to Barbara, so her father explains that he is the owner of a whiskey distillery. He then offers to donate the remaining five thousand. Mrs. Baines is ecstatic, but Barbara can't fathom that she would accept such contributions, especially since their fiercest battles have been against the scourge of drunkenness. She is alone, however, as all seem thrilled that the work of the Salvation Army can go on. As Undershaft prepares to join them in their march, Barbara removes her Salvation Army pin and gives it to her father - she is prepared to resign from the Army, and is in danger of losing her faith. Bill Walker, having seen the foregoing exchange and hearing that Snobby Price has stolen his pound, proclaims that he was right all along to refuse to be drawn in by the Salvation Army.

**Act III** - The last act begins back in Lady Britomart's library. Barbara, dejected, is in ordinary dress, having turned in her uniform. Charles tries unsuccessfully to cheer her up, then Cusins comes in, thoroughly hung over, having been out drinking with Undershaft. He admits that he joined the Salvation Army solely because of Barbara, and that he intends to resign also. Upon hearing that Undershaft has arrived, Lady Britomart sends the young people upstairs to get ready. She then demands of her ex-husband that he supply the money needed for Sarah and Barbara to live comfortably in their coming marriages. He agrees, but balks when she insists he leave the munitions business to his son Stephen; after all, it goes completely against family tradition. He then admits that he has been unable to find a suitable foundling, since all of them have been spoiled by the social welfare system. Stephen then comes in, and announces that he has no interest

in the munitions factory, but wants to go into politics, scandalizing his mother in the process - this is the first time he has ever resisted her will. Shortly thereafter, the rest of the young people arrive for the trip to the munitions factory.

When they arrive at the foundry town, Cusins notices with disappointment that it is clean and its workers are happy. Undershaft has found Peter Shirley a productive job, about which he complains. Stephen seems concerned that all this luxury and happiness might make the workers weak and cost them their independence, but Undershaft ensures him that only failure to organize society for the welfare of the people could do that. Lady Britomart then arrives and, having seen the town and its beauty, insists that it should be left to someone in the family, but Undershaft still requires that it be left to a foundling. Cusins then reveals his secret - that the marriage of his parents in Australia was not recognized under British law, so that he is, at least technically, a foundling. Undershaft agrees to make him his heir, but Cusins bargains for a higher salary and better terms; recognizing a fellow “shark,” Undershaft agrees. Cusins, refusing to follow Undershaft’s creed of selling munitions to whoever can pay for them, says he will sell them to whomever he pleases. Barbara, meanwhile, bewails the loss of her faith. Undershaft tells her to find a new one, and expounds the tenets of his “religion” of social progress - eliminate poverty, and all will be well. Lady Britomart then tells everyone what she thinks of them - not a compliment in the bunch. Cusins, torn between his desire to control the factory and his fear that Barbara will refuse to marry him if he does, finally chooses the factory - after insisting on keeping reasonably short hours on the job. The others leave, and Barbara and Cusins are left alone. Cusins describes why he had to accept the offer - because it provided the only hope for doing good for the common people; because only by force could one make war on war. Despite his fears to the contrary, Barbara professes her desire to marry him, asserting that God’s work must be done by raising the standards of life for the ordinary man rather than by offering him salvation in another life.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. When George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara* first came to the stage, it was reviled by many as an attack upon the Salvation Army. Most Salvationists, however, responded positively to the play. Discuss these reactions and explain why you think the play drew such diverse responses. Cite specifics from the play in your essay.
2. In George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, we find a much more direct attack against “middle-class morality” than the comic approach represented by Alfred P. Doolittle in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. What does Shaw mean by “middle-class morality”? Why does he despise it so much? With what does he hope to replace it? Support your answer with specifics from the play.
3. George Bernard Shaw was a leading member of the Fabians, a group of middle-class British socialists who sought to change society through legislation. Shaw’s *Major Barbara* reflects many of the playwright’s socialist ideas. Using the script as a model, describe the nature of the socialism advocated by the Fabians.

4. In George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, he argues that poverty is the greatest crime. What does he mean by this? How does his understanding of poverty and its significance affect his political and economic views? How are these views reflected in the play?
5. In George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, Andrew Undershaft tells his daughter, "You have made for yourself something that you call a morality or a religion or what not. It doesn't fit the facts. Well, scrap it. Scrap it and get one that does fit. That is what is wrong with the world at present. It scraps its obsolete steam engines and dynamos; but it won't scrap its old prejudices and its old moralities and its old religions and its old political conventions. What's the result? In machinery it does very well; but in morals and religion and politics it is working at a loss that brings it nearer bankruptcy every year. Don't persist in that folly. If your old religion broke down yesterday, get a newer and better one for tomorrow." What does this quotation tell you about Shaw's understanding of the nature and purposes of religion? How does the play itself support Shaw's views on the matter?
6. Compare and contrast the religious views of the protagonist in George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* before and after her climactic conflict with her father. Was her religion at the beginning of the play truly Christian? Use details from the script to analyze her beliefs both before and after her "conversion."
7. In George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, the Salvation Army accepts large donations from a distillery and a munitions factory in order to keep its ministry afloat. The acceptance of these donations causes the disillusionment and subsequent departure from the Army of the play's protagonist. Evaluate the morality of the Salvation Army's decision. Should the Army have accepted the donations? Should Christian organizations care about the sources of the money they use to carry out their work?
8. George Bernard Shaw cited among his many influences the works of Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche. How are these influences evident in *Major Barbara*? Using specific quotations, show how the works of these three thinkers contribute to the philosophy of the play.
9. In the preface to George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, the playwright describes what he calls "the gospel of St. Andrew Undershaft." What is the essence of this gospel? How is it related to the concepts of power, religion, and social change reflected in the play? Use specifics from the play to support your arguments.
10. Evaluate "the gospel of St. Andrew Undershaft" as it is presented in George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*. From a biblical standpoint, what is wrong with Shaw's approach to saving society? In what ways would it ultimately destroy society, producing horrible evil rather than the great good Shaw envisions?
11. Compare and contrast the roles played by language in the George Bernard Shaw plays *Major Barbara* and *Pygmalion*. Focus particularly on the uses of language to indicate class structure and generate comedy.

12. Discuss the significance of the Salvation Army motto “Blood and Fire” to the conflicts and themes contained in George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*. In what different ways does Shaw make use of this motto, and what does it mean in each case? How does it serve as a means of conveying the pivotal themes of the play?
13. In Act II of George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, we meet three inhabitants of the West Ham Salvation Army Shelter - Rummy Mitchens, Snobby Price, and Peter Shirley. How are these characters alike, and how are they different? How does Shaw use each one to help advance the major themes of the play? Be sure to cite specifics in your arguments.
14. Compare the character of Andrew Undershaft in George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara* with that of Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*. In what ways is Undershaft a seducer? Whom does he seduce? According to Shaw, is the seduction to good or to evil? Support your conclusions with details from the play.
15. Discuss the utopian community of Perivale St. Andrews in George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*. The community clearly portrays Shaw’s ideal society, but is it realistic? Analyze the workings of Undershaft’s factory town from a biblical perspective.
16. George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara* is at its heart a conversion story. To what is the protagonist converted, and from what? What hallmarks of religious conversion may be seen in the change? What role does reason play as an agent of conversion, and to what extent does it stem from Barbara’s experience? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
17. Analyze the major themes of George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara* in the light of its historical context. The play was written in 1905 - the time of the Russo-Japanese War, an arms buildup in Europe in preparation for a war most thought inevitable, and the growth of socialism and social engineering in the face of crushing poverty among significant segments of British society. How do the themes of the play address the conditions that existed at the time Shaw wrote it? How did Shaw believe England should deal with these controversial issues?
18. In George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, Alfred P. Doolittle, though a minor character, serves as the mouthpiece for much of Shaw’s social philosophy. Which minor character in Shaw’s *Major Barbara* is most nearly his counterpart - the representative of the “undeserving poor”? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.