



Bernard Shaw: The Ascent of the Superman

By Sally Peters

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When he died in 1950, Bernard Shaw was a Nobel laureate hailed as the second greatest playwright in the English language. At the same time, his strangely flamboyant personality, filled with eccentricities and contradictions, aroused curiosity. Despite many investigations into Shaw's life and art, parts of him have remained secret. In this critical biography, Sally Peters explores Shaw's background and beliefs, interests and obsessions, relations with men and women, prose writings and dramatic art. In trying to decipher the man she uncovers a convoluted and extravagant inner life studded with erotic secrets. Peters examines the passions of Shaw's life - everything from vegetarianism and boxing to socialism and feminism - and pieces them together, offering an interpretation of his life and works. Striving unceasingly to ascend, possessed of monumental energy, Shaw was in many ways a dazzling example of his idealized superman. But, says Peters, this superman was also a man haunted by phantoms, a man of gender ambivalences and romantic yearnings, and a man who championed will even while believing that his erotic inclinations were the secret mark of the "born artist". Throughout, he was braced by a resilient comic vision as he transformed his life into enduring art.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Social critic, major playwright, self-proclaimed genius, sexual adventurer, fanatical vegetarian, George Bernard Shaw was a kind of literary Superman in late Victorian England, a precursor of Pound and Eliot who helped blaze the trail for modernism. He was also a repressed homosexual. So argues Sally Peters, a lecturer at Wesleyan University, in this adventurous study of buried feminine and homoerotic themes in Shaw's life and work. Whether one agrees or disagrees with her thesis, Peters has produced a fascinating exploration of the man who lived life in pursuit of "the satisfaction of a passion in us of which we can give no rational account whatever."

From Publishers Weekly

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was haunted by the idea that he was a reincarnation of William Shakespeare. According to Peters's startlingly incisive biographical study, full of fresh insights, Shaw saw himself as in many ways the idealized "superman" of his plays?the heroic artist as moral, powerful and courageous outsider. Yet Shaw, who hated hypocrisy, was, in Peters's estimate, an arch-hypocrite, touted as a feminist while he played women off each other in triangular relationships and used the threat of physical violence to assert control over his mistress, Irish widow Jane Patterson, whom he "pretended to throw out of (a) window" (in the words of Shaw's diary). Peters, a visiting lecturer at Wesleyan, says Shaw's unconsummated marriage to Charlotte Payne-Townshend was "a protective but sterile womb" and traces his misogyny to overidentification with his cold, selfish mother, who dumped Shaw's drunkard father. She illuminates the vegetarian, teetotaling playwright's obsessions, including his devotion to boxing and mountain climbing and his preference for unbleached, knitted wool clothing. Preaching eugenics, seeking spiritual salvation, Shaw projected his romanticized self-image onto the stage in telling parables for humanity. Photos.

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From Library Journal

The appearance of yet another book on Shaw testifies to his fascination for both academics and the public. Shaw's life and work have been carefully documented, studied, and analyzed in the last decade, but Peters (a visiting lecturer at Wesleyan) brings another questioning eye to the exploration of the ambiguities and passions that formed this great playwright and thinker. Shaw's sexuality, always a good topic of speculation, is studied here, but one wishes for more insights and in-depth analysis. Peters does devote a chapter to Shaw's close relationship with the actor and playwright Harley Granville Barker, mainly from Shaw's point of view. One may not agree with Peters's conclusions, but they will prove to be of interest to anyone studying Shaw. Recommended for theater collections and academic libraries. (Index and photographs not seen.)?Susan L. Peters, Emory Univ. Lib., Atlanta

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