

InsideOUT

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HEARTBREAK HOUSE

HEARTBREAK HOUSE
By **GEORGE BERNARD SHAW**
Directed by **BRUCE K. SEVY**

Photo by eric baeris

Denver Center
Theatre 
KENT THOMPSON
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR **Company**

2011/12
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Douglas Langworthy Editor
Sally Gass Contributing Writer
David Saphier Education Contributor
Tina Risch Community Services Manager

Administration 303.893.4000
Box Office 303.893.4100
denvercenter.org

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Synopsis

Heartbreak House is not merely the name of the play which follows this preface. It is cultured, leisured Europe before the war.

—George Bernard Shaw,
Preface to *Heartbreak House*

Ellie Dunn, a poor but proper young lady, arrives for a weekend house party at the country house of Hesione Hushabye. Upon arrival she discovers that no traditions or conventions exist there and the house is in disarray. Hesione's father, Captain Shotover, is an inventor who wants to create, but can sell only destructive inventions. He doesn't seem to recognize his eldest daughter, Ariadne, who is returning home after 20 years abroad. Hesione herself has an unconventional marriage; her husband Hector poses as a dashing hero and flirts with young girls. One of Shaw's last plays, *Heartbreak House* introduces us to charming, capable, intelligent people who are unaware of the looming peril ahead. ■

THE BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Shaw (1856-1950) was born in Dublin, the son of a civil servant. His education was irregular due to his dislike of any organized training. After working in an estate agent's office for a while, he moved to London in 1876 as a young man where he established himself as a leading music and theatre critic in the 1880s and 90s and became a prominent member of the socialist Fabian Society, for which he composed many pamphlets.

He began his literary career as a novelist; as a fervent advocate of the new theatre of Ibsen (*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 1891) he decided to write plays in order to illustrate his criticism of the British stage. His earliest dramas were called appropriately *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898). Among these, *Widowers' Houses* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* savagely attacked social hypocrisy, while in plays such as *Arms and the Man* and *The Man of Destiny* his criticism is less fierce. Shaw's radical rationalism, his utter disregard of conventions, his keen dialectic interest and verbal wit often turn the stage into a forum of ideas, and nowhere more openly than in the famous discourse on the Life Force in *Don Juan in Hell*, which is the third act of *Man and Superman*.

Important plays by Shaw are *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901), a historical play filled with allusions to modern times; *Saint Joan* (1923), in which he rewrites the well-known story of the French maiden-soldier and extends it from the Middle Ages to the present, and *Androcles and the Lion*, where he exercised a kind of retrospective history along with modern movements that drew deductions for the Christian era. In *Major Barbara* (1905), one of Shaw's most successful discussion plays, the audience's attention is held by the power of the witty arguments that concern man's aesthetic salvation only through political activity, not as an individual. *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1908), is a comedy about the medical profession. *Candida* (1898) explores social attitudes toward sexual relations as objects of satire, while *Pygmalion* (1912) is a witty study of phonetics as well as a treatment of middle class morality and class distinctions. The combination of the dramatic, the comic and the social corrective give Shaw's plays a special flavor. "His plays show a passion for the destruction of idols, a contempt for conventionally accepted wisdom, a love of strong women and an inability to stop arguing with God."¹ He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925.

Shaw's personal life resulted in emotional depths in his writing. His marriage to Charlotte Payne Townsend was on shaky ground because of his affair with the great English actress, Mrs. Patrick Campbell (Stella Campbell), the model for Hesione. When she rejected him, Shaw was close to heartbreak, humiliated like Randall and Mangan in the play. With all the amusement in the play, there is also despair in *Heartbreak House* (1916) that lies "in the fear that those of noble and cultured sensibilities have lost their dynamism, and that the vacuum has been filled by ignoble, self-centered, materialistic seekers of power or by guardians of a mindless status quo."² ■

1. Valency, p. 280.

2. Berst, p. 233

<http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel-prizes/literature/laureates/1925/shaw-bio.html>

Valency, Maurice. *The Cart and the Trumpet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Berst, Charles A. *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973.

EUROPE BEFORE WORLD WAR I

MAZZINI: *You are rather a favorable specimen of what is best in our English culture. You are very charming people, most advanced, unprejudiced, frank, humane, unconventional, democratic free-thinking and everything that is delightful to thoughtful people.*

—Heartbreak House

The latter half of the 19th century was a period of immense upheaval and conflict in every major area of social and intellectual life. Shaw refers to this time in the Preface to Heartbreak House as “The Wicked Half Century.” This was a time marked by the expansion of European imperialism, growing Socialist movements in Russia, and the still entrenched class system in England. A social malaise infected the middle and upper classes of Great Britain, which the characters in the play have caught, albeit their charm and freethinking ways keep their lives entertaining.

In 1914 all of Europe was ripe for war. All the European nations were to varying degrees militaristic, but Germany and Austria-Hungary were especially so. Germany had an army of 2,200,000 soldiers while Austria-Hungary had 810,000 enlisted men. Meanwhile, the French had built up their force to 1,125,000 men while Great Britain kept 711,000 men in arms.

All European countries sought protection by forming alliances. Kaiser Wilhelm concentrated on the Dual Alliance of 1879 between Germany and Austria-Hungary. In 1894 France made an alliance with Russia; in 1907 Britain made an entente (or understanding) with Russia, thus forming the Triple Entente of France, Russia and Great Britain. This action alarmed Germany which felt itself surrounded by this alliance. Many politicians of 1914 did not see the build-up of forces and the system of alliances as threats to peace; rather they thought that these actions acted as a deterrent to any nation thinking of attacking.

Every country in the early 20th century was nationalistic and wanted to rule itself. The countries ruled by Turkey (Romania and Bulgaria) and Austria-Hungary (Serbo-Croatia) wanted the opportunity to govern themselves. This led to rebellions and terrorism that destabilized the Balkans.

Imperialism was rampant in Europe at the time. Countries such as Great Britain, France and Italy thought it was acceptable to colonize vast areas of Africa in the 19th century. In 1900, the British Empire covered a fifth of the land area of the earth. This led to clashes between imperialist countries and to tension when Kaiser Wilhelm decided he wanted some colonies of his own. ■

Gibbs, A.M. Heartbreak House: Preludes of Apocalypse. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.
http://www.johndclare.net/causes_WWI.htm

BOHEMIANISM AND THE BLOOMSBURY GROUP

ARIADNE: *You may think because I'm a Shotover that I'm a Bohemian,
because we are all so horribly Bohemian.*

—Heartbreak House

Bohemianism is defined as an unconventional lifestyle, lived in the company of like-minded people. They usually have few permanent ties and are involved in musical, artistic or literary pursuits. Usually typed as outsiders, they are “opposed to and in rebellion against mainstream culture.”¹ As such, they challenge the limits of individual and social existence.

The most famous Bohemian association was the Bloomsbury Group, a small informal grouping of artists and intellectuals who lived and worked in the Bloomsbury area of central London. They met in cafes or dining-rooms where no rules of order governed their conversations about any topic, but chiefly leftist politics. Their intellectual arguments often led to significant writings on weighty subjects.

Most of the Bloomsbury Group did not achieve fame until later in life. Many of the men were students at King’s College, Trinity College or Cambridge. Several members advocated for and practiced polygamy with a roster of romantic partners. In Edwardian England such liberation was frowned upon, so this made it very easy for their generation to dismiss them as deviants.

The de facto leader was Virginia Woolf, who was born into a wealthy and distinguished family. She is known for her feminist literature, especially her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, an excellent writer with a razor-sharp intellect. Another founding member was Giles Lytton Strachey, an author whose first achievement was *Landmarks of French Literature*. He was frequently ill and subject to depressive episodes; nevertheless, he wrote *Eminent Victorians*, a biography of four prominent 19th century figures.

One of the most accomplished members of the group was E. M. Forster, a celebrated novelist. His novels are critical observations about the state of British Edwardian society that display the uncertainty and worry that was plaguing all of Britain. His last novel, *A Passage to India*, highlights the vast cultural rift that lay between England and its most prized colony, India.

As the group became more famous, their private lives became less private, with much gossip about their extramarital affairs. They were also criticized for being elitist, atheist and unpatriotic, all of these insults without much basis. The Bloomsbury Group was many things to many people. Many of them became leaders of anti-war movements and outspoken on issues of the day, especially the stifling of human nature by a too-rigid class society. Many critics see them as a bridge between the Victorian Age and the Moderns.

1. DeLuca, p. 31.

DeLuca, Christopher. “The Bohemian Curriculum: Expanding Consciousness, Evolving Culture.” *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, Volume 9 number 2, 2011.

<http://www.online-literature.com/periods/bloomsbury.php>

THEMES AND METAPHORS IN *HEARTBREAK HOUSE*

HECTOR HUSHABYE: *There is no sense in us.
We are useless, dangerous and ought to be abolished.*
—Heartbreak House

In 1914, on the brink of war, Shaw published in his anti-war views in a pamphlet entitled “Common Sense about the War.” This manifesto, which enraged the public, treated such subjects as recruiting, treatment of soldiers, secret diplomacy, militarism, Russia, etc. In 1916 he wrote *Heartbreak House*, setting the story in a house that resembles a ship, which can be viewed as a metaphor for the ship of state about to crash on the rocks.

Sleep is an important theme of the play. The play opens with Ellie dozing over her copy of *Othello* while upstairs her hostess, Hesione Hushabye, has fallen asleep in an armchair while arranging flowers. When Lady Utterword arrives and no one greets her, she shouts, “Is everybody asleep?” The greatest scene of sleep is Ellie’s hypnotization of Mangan who remains under the spell for a long time. Captain Shotover indulges in a great deal of rum, which causes him to sleep and to dream. All this somnolence is Shaw’s way of displaying England’s inattention to the rumblings of World War I.

Another prominent theme is money and morals. Shaw believed that “society must organize itself in such a way that makes it possible for all men and all women to provide for themselves decently enough through their work that they should not have to sell their affections.”¹ In the early 1900s opportunities for women to find meaningful jobs were extremely limited as Shaw expresses in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Thus, when Ellie decides to marry Boss Mangan, Hesione counters her argument by saying: “You know, of course, that it’s not honorable or grateful to marry a man you don’t love,” to which Ellie responds: “Marriage is a woman’s business.”

Love and marriage are presented in several different ways in the play. Lady Ariadne Utterword used her marriage to the unseen Hastings to escape from Captain Shotover’s Bohemian manners. Hector and Hesione may have had a great romance, but now the spark has fizzled; Hector philanders while Hesione flirts. Ellie has opted to marry a man she doesn’t love in order to ensure a comfortable life.

Shaw had strong feelings about the distinctions based on class and social rank that greatly influenced the outcome of a person’s life. Lady Utterword divides the upper class into two groups: “There are only two classes in good society in England: the equestrian class and the neurotic class. It isn’t mere convention: everybody can see that the people who hunt are the right people and the people who don’t are the wrong ones.” Shaw felt the upper classes had all the big ideas about changing the world, but did nothing.

1. Shaw Festival Study Guide, p. 11.

www.shawfest.com/education/study-guide

www.repstl.org (Repertory Theatre of St. Louis)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NAMES IN *HEARTBREAK HOUSE*

The characters' names are very descriptive and underlie the themes Shaw is addressing, including the sense of the end of an era. For example, Ellie's last name is Dunn meaning "done;" in Ariadne Utterword, "utter" is the ancient form meaning death; Captain Shotover's "shot" is tired, and "over" and "bye" suggest endings.¹ The "Hushabye" name implies sleep, which is one of the themes of the play. Giuseppe Mazzini was an Italian politician and journalist who lobbied for the unification of Italy; Mazzini Dunn seems to unify the upper class Utterwords and Hushabyes with the middle class Dunns.

In addition, three characters have names from Greek mythology. Ariadne was the daughter of Minos and the wife of Dionysus who helped Theseus find his way out of the labyrinth by means of a thread. Hesione was the sister of Priam, the Trojan leader; she was rescued by Hercules (for a pair of horses) while being sacrificed to the god of the sea. Hector was the son of Priam and Hecuba and the mightiest warrior in the Trojan military. Since Hector and Hesione are associated with Troy, could Shaw be suggesting they are doomed to defeat and have no place in the future?

1. www.repstl.org

HEARTBREAK HOUSE AND THE CHERRY ORCHARD

Heartbreak House is subtitled *A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes*. In his preface, Shaw refers to the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov and his play *The Cherry Orchard*. "Chekhov was a humane and compassionate fatalist who makes no judgments about his characters."¹ Like *Heartbreak House*, *The Cherry Orchard* is full of powerful and incisive critiques of contemporary society. The landowner class is portrayed as idle, selfish and feckless while the intellectuals of Russia are ineffectual and remain aloof from the issues of the peasants.

Shaw saw Chekhov's portrayal of social decay and irresponsibility as precursors to the characters in his play, the cultivated intelligentsia that plays dangerous and foolish games of love as civilization drifts toward self-destruction.

1. Gibbs, p. 59.

Gibbs, A.M. *Heartbreak House: Preludes of Apocalypse*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A BROKEN HEART?

Yes, writes the Mayo Clinic and it is a temporary heart condition brought on by stressful situations such as the death of a loved one. The condition was originally called takotsubo cardiomyopathy. The patient may have sudden chest pain as in a heart attack; the stress hormones cause the heart to enlarge temporarily and not to pump normally, while the remainder of the heart functions normally or with even more forceful contractions. The symptoms can include chest pain, shortness of breath, an irregular heartbeat and a generalized weakness—and are treatable, usually receding in about a week.

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/broken-heart-syndrome/DS01135>

PRODUCTION HISTORY OF *HEARTBREAK HOUSE*

Heartbreak House was first produced by the New York Theatre Guild at the Garrick Theatre in New York on November 10, 1920. Directed by Dudley Gigg (who also played Boss Mangan) with Albert Perry as Captain Shotover, it ran for 125 performances. A 1938 production directed by Orson Welles at the Mercury Theatre, with Welles as Shotover and Vincent Price as Hector Hushabye, managed 48 performances. Harold Clurman's production at the Billy Rose Theatre in 1959 starred Maurice Evans as Shotover and Diana Wynyard as Hesione Hushabye. The 1983 production at Circle in the Square Theatre in New York had great star power, with Philip Bosco as Boss Mangan, Rosemary Harris as Hesione and Rex Harrison as Shotover. But it closed after 65 performances.

The British premiere of the play was at the Royal Court Theatre in London, opening on October 18, 1921, directed by J.B. Fagan along with Shaw's help. Brendan Wells was Captain Shotover while Edith Evans played Lady Utterword. In 1932 at the Queen's Theatre Captain Shotover was played by Cedric Hardwicke and Edith Evans was again Lady Utterword. In 1943 the Cambridge Theatre featured Robert Donat as Shotover and a young Deborah Kerr as Ellie Dunn.

Rex Harrison again played the role of Shotover in a 1983 production at the Haymarket Theatre, directed by John Dexter, with Diana Rigg as Hesione and Paxton Whitehead as Hector. The Haymarket was also home to a 1992 revival, directed by Trevor Nunn, with a cast that included Paul Schofield as Shotover, Imogen Stubbs as Ellie, Felicity Kendal as Lady Utterword, Vanessa Redgrave as Hesione and Daniel Massey as Hector.

www.shawfest.com/education/study_guide

Gibbs, A. M. *Heartbreak House: Preludes of Apocalypse*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

“DOWNTON ABBEY” VERSUS *HEARTBREAK HOUSE*

MATTHEW: *War has a way of differentiating between the things that matter
and the things that don't.*
—“Downton Abbey”

The characters and setting of *Heartbreak House* and the PBS series “Downton Abbey” have much in common as well as significant differences. Captain Shotover’s house is in the shape of a ship but not nearly as elegant as Highclere Castle where much of the series is filmed. In addition, the staff at Highclere far outnumber the Shotover staff led by Mrs. Guinness.

The entrenched class system clearly is seen in both productions. At Downton, the family is very friendly with the servants, but only in private places; when the group is at dinner or with friends the staff is there only to serve them. When Lady Mary first meets Matthew Crawley, the only male heir to inherit the estate, she remarks, “He is not one of us.” Lord Grantham is from landed gentry; he is the master of this large country estate “which is the basis of English aristocracy.”¹ The estate was a sacred inheritance handed down from father to son; but the Lord has only daughters. Captain Shotover also has only daughters and a large house, but does not seem concerned with who will inherit it.

The greatest difference between both families is their reaction to World War I. While the Shotover family seems oblivious to the nascent war, the Crawleys are deeply involved. Sybil becomes a nurse and is active in the suffrage movement while Edith learns to drive and aids a farmer by driving his tractor. Matthew joins up and fights in the trenches with the former servants, Thomas and William. At Mrs. Crawley’s (Matthew’s mother) insistence, the mansion becomes a hospital for wounded veterans where everyone works, even Lady Mary and Cora, her mother.

“What Downton Abbey offers is a utopian version of the past that’s custom made for the present sociopolitical morass. It presents a system so perfect that it can weather any upheaval, smooth out any wrinkles, absorb any shock. It refers incessantly to the coming collapse of the social order,” which is exactly what Shaw was predicting.²

1. pbs.org.

2. Chocano, p. 53.

Chocano, Carina. “Indulging in a Fantasy of a Bygone Era That We’re Actually Thankful is Gone.” *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 19, 2012.

http://www.salon.com/2012/02/19/downton_abbey_we_re_breaking-up/singleton.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/cazalets/society.html>

QUESTIONS

PRE PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

- 1) What is a broken heart? How does one get one and, if possible, how does one heal from them?
- 2) How is marriage like or unlike business?

POST PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

- 1) What is in a character's name? How do the names of the characters allude to the type of character that they are? Cite some examples where the character is living up to their name.
- 2) Why does the set resemble a boat? How do the design elements (set, costumes, light, and sound) help convey the story?
- 3) How does Shaw comment on the theme of money and morals? Describe how some of the characters are struggling with the compromise between money and morals.
- 4) What is the symbolism with sleeping in this play? What happens if the play is only a dream?
- 5) Why does the family not recognize Lady Utterword? How do they treat her arrival?
- 6) How would you describe the familial relationships between the characters in the play? How does the Captain treat his daughters? How does Mazzini Dunn treat Ellie? How would you describe the way Mrs. Hushabye treats her husband? How do the characters interact with the other characters in the play?
- 7) How does Captain Shotover describe his inventions? Why has he created these objects and what is he continually trying to invent?
- 8) Why does Ellie want to marry Mr. Mangan? Why does Mrs. Hushabye try to convince Ellie not to marry Mr. Mangan? What changes?
- 9) How are servants treated by the family? How does the family treat the servants?
- 10) Why do the characters seem oblivious to the coming war? How do they react to the bombing?

ACTIVITIES

Contemporizing *Heartbreak House*

Material Needed: Pen, paper, copy of *Heartbreak House* by George Bernard Shaw

1. Either individually or in a small group, pick a scene from the play *Heartbreak House* to contemporize. Discuss the underlying theme of the scene (ie. Fantasy, morals and money, etc), and decide how to best convey the meaning while placing it in the new setting. What kind of audience are you writing hoping to present to?
2. By utilizing stage directions and dialogue, adapt a scene from the play that sets the scene in the 21st Century.
 - a. Discuss what changes from the play would need to be made. How do the costumes change? How do the underlying themes of classism and marriage change in your version? How does the way your characters speak differ from Shaw's?
 - b. How does your scene differ from the scene from the play?
3. After writing the scene, have different students read the parts of the scene.
 - a. How can you improve the scene to make it more effective in conveying your theme to understand?
 - b. How does the scene change by updating the scene?

Colorado Model Content Standards

Writing PG: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

Change Three Things

Materials: None

1. Students line up in two lines facing each other so that each person has a partner who is standing across from them. One row is A and the other is B.
2. Tell the group that they will have 30 seconds to observe their partners. At the signal, they will turn their backs to each other.
3. While their backs are turned, each person must change three things about their appearance. All changes must be visible. This can be simple; taking off a shoe, switching their hair style or more difficult; removing an earring.
4. At the signal, the two rows turn back and face each other. They have two minutes to figure out what their partner changed.

continued on next page

5. Discuss which were easy changes to spot and which were more difficult. How many people caught all three changes?
6. Raise the bar by changing from the earlier physical attributes to attitude and body language. How do these changes in body language differ from the original poses? How do we interpret non-verbal communications and what problems could this lead to?
7. Discuss how the perceptions of some of the characters in *Heartbreak House* change from their first impressions.

Colorado Model Content Standards

Theatre PG: Employ drama and theatre skills, and articulate the aesthetics of a variety of characters and roles.

Status Card Game

Material needed: Deck of cards

1. Choose five students and have them stand in a line in front of the class. Without looking at the card, each student receives a card that they are to place face out on their forehead. Explain that the cards' ranking is equal to the student's status in relation to the other students. For example, a student with a queen would have high status, but a king or an ace would have more and a two would have the least amount of status.
2. Students must determine their status in relation to the other students through an improvisation game. Set the scene at a party and select one of the students to be the host. As the party-goers enter, they must not look at their cards. They must behave in the status position and react to the how the other students might treat them. Assist the students by dropping subtle clues about their status without divulging their card.
3. After the exploration, have the students line-up in the order where they think their card would place them.
4. Discuss the activity: How does it feel to be treated well or poorly by your peers? What are some of the ways that you were treated to indicate what your status was? How could you tell if it was a high card or low card? What about a middle card?
5. Discuss the play: Who are the characters in *Heartbreak House* that have more status than others? How do the characters interact and display that they have more or less status than the other characters? Which characters use status for their personal gain?

Colorado Model Content Standards

History: Analyze key historical periods and patterns of change over time within and across nations and cultures.

CONNECT

A series of free discussions providing a catalyst for discussion, learning and appreciation of the productions.

PERSPECTIVES – Denver Center theatre Company’s own “Creative Team” and community experts host interactive, topical discussions with attendees that provide a unique perspective on the production. This provides an in-depth connection that makes the stage experience even more rewarding.

3/30, 6pm, Jones Theatre

TALKBACKS – Perhaps the best way to fully appreciate a production is by engaging in a stimulating dialogue with your fellow audience members and the actors who bring it to life.

4/8, Post-show

THEATRE & THEOLOGY – In our continued partnership with Pastor Dan Bollman with the Rocky Mountain Evangelical Lutheran Synod and cast members, this discussion examines the relevant connections to the productions through a theological lens.

4/10, Post-show

HIGHER EDUCATION ADVISORY DISCUSSIONS – Audience members gain scholarly insight into the productions through discussions, facilitated by faculty members from regional colleges and universities.

4/15, Post-show