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Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795584126860002

Introduction: The Enduring Genius of Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw

Few plays have managed to challenge both the conscience and the intellect quite like **Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw**. First performed in 1905, this provocative comedy-drama remains one of Shaw's most debated works, blending sharp wit with profound philosophical questions about poverty, morality, religion, and the corrupting – or perhaps redeeming – power of money. At its heart, the play asks an uncomfortable question: Is it better to save souls with empty pockets or to fill pockets by compromising one's principles? Shaw, ever the iconoclast, refuses to give a simple answer. Instead, he crafts a narrative that forces audiences to examine their own assumptions about virtue, charity, and the true engine of social change. This article will explore the plot, themes, characters, and lasting significance of **Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw**, demonstrating why it remains a staple of modern theatre and a touchstone for discussions on ethics and capitalism.

Plot Overview: A Battle Between Idealism and Capital

The story revolves around the wealthy and eccentric munitions manufacturer Andrew Undershaft, his estranged family, and his idealistic daughter, Barbara. Barbara is a major in the Salvation Army, a woman deeply committed to saving the souls of the poor through religious faith and charitable works. She believes that her work is morally superior to her father's business of making weapons of war. However, when Andrew returns to the family after years of absence, he challenges Barbara’s convictions by offering the Salvation Army a substantial donation. Barbara faces a crisis: Should she accept money that is tainted by the arms trade, or reject it and watch her mission struggle? Shaw uses this central conflict to dissect the hypocrisy often hidden behind charitable giving and to question whether genuine social reform can occur without economic power.

Key Characters in Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw

To fully appreciate the play, one must understand its rich cast of characters, each representing a different philosophical stance:

- Andrew Undershaft: The quintessential capitalist, Undershaft is a brilliant, ruthless, and witty arms dealer. He believes that poverty is the worst of all crimes and that money – not morality – is the true source of power. His famous declaration that he can "do no wrong" because he pays the piper encapsulates his amoral worldview.
- Major Barbara Undershaft: The idealist of the family, Barbara is passionate, sincere, and deeply religious. She uses the Salvation Army to fight poverty and sin, but her faith is tested when she confronts the source of the money that supports her work.
- Adolphus Cusins: A classics professor and Barbara's fiancé, Cusins is an intellectual who initially shares Barbara's ideals. However, he is pragmatic and eventually chooses to inherit the Undershaft fortune, believing he can use it for good – a decision that mirrors Shaw's own complex views on reform.
- Lady Britomart Undershaft: Barbara's formidable mother, who disapproves of Andrew yet depends on his

wealth. She represents the hypocrisy of the upper class that benefits from capitalist exploitation while maintaining a facade of moral superiority.

- Bill Walker: A poor, belligerent laborer who becomes a test case for Barbara's methods. He refuses her charity and insists on being independent, even if it means embracing violence. His character highlights the limits of philanthropic intervention.

Thematic Depth: Morality, Money, and the Salvation Industry

Major Barbara By George Bernard Shawis a treasure trove of themes that remain startlingly relevant. The most prominent is the relationship between money and morality. Shaw, a committed socialist, was deeply skeptical of charity. Through Undershaft, he argues that poverty is not a spiritual condition but a material one – and therefore requires material solutions. The Salvation Army in the play is portrayed as well-meaning but ultimately ineffective because it operates within the same economic system that creates poverty. When Undershaft bribes the Army with a large cheque, he demonstrates that even their "spiritual" work is dependent on the very wealth they claim to renounce.

The Critique of Philanthropy

One of Shaw's sharpest critiques is directed at the commodification of virtue. The play suggests that charity often serves as a salve for the conscience of the rich, allowing them to perpetuate inequality while feeling righteous. Barbara's journey is one of disillusionment: she realizes that her work is merely a bandage on a gaping wound. This theme is explored through the character of Bill Walker, who refuses to be "saved" because he recognizes that the Salvation Army's moral superiority is built on the same economic foundations that keep him poor. Shaw challenges the audience to consider whether true charity should aim to eliminate the need for charity altogether, rather than creating a dependency system.

Religion and Its Limitations

Shaw was a vocal critic of organized religion, and the play reflects his belief that traditional Christianity had failed to address the structural sins of society. Barbara's faith is genuine, but Shaw shows that it is naive when separated from economic reality. When Undershaft declares that "the way to prevent misery is to get rid of poverty," he offers a secular gospel that appeals to Barbara's practicality. Her eventual decision to embrace her father's world – not as a capitalist but as a reformer from within – represents Shaw's own ideal: a pragmatic approach to social change that uses the tools of the system to dismantle its worst effects.

Philosophical Underpinnings: Shaw's Fabian Socialism

To fully grasp **Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw**, one must understand the playwright's deep commitment to Fabian socialism. Shaw believed that gradual, intelligent reform – not violent revolution – was the path to a just society. Undershaft, for all his amorality, embodies a certain intellectual force that Shaw admired: he is clear-eyed about how power works. Barbara and Cusins initially represent idealism, but by the end, they choose to enter the world of capital. This is not a surrender but a strategic move. Shaw suggests that to change the system, one must first understand its mechanisms and, if necessary, seize its levers. The famous ending, where Cusins agrees to take over the munitions factory, is deliberately ambiguous: is he becoming a hypocrite, or is he using his position to eventually steer the business toward ethical ends? Shaw leaves it to the audience to decide.

The Role of Power and Force

Another key theme is the role of force in society. Undershaft's arms business is a metaphor for the raw power that underpins all social order. Shaw argues that while we may deplore violence, we cannot ignore that governments and institutions are ultimately maintained by force. The play challenges pacifist idealism and questions whether moral reform can exist without the coercive power of the state or the economy. Barbara's

journey leads her to accept that her father's world, however brutal, is more honest than the sentimental world of charity.

Character Analysis: Andrew Undershaft as the Anti-Hero

Perhaps the most memorable character in the play is Andrew Undershaft. Shaw presents him not as a villain but as a force of nature. His speeches are full of provocative logic: "There is only one true religion: the religion of money." He argues that poverty is the greatest crime because it destroys the human spirit, and that the only way to end poverty is through economic productivity. Undershaft is a foil to traditional morality; he is honest about his motivations, unlike the hypocrites who cloak greed in piety. His power lies in his self-awareness. Shaw’s audiences were often unsettled by how persuasive Undershaft could be, and that was precisely the point. The playwright wanted to force people to confront the uncomfortable truth that good intentions often rest on foundations of exploitation.

Barbara's Transformation

Barbara's arc is equally compelling. She begins as a fiery idealist, convinced that her spiritual mission is superior. But when she sees that her father's money can buy her organization's silence, she undergoes a crisis of faith. Unlike a typical melodrama where the heroine rejects the corrupt offer, Shaw has Barbara accept it – but on her own terms. She agrees to join her father's business in order to transform it. This ending is controversial, but it resonates with Shaw's belief in working within the system. Barbara represents the potential for moral force to coexist with material power, even if the path is fraught with compromise.

Literary Devices and Dramatic Structure

Shaw's play is a masterpiece of dialectical drama. Rather than presenting a thesis and antithesis that resolve into a neat synthesis, Shaw pits characters against each other in dialogues that reveal the flaws in every position. The play is structured as a series of debates, each one pushing the characters toward deeper self-examination. Irony is used heavily: the Salvation Army, which preaches poverty, is shown to depend on the wealth of the rich; the arms dealer, who makes weapons, claims to be the true savior of the poor because he provides jobs. Shaw also employs paradox and epigrammatic wit – his hallmark – to keep audiences laughing even as they squirm.

Relevance Today: Why Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw Still Matters

Over a century after its debut, the questions posed by **Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw**are more urgent than ever. In an era of extreme wealth inequality, debates about philanthropy, corporate social responsibility, and "ethical capitalism" mirror the play's central conflicts. The rise of billionaires who profess to solve social problems through their own foundations echoes Undershaft's argument that money can be used for both good and ill. Shaw would likely be skeptical of such efforts, pointing out that the same economic system that produces vast wealth also perpetuates poverty. The play also speaks to modern discussions about the moral compromises involved in accepting funding from controversial sources – whether in universities, non-profits, or the arts. In an age of corporate greenwashing and performative activism, Barbara's struggle to maintain her integrity while wielding power feels deeply familiar.

Critical Reception and Legacy

When it first premiered, **Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw** was met with mixed reviews. Some critics found it too cynical; others praised its intellectual rigor. Over time, it has come to be regarded as one of Shaw's finest works, alongside *Pygmalion* and *Man and Superman*. The play has been adapted into a film (1941) starring Wendy Hiller and Rex Harrison, and it continues to be performed by major theatre companies

worldwide. Its lasting appeal lies in its refusal to offer easy answers. Shaw described the play as a "disquisition on the money question," and indeed, it remains one of the most incisive theatrical examinations of capitalism ever written.

Conclusion

Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw is far more than a witty Edwardian comedy. It is a profound, unsettling, and brilliantly argued work that challenges its audience to think critically about the relationship between wealth, power, and virtue. Through unforgettable characters and razor-sharp dialogue, Shaw dismantles the comfortable illusions of charity and exposes the structural underpinnings of society. Barbara's journey from naive idealist to pragmatic reformer offers no final triumph, only the ongoing struggle to reconcile principle with practicality. In a world still grappling with the same fundamental questions, Shaw's play remains an essential text – a mirror held up to our own moral compromises. Whether we agree with Undershaft's ruthless logic or sympathize with Barbara's wounded idealism, we cannot leave the theatre without asking ourselves: What would we do when the price of doing good is the acceptance of undeniable evil? That is the enduring genius of **Major Barbara By George Bernard Shaw**.

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