

## **George Bernard Shaw's essays versus folk culture**

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*Abstract.* George Bernard Shaw did various things to make his essays readable, such as using short sections. In this paper, I raise the worry that they are at risk of being replaced by vocabulary and sayings from folk culture.

*Draft version:* Version 1 (13<sup>th</sup> November 2022; the poem is version 2 after a live version; it is not my personal sentiment of course).

*"I'm gonna whack your Mum with the law  
And if that don't work, then Bernard Shaw!"*

George Bernard Shaw did various things to make his essays readable, as I stated in the abstract. Notably he often used short sections. But who reads the essays of Bernard Shaw today? I asked a student if he knew other essayists from the first half of the twentieth century apart from the one he was reading and he did not know any, apart from James Baldwin. It is probably a fit subject for a comedic song.

Reading Bernard Shaw today, one notices that folk culture provides us with single words or sayings as an alternative to some claims of his. For example, in a book he writes:

There is no such thing as an empty head, but there are heads so impervious to new ideas that they are for all mental purposes solid, like billiard balls. (1928: 3)

In England we have a single colloquial word for this: thick! Bernard Shaw was perhaps the father or grandfather of this piece of slang.

Another thing that Bernard Shaw says, in another book, is:

A child is a restless, noisy little animal, with an insatiable appetite for knowledge, and consequently a maddening persistence in asking questions. If the child is to remain in the room with a highly intelligent and sensitive adult, it must be told, and if necessary forced, to sit still and not speak, which is injurious to its health, unnatural, unjust, and therefore cruel and selfish beyond toleration. Consequently the highly intelligent and sensitive adult hands the child over to a nurserymaid who has no nerves and can therefore stand more noise, but who has also no scruples, and may therefore be very bad company for the child. (1910)

Today we have the unpleasant saying, “Those who can do and those who cannot: teach.” (What can you say to that: “Let me teach you otherwise”? After the inevitable crash, the man who does has to explain, i.e. teach.)

Observing these examples, one might say to Bernard Shaw or anyone embarking on that path: do not bother with trying to achieve readability by these short sections and other techniques. It is wasted energy. Either write for people who are not so lazy or turn the material into one liners, because if there is anything worthwhile here others will. But probably that is too harsh an assessment.

## References

Shaw, G.B. 1910. *A Treatise on Parents and Children*. Available at:

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Shaw, G.B. 1928. *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*. New York: Garden City Publishing Company.