

George Bernard Shaw
(1856 -1950)

Nobel Prize in Literature: 1925

Discussion: September 28

John Bull's Other Island (written 1904)

Premiere: Royal Court Theatre,
London, Nov. 1, 1904

First Dublin Production: September 1916

Discussion Guide (For new readers, please note that this guide is a starting point, one which you are free to ignore. Just read the play and join us.)

On the matter of texts and history: Since we will be working from different texts, you might want to note the page numbers of acts and scenes for ease in finding actions and lines to call to our attention. You might find it useful to read a bit about Charles Parnell, the Irish Parliamentary Party, Home Rule, and Wyndham's Act (on Irish land purchase).

- Have you read (or seen) other plays by Shaw? If so, are you surprised by this one? Speculate on Shaw's aims in writing *John Bull's Other Island*. How would you describe his dialogue and character development? Were you satisfied with the ending?
- Shaw wrote the play at the request of William B. Yeats for the new Irish theatre. Why might this play have disappointed Yeats?
- Consider the stereotypes in the title ("John Bull" and "Other Island"). Think about how Shaw uses stereotypes in the play. How does the language used by different characters contribute to the satire?
- Select one or two characters to analyze and be the "authority" on. What does the character represent in Shaw's argument on the relationship between England and Ireland? Is the character a stereotype or a more complex personality?
- At a command performance, King Edward VII laughed so hard that he broke his chair. When performed in Dublin, it also provoked laughter. Do you think the two audiences were amused by the same things? Did you enjoy the comedy in the play? Any scenes you would like for us to read aloud? In a critical study on theatre, Shaw described comedy as "the fine art of disillusion." Does this idea have relevance for our play?
- In "Preface for Politicians" (pub. with first edition in 1906), Shaw identified himself as follows: "When I say that I am an Irishman, I mean that I was born in Ireland, and that my native language is the English of Swift I am a genuine typical Irishman of the Danish, Norman, Cromwellian, and (of course) Scotch invasions. I am violently and arrogantly Protestant by family tradition, but let no English Government therefore count on my allegiance."

Does Shaw's identification as a particular kind of Irishman seem to influence *John Bull's Other Island*?

▶▶▶ Looking Ahead to October 26: Molly Keane, *Good Behaviour*.