



# The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on The Niblung's Ring

*George Bernard Shaw*

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## **The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on The Niblung's Ring** George Bernard Shaw

As a commentator on music and music critics, Bernard Shaw was experienced and knowledgeable, strongly opinionated, and, as in all his writing, unsurpassed for brilliance and wit. The reader will find that this commentary on the cycle of four Wagner operas known as "The Ring" contains all these characteristics: it is enlightening and provocative, and it makes very entertaining reading.

Shaw was firm Wagner partisan, and in the book he enthusiastically endorses the operas and Wagner's music in general. Particularly interested in the philosophic and social ideology behind the Ring operas, he also discusses Wagner's life, the character of music drama as opposed to grand opera, the role of the Leitmotif in unifying the cycle and delineating character, the character of Siegfried, and many other related questions. As with all of Shaw's work, even if the reader disagrees with much of it, he will still find the analysis full of stimulating ideas and valuable insights, and written throughout with rare liveliness and wit.

## **The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on The Niblung's Ring Details**

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**George Bernard Shaw**

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Shaw's 1884 novel is entertaining enough, but isn't really sure what it wants to be-the comedy of the early chapters soon switching to political preaching and melancholy. Trefusis is a ridiculous prig and the naivety of his politics is made more grating by the fact there is no challenge to them. That capitalism is brutal-earning the merchants such as Trefusis's father more than they could ever hope to spend, whilst the working class are denied the right to earn even enough to subsist-is undeniably the great social evil of its (and subsequent) days; but Shaw is naive in thinking flowery political solutions that sound great in theory, rarely(never?) translate into reality as politics (as any reader of Orwell will tell you) is about power over the

people; NOT for the people.

Perhaps a better answer already existed-Cadbury who built quality homes for his workers and paid them well, or the John Lewis model where the workers (still to this day) take a share in the profits they help generate-and could have been used by social reformers to force all capitalists to follow a just model, whereas the political model just caused a superb reason for them to entrench their position.

All in all, 'An Unsocial Socialist' is a bit of a quaint curiosity now as far as the politics goes, but it still stands up as a beacon for the feminist cause and the role of women in society. It also gives a useful window to look into and see the winds for social change that were blowing in to Victorian Britain and the world in general.

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## Ahmed says

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## ant3nio says

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## Karan Gupta says

It was back in the days, when I had a compulsion for buying books, that I found myself in the back alleys of the famous M.G. Road in Bangalore. I was wandering without purpose when I found myself in front of a second-hand-book-store. I was in love with graphic novels then, having discovered Moore recently, but my browsing through the shop resulted in this book. I made a mental note to come back to the shop again when I needed books but, as happens with most notes, it got lost and I never went back to that shop. However, the book persisted in my collection; hopping shelves in Bangalore and Delhi before I picked it up recently, almost two years since I had picked it up from the small store in Bangalore.

I was introduced to G.B. Shaw in Roorkee through "Candida", one of the plays that was a part of an elective course. I liked his writing then and I had remembered this book being mentioned by a then close friend over our endless telephonic discussions. Hence Shaw's novel was something that held an intrigue and I was looking forward to what lay in store. The novel proved to be quite amusing. The story was interlaced with dollops of humour, so subtle that I still wonder about what it was that the author tried to mock! I initially thought he was mocking socialism, but later it seemed his views on socialism were in the earnest. Maybe the Victorian society as such. Or maybe there was no mockery at all, the humour being a result of the ridiculous nature of the conflicting demands of society from individuals.

The story revolves around a certain Sidney Trefusis who is introduced as an eccentric character. Having found his marriage unbearable, he flees his wife and hides from her. He takes up the life of a common wage worker and is introduced to the young ladies in Alton College, in whose vicinity he has chosen to hide. His social conduct is appalling and he tries his best to cause outrage in social settings and gatherings. His grooming, which he tries to shun so, comes back in his dealings with the ladies of the society, who he never fails to charm. The story twists and turns with Trefusis's socialist propaganda and his resumed social contact with a three ladies of Alton : Jane, Getrude and Agatha. There are flirtations and outrages and absurd social meetings. With Sidney nothing is ever quite simple!

The novel lived up to any expectation that I might have had from it. It was fast paced and thoroughly entertaining. I specially liked the subtle humour and the complete unassuming way that Shaw had weaved it with his story. This will definitely make me look up more of Shaw's novels in the future.

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## Aaron Arnold says

The literature on Wagner is vast - you could construct a castle as imposing as Wotan's own with the sheer tonnage of Wagner biographies, critical analyses, and musical exegeses - so I was looking for something digestible that gave an overview of the Ring Cycle's plot, themes, music, and context without getting too bogged down in over-philosophizing. That's harder to do than it sounds, since Wagner's grand artistic project practically demands that intellectually-inclined listeners start attaching their various manifestos to various portions of the Ring Cycle's scaffolding, and though Shaw is hardly immune to this pontification, as his lengthy excursions into the history of socialism or racial theorizing demonstrate, he approaches his critical ask with both love and rigor, which is all you can ask for. As he says, "to be devoted to Wagner merely as a dog is devoted to his master, sharing a few elementary ideas, appetites and emotions with him, and, for the rest, reverencing his superiority without understanding it, is no true Wagnerism." I'm not sure you'll be a

"perfect" Wagnerite after reading this, but surely you'll appreciate and enjoy it even more.

I read this while I was relistening to the whole Ring Cycle, following some advice to give the 2012 remastered version of the famous 1965 Decca recording by Sir Georg Solti a spin (it was excellent, a worthy companion to the 1953 Furtwängler and the 1970 von Karajan versions I've also heard). I've listened to this enormous beast several times through in my life - watching a televised version on PBS and reading the subtitles to my then-toddler-age brother is one of my earliest musical memories - yet I've always been a bit hazy on many details of the plot since I don't speak German and I'm not in the habit of reading librettos for fun. Shaw's explanation of the windings of the narrative, its inspirations, and its themes are as good as you'll find anywhere, laying out the internal logic of Wagner's vision as well as some of the more curious decisions he made. A full performance of the Ring Cycle is four nights of three or four hours each, which doesn't sound like too much in this era of full-season TV binge-watching marathons, but there's still a lot for the modern aficionado to unpack.

Reading through Shaw's summary while listening to the music, I was struck by what a delicate balancing act Wagner was trying to strike between the legacy of the source material - the Nibelungenlied and the Eddas, but also plenty of his own vaguely period-era invention - and a plot that was firmly about modernity. Shaw finds lots of anti-capitalist ideology in the Ring Cycle (fairly plausibly), but there's a lot to ponder about how humanity is portrayed in The Ring Cycle versus, say, Greek mythological arcs. For all its imposing density and complexity, the Ring Cycle is ultimately about the rising power of humanity against the declining power of the gods, and in the scenes showing the dangerous power of the ring or the cruelty of Alberich's machine workshop you can see the inspiration for countless modern works, not least The Lord of the Rings. The tragedies in the lives of Brünnhilde or Sieglinde, or even Wotan or Alberich, are masterfully conveyed by Wagner's careful plotting and characterization:

"If you are now satisfied that The Rhine Gold is an allegory, do not forget that an allegory is never quite consistent except when it is written by someone without dramatic faculty, in which case it is unreadable. There is only one way of dramatizing an idea; and that is by putting on the stage a human being possessed by that idea, yet none the less a human being with all the human impulses which make him akin and therefore interesting to us. Bunyan, in his Pilgrim's Progress, does not, like his unread imitators, attempt to personify Christianity and Valour: he dramatizes for you the life of the Christian and the Valiant Man. Just so, though I have shown that Wotan is Godhead and Kingship, and Loki Logic and Imagination without living Will (Brain without Heart, to put it vulgarly); yet in the drama Wotan is a religiously moral man, and Loki a witty, ingenious, imaginative and cynical one."

Something I was almost heartened to read was that Wagner sometimes made mistakes. James Joyce once had that line about "A man of genius makes no mistakes; his errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery," but the convolutions of the Ring Cycle are not always as intentional as they seem. For example, Wagner came up with the idea to set the Nibelungenlied and the Eddas to music first and decided to work backwards to add more foundation to the plot from there. So *Götterdämmerung* came conceptually before *Das Rheingold*, which explains why certain parts of *Götterdämmerung*, like the opening scene with the Norns, seem so out of place from a narrative logic perspective. When I was listening to it, I immediately thought of the famous opening scene with the three witches in *Macbeth*, but whereas Shakespeare's witches are an integral part of the play, Wagner's Norns are not very well-integrated into the rest of the story:

"The very senselessness of the scenes of the Norns and of Valtrauta in relation to the three foregoing dramas, gives them a highly effective air of mystery; and no one ventures to challenge their consequentiality, because we are all more apt to pretend to understand great works of art than to confess that the meaning (if any) has escaped us."

And yet it's somehow comforting that there are those little imperfections, as it makes the grandeur of the whole thing more human, especially in the face of all that music. The music is the most famous aspect of the Ring Cycle, and though I've been listening to it for decades, I am still absolutely transported by songs like "Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey" every time I hear them. To me, even though Wagner's leitmotif system has become commonplace it's never been bettered or even equaled, and as Shaw discusses in his (too brief) musicological sections, that system may not necessarily be "better" music than what Wagner termed "absolute music" like a Bach fugue or a Beethoven symphony, but it works differently than his predecessors' works did: "A Beethoven symphony (except the articulate part of the ninth) expresses noble feeling, but not thought: it has moods, but no ideas. Wagner added thought and produced the music drama." The idea that music could express emotions was not new, of course, but in Wagner's music the idea is expressed very differently; from a musical theory perspective Wagner is working on a whole different level of songwriting:

"There is not a single bar of "classical music" in The Ring - not a note in it that has any other point than the single direct point of giving musical expression to the drama. In classical music there are, as the analytical programs tell us, first subjects and second subjects, free fantasias, recapitulations, and codas; there are fugues, with counter-subjects, strettos, and pedal points; there are passacaglias on ground basses, canons ad hypodiapente, and other ingenuities, which have, after all, stood or fallen by their prettiness as much as the simplest folk-tune. Wagner is never driving at anything of this sort any more than Shakespeare in his plays is driving at such ingenuities of verse-making as sonnets, triolets, and the like."

And Shaw makes a good comparison between the music of that Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner trio:

"After the symphonies of Beethoven it was certain that the poetry that lies too deep for words does not lie too deep for music, and that the vicissitudes of the soul, from the roughest fun to the loftiest aspiration, can make symphonies without the aid of dance tunes. As much, perhaps, will be claimed for the preludes and fugues of Bach; but Bach's method was unattainable: his compositions were wonderful webs of exquisitely beautiful Gothic traceries in sound, quite beyond all ordinary human talent. Beethoven's far blunter craft was thoroughly popular and practicable: not to save his soul could he have drawn one long Gothic line in sound as Bach could, much less have woven several of them together with so apt a harmony...."

Shaw can periodically wander away from the point: for one example, the entire section of "Siegfried as Protestant" starts off quite reasonably as a vaguely Weberian analysis of how the hero's energetic aspects reflect quite real Christian allegories in the Ring Cycle and also something of Wagner's own relationship to the Christian divides in Germany, but then detours into eugenicist musings which sit uncomfortably with the fact that Siegfried is, of course, a product of incest. Much of the discussion of socialist (or at least anti-capitalist) themes is likewise heavily inflected by Shaw's own views, frequently more enlightening as an elucidation of Shaw's politics than Wagner's famously idiosyncratic ones. Yet overall Shaw's explanation of what happens in the Ring Cycle and why it matters is enormously useful, not only revelatory but inspiring. His appreciation for the power of love in the Ring Cycle is a real delight to read, as is his conclusion about the ultimate aim of one of the grandest dramatic works in all of human history:

"The only faith which any reasonable disciple can gain from The Ring is not in love, but in life itself as a tireless power which is continually driving onward and upward - not, please observe, being beckoned or drawn by Das Ewig Weibliche or any other external sentimentality, but growing-from within, by its own inexplicable energy, into ever higher and higher forms of organization, the strengths and the needs of which are continually superseding the institutions which were made to fit our former requirements. When your Bakunins call out for the demolition of all these venerable institutions, there is no need to fly into a panic and lock them up in prison whilst your parliament is bit by bit doing exactly what they advised you to do. When your Siegfrieds melt down the old weapons into new ones, and with disrespectful words chop in twain the

antiquated constable's staves in the hands of their elders, the end of the world is no nearer than it was before. If human nature, which is the highest organization of life reached on this planet, is really degenerating, then human society will decay; and no panic-begotten penal measures can possibly save it: we must, like Prometheus, set to work to make new men instead of vainly torturing old ones. On the other hand, if the energy of life is still carrying human nature to higher and higher levels, then the more young people shock their elders and deride and discard their pet institutions the better for the hopes of the world, since the apparent growth of anarchy is only the measure of the rate of improvement. History, as far as we are capable of history (which is not saying much as yet), shows that all changes from crudity of social organization to complexity, and from mechanical agencies in government to living ones, seem anarchic at first sight. No doubt it is natural to a snail to think that any evolution which threatens to do away with shells will result in general death from exposure. Nevertheless, the most elaborately housed beings today are born not only without houses on their backs but without even fur or feathers to clothe them."

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### **Garry says**

A little less on the Ring plot summaries, GB, and a little more on Wagner's philosophies and historic import/influence on music, please. Oh, wait, a rewrite is really really unlikely.

Oh well. As time capsule-like capture of pre-Hitler thinking about Wagner, I doubt this can be beaten. Reading this is one of those "dog that did not bark times." I, for one, kept waiting for discussions of heroism, nationalism, super beings, etc to bring in the inevitable "Don't-Blame-Wagner-For-His-#1-Fan" discussion. But for Shaw, Hitler was years in the future. For a composer it is hard to evaluate these days WITHOUT considering the uses and abuses of his music, it was fascinating to read the perspective from a time before....

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### **Steven Peterson says**

An interesting take on Richard Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung set of four operas. G. B. Shaw places the ring in a political context, discussing Wagner's broader ideas and how these were tied to the Ring.

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### **Kevin says**

This book improves greatly once the reader endures all the prefaces and preambles to the prefaces. Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is, I believe, my first experience with opera. Not wanting to do things by increments I plunged in and watched the entire monster back to back a few years ago. I enjoyed the four operas very much, but I have to admit dividing my mind between understanding the music, the English subtitles, the overall story and the amazing stage effects, I wasn't getting much subtlety out of the proceedings.

This book fills in the gaps. Shaw is witty, insightful and fairly easy to follow. He proposes cogent metaphors for each character and event, though from a nonapologetically socialist stance. (Because of this book's political leanings, I'm likely on some shadow government watch list now for having mentioned it.) I cannot say I buy into all of his explanations, but they are nonetheless food for thought and they have made me enjoy the Ring Cycle all over again even years after having first seen it.



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## Andrea says

Oh, my sweet Fabian Jesus, was Shaw ever unbearable when he wrote this! It is from his early(ish) years (1884), I grant him, and in his preface he draws a line between himself as young novel writer and the older playwright and man of political experience. I try not to confuse authors with characters, especially when they are attempting a vaguely humorous novel. Trefusis may well be something of a caricature. Still, the heavily expository nature of this novel seems to indicate that in the main these are essentially Shaw's views on Socialism, the position of wealth, the workings of class and most abysmally, the nature of women.

I hate it when wit, satire and misogyny get confused.

Trefusis has more public school arrogance than what he mocks in others, a great desire to constantly hear his own voice, and the emotional reach of a twig. Small wonder the Fabians didn't get far with the working classes. That said, he was right (and occasionally witty) on a number of points.

At Cambridge they taught me that his profits were the reward of abstinence...Then came the question: what did my father abstain from? The workmen abstained from meat, drink, fresh air, good clothes, decent lodging, holidays, money, the society of their families and pretty nearly everything that makes life worth living, which was perhaps the reason why they usually died twenty years or so sooner than people in my circumstances. Yet no one rewarded them for their abstinence. The reward came to my father, who abstained from none of these things, but indulged in them all to his heart's content (94).

Pages 272-273 contain as good an account of globalisation and the move of industry to countries of cheaper labour as any written today, though he believed the workers would follow the jobs. He writes:

As the British factories are shut up, they will be replaced by villas; the manufacturing districts will become fashionable resorts for capitalists living on the interest of foreign investments... (273)

It did take a while for this to happen, but I got a little chill reading that.

On the other hand, had I written down every grating insult to women phrased as wit contained in these pages, this post would have been as long as the book. I don't know why these two in particular called me to mark them as I feel sure there was worse, but still:

But we Socialists need to study the romantic side of our movement to interest women in it. If you want to make a cause grow, instruct every woman you meet in it. She is or will one day be a wife, and will contradict her husband with scraps of your arguments. A squabble will follow. The son will listen, and will be set thinking if he be capable of thought. And so the mind of the people gets leavened. I have converted many young women. Most of them know no more of the economic theory of Socialism than they know of Chaldee; but they no longer fear or condemn its name (283).

On reflection, the quote below might just have been the most infuriating. I hadn't wanted to punch an author in the stomach this much since reading Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, but that feeling started up from the very beginning when he abandons his wife and commences flirting with several 17-year old school girls.

Yes; you sometimes have to answer a woman according to her womanishness, just as you have to answer a fool according to his folly (333).

Socialist women certainly had their work cut out for them in fighting for respect, a place and a voice in this movement. It makes the efforts of those like Maud Pember Reeves and the Fabian women's group all the more impressive, and I now blame Shaw and his ilk entirely for their steadfast seriousness and abandonment of any kind of 'femininity' as they battled to overturn the image of flighty, emotional society women incapable of serious thought presented here. What a waste of women's effort.

The geographies of this? From a countryside finishing school to London houses in Belsize Park and St John's Wood and back out to a baron's country house...far from the London I know and love.

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### **Magdalena says**

An old-fashioned read, I'm afraid.

What starts as a light-hearted description of events at a school for girls, finishes as an embarrassingly boring romance, with some pages on socialism thrown in between.

Witty remarks ('a polite lady who refrained from staring but not from observing') were too scarce to save the book.

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### **Charlotte says**

I was looking for a light-comic novel with moral, socialist overtones to see whether the late nineteenth/early-twentieth century socialist novel could be written in a lighter way, i.e. more P.G Wodehouse than Maxim Gorky. Sadly, this novel was a let down. There were some interesting and key points about socialism and workers rights, but it was too long and the point of the story seemed too diffuse and lost: sometimes it was unclear whether the socialist was to be applauded or ridiculed. Shaw was obviously aware of the difficulty in moving from one system to another but this has been dealt with elsewhere: revolution does seem to be the only solution and yet this is barely discussed.

Sadly, not one of Shaw's better written works in terms of English, characterisation or plot.

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### **johnny dangerously says**

I think this book is, more than anything else, a fascinating snapshot into the world of literary criticism in an age gone past. I'm not sure how relevant it will be to someone who considers themselves a Wagnerian (I, myself, do not, I just really like the Ring Cycle). The theories Shaw proposes are rich and fascinating, but he

undercuts them through his own need to prove that Wagner himself would agree. This is an aspect of being a Victorian writer, however, who existed before the principal of the death of the author concept. As such, one of the premier English-speaking authors of our time makes what we now consider an elementary mistake in literary criticism.

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### **Barnaby Thieme says**

That this book is one-sided is well-known -- Bernard Shaw focuses on *The Ring* overwhelmingly through the lens of his socio-political and economic interests. Nevertheless, it remains one of the greatest and most illuminating commentaries on *The Ring* written in English, perhaps surpassed only by Cooke's *I Saw the World End*.

In this short and lively book, Shaw reads *The Ring* as a dramatic allegory for social evolution, the corrupting influences of political power and capitalism, and the virtues of anarcho-socialist revolution. He finds ample evidence for his interpretation in the biography of Wagner, who fled Germany in exile after his participation in the failed May Revolution of 1849 in Dresden.

Shaw spends precious little time on musicological analysis and gives short shrift to *The Ring*'s sustained metaphysical and existential ramifications, which he views as tertiary threads of the narrative that ultimately derail *The Ring* in *Twilight of the Gods*. Shaw views the final opera in the series as a dramatic failure which subverts the brilliant structure of the first three operas by resorting to the gestures grand opera in the Meyerbeer style -- a style that Wagner himself stridently attacked for its staginess and melodrama.

Shaw is quite right that there is a decisive shift in style and structure in *Twilight* compared with the preceding three evenings, and I share his opinion that it is the most problematic work, and the most in need of careful interpretation. But it can be included in the integral vision of the cycle if one includes all of the various aspects of the story, and it is obvious to nearly every reader that Shaw does not.

That said, if one compares this volume to the dozens of similar pamphlets that appeared in Europe in the early twentieth century one will immediately see why Shaw's work remains a classic while the overwhelming majority of pedantic commentaries have fallen by the wayside. One may differ with Shaw in terms of emphasis, but whereof he speaks he deals with superb insight. Perhaps it need not be added that his prose is of literary caliber.

Like Odin, Shaw purchased wisdom for the price of one eye, buying insight at the expense of perspective. But a god remains a god, and Shaw's vision, however one-sided, is as penetrating as his prose is illuminating.

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### **Roma Kukchishvili says**

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### **João Miranda says**

Livro bem interessante na segunda parte. Um ensaio socialista no meio do século XIX em Inglaterra; uma

pequena visão distópica e satírica do autor. A personagem Trefusis consegue salvar o enredo e a alma do socialismo.

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## **Mariam Okasha says**

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## **Maria Ch says**

It is very rarely that one comes upon a book in which its main character is so unsympathetic. It is often we encounter books with flawed main characters but somehow the author manipulates the reader into liking them and before we know it, we are rooting for the anti-hero or we are justifying their faults and bad decision making. This is not the case in An Unsocial socialist. I found it very difficult to follow this story because it had very little interest for me. Trefusis is not a likeable character, Henrietta or Agatha are not either. None of their actions are justifiable or endorsed. Everything in this story is a bit superficial and at times even random, and even though I forced myself into reading it, I can hardly say I enjoyed it and was very relieved when I reached the end.

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## **carl theaker says**

If you get Valkeyrie like protests whenever you try to get your spouse out of the house to listen to Wagner, then this short companion to the Ring Saga is for you and maybe even for the spouse.

It's a part Ring 101 and part social commentary. Despite being written in 1898 it's still very witty, with Shaw comparing parts of the play & characters to the English society, most of which fits today for society and politics in general.

It's been a long time since I've listened or watched the Ring cycle, which I thought would make the contents a bit vague, but it didn't, it was still enjoyable.

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