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Noël Coward
Complete Works



Series Fourteen

The Complete Works of
NOËL COWARD

(1899-1973)



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The Complete Works of

NOËL COWARD

with introductory material by Gill Rossini, MA



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Complete Works of Noël Coward



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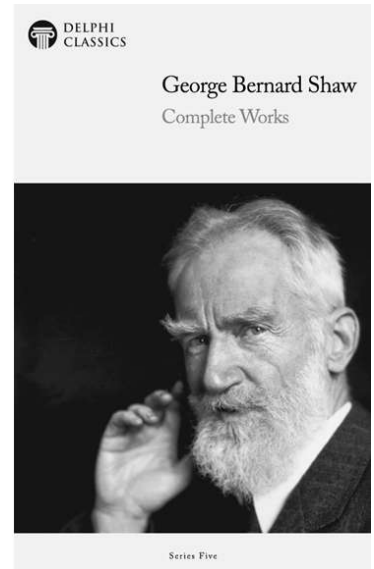
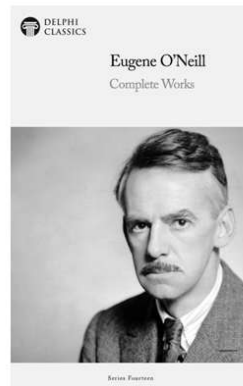
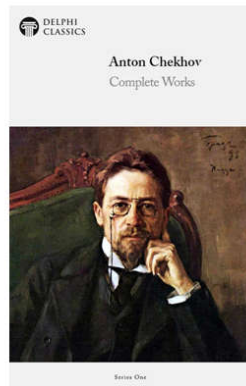
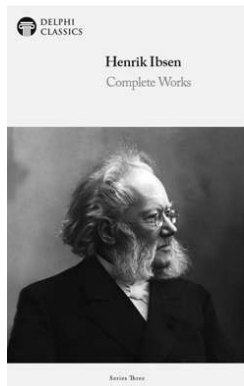
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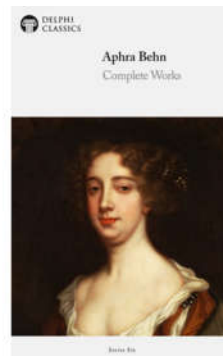
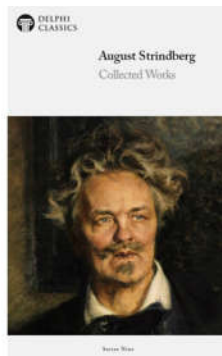
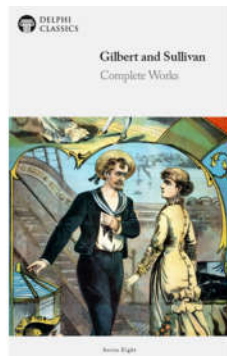
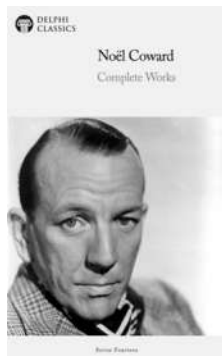
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Classic Drama



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The Plays



*Teddington, an affluent suburb of London in the Borough of Richmond upon Thames, c. 1902 —
Coward's birthplace*



The birthplace, 131 Waldegrave Road, Teddington



Coward, at the age of two

What Next? (1915)



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CHARACTERS
WHAT NEXT?



Coward, c. 1907

CHARACTERS



HEATHER WILTON

JIM HALFORD

WHAT NEXT?



SCENE: DRAWING-ROOM OF Mrs. Wilton's House. HEATHER WILTON discovered alone.

HEATHER (*running to window and then to door*): He will be here soon now. Oh! Won't we have fun? I wish he would be quick, I'm simply dying for him to come.

Knock at the door heard off.

That must be him. I'll go and see.

Exit. Sound of door opening off.

Oh, here you are at last.

Sound of loud kiss. Re-enter HEATHER with JIM HALFORD who looks round in a rather surprised way.

JIM: Hist, your Ma might hear us.

HEATHER: There's no need to hist, everybody is out. Do you suppose that I should ask you here with Mother in the house? Why, she'd have a fit if she saw you.

JIM: Are you alluding to my personal appearance?

HEATHER: No, of course not, silly. You know quite well how Mother detests boys. That is just where I don't quite agree with her.

JIM: Thanks for the compliment.

HEATHER: I mean some boys.

JIM: Pig!

HEATHER: Pig yourself.

JIM: Oh, shut up!

HEATHER: All right, let's have some tea.

They are just about to sit down when a loud rat-a-tat comes at the front door.

HEATHER: What on earth's that?

JIM: Let's go and see.

They go off. Sound of door opening off.

HEATHER: A telegram.

Enter both.

Who can it be from?

JIM: I should think the best way to find out would be to open it.

HEATHER: All right, clever. (*She opens it and reads.*) “Will arrive nearly as soon as this. Arabella.” My goodness gracious, what on earth’s to be done? Jim, do read it.

JIM (*after reading*): Whew! My aunt, I shall have to go. I have a dim recollection of Miss Arabella’s nose. But oh! I say, this is disappointing, isn’t it? We were going to have such fun.

HEATHER: I’ve got an idea.

JIM: Does it hurt?

HEATHER: Don’t be an ass — but listen. What do you say if I dress you up as a girl?

JIM: Really, Heather, I’m surprised at you.

HEATHER: Oh, I don’t mean that *I* should dress you, idiot. You can dress behind the screen and I’ll hand the things over to you and if you want anything special done for you, I’m here!

JIM: I say, you know, I am afraid I should make a most awful ass of myself.

HEATHER: Oh, that would be no change.

JIM: There you go again with your insulting remarks.

HEATHER: Oh, Jim, do let’s do it!

JIM: But why shouldn’t I just be my ordinary self?

HEATHER: Why, good gracious, she would tell Mother the very first moment she saw her.

JIM: I suppose it will *have* to be then. What clothes have you got?

HEATHER: All my summer clothes are at the wash, so you will have to have a cold and wear winter ones.

JIM: Oh, heavens!

HEATHER: Let’s get the screen ready.

JIM: Righto.

They arrange screen. HEATHER goes out and returns with a drawer full of clothes.

HEATHER: I’ll get two walking-sticks and we can hand the things over with them. You had better be arranging the screen to your satisfaction while I am getting them.

Exits.

JIM (*arranging screen*): Oh, won't there be a kick-up if I'm found out. I shall have to be careful.

Re-enter HEATHER with sticks.

HEATHER: Ready?

JIM: Yes.

HEATHER: Well, retire then and disrobe and for heaven's sake don't knock the screen down.

Business.

JIM (*behind the screen*): Oh, bother this bally skirt. I can't get the thing done up. How women exist with these rotten things is a puzzle to me.

HEATHER: Shall I come and help you?

JIM: No, for heaven's sake, don't knock the screen down. Look out!

Knocks screen down. HEATHER falls on the floor flat on her face, shaking with laughter. JIM picks up the screen.

HEATHER: Hurry up or I shall burst.

Woman and Whisky (1918)



At the age of nineteen, Coward co-wrote this one act play with Esme Wynne (later Esme Wynne-Tyson), a former child actor, who left the stage in 1920 at the age of 22 — her last role was as Faith in Coward's play, *I'll Leave it to You*. Thereafter, she concentrated on writing plays, novels and journalistic pieces. Wynne and Coward first met in January 1911, when as child actors they were both cast in the play *Where the Rainbow Ends* by Clifford Mills and John Ramsey. The drama was directed by Charles Hawtrey, who was influential in coaching the twelve-year-old Coward in the basics of acting and administering some paternalistic discipline when he became difficult and demanding. As children, Wynne and Coward called each other by nicknames — she was Stoj and he was Poj.

Their friendship, although it waned somewhat, due to Wynne's change of outlook and career, would manifest itself in Coward's writing for decades to come. Wynne was a person of deep faith from a young age, but her belief was often eccentric and she tried her hardest to bring Coward to her way of thinking, without success. They called their friendship a 'Palship' and in 1915 they created a substantial list of rules for it. These included no splitting on each other; no teasing each other; stand by each other in all danger; and take it in turns to visit each other, so it is not always left to one person to visit. In the coming decades they were to laugh about it, but as a fond memory.

Woman and Whisky was performed at the Wimbledon Theatre in November 1918, as what would now be termed a 'warm-up act' for another play, *A Pair of Silk Stockings* by Cyril Harcourt. It previously premiered in Blackpool in February 1918. The drama had passed the scrutiny of the Lord Chamberlain's office without hindrance — this involved a team of expert readers that examined plays for anything that could cause public offence or moral harm to the population. It received its licence on 17th January.

The plot concerns the wealthy Major Curtis, who retires from a busy ballroom to a quiet spot to enjoy his glass of whisky and soda. However, he is soon intruded upon by a widow, Mrs. Grace, also looking for a few moments of peace and then the seventeen-year-old Norah Chambers. Worryingly they are both intent on marrying him. He manages to deflect their attentions by inventing a wife living in Brighton, thereby making himself appear unavailable. Chivalrously, however, he does entertain them with tales of his exploits in India, as the two women try to impress him with witty interjections. Once peace is restored and the ladies depart; a male friend appears and Curtis asks him not to reveal his deception about a marriage to the ladies in question.

The principal interest in this short play today must be in the hints of themes that Coward would use repeatedly in his better known and more mature works — characters from the middle classes or better; witty repartee; a glamorous setting (a ball); and an unrepentant flirtatious glamour in the characters and their behaviour. It also represents a change of direction for the young Coward, away from his life as a child and youth actor and towards a wider remit of playwriting and acting.



Esmé Wynne-Tyson in 1916 with fellow actors, John Ekins on the left and Coward

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End of Sample