

# G. K. Chesterton

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**Gilbert Keith Chesterton**



**Born:** 29 May 1874  
London, England<sup>1</sup>

**Died:** 14 June 1936, age 62  
Beaconsfield

**Occupation:** Journalist, Novelist

**Genres:** Fantasy, Christian apologetics, Catholic apologetics, Mystery

**Influences:** Christianity, Catholicism, George MacDonald, William Blake, Charles Dickens, Hilaire Belloc

**Influenced:** C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Marshall McLuhan, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Karel Čapek, Ernest Hemingway, Agatha Christie, Ronald Knox, Anthony Burgess, E. F. Schumacher, Orson Welles, Dorothy Day, Franz Kafka, Brian McLaren, R. A. Lafferty, Philip Yancey, Rich Mullins, Terry Pratchett, J K Rowling, Neil Gaiman, Gene Wolfe, Alan Watts, Don Miller, Garry Wills, and Carl Amery.

**Gilbert Keith Chesterton** (May 29, 1874–June 14, 1936) was an influential English writer of the early 20th century. His prolific and diverse output included journalism, poetry, biography, Christian apologetics, fantasy, and detective fiction.

Chesterton has been called the "prince of paradox."<sup>[1]</sup> He wrote in an off-hand, whimsical prose studded with startling formulations. For example: "Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that

they may more perfectly respect it."<sup>[2]</sup> He is one of the few Christian thinkers who are equally admired and quoted by both liberal and conservative Christians, and indeed by many non-Christians. Chesterton's own theological and political views were far too nuanced to fit comfortably under the "liberal" or "conservative" banner. And in his own words he cast aspersions on the labels saying, "The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected."<sup>[3]</sup> He is not to be confused with his politically radical cousin, A. K. Chesterton.

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## Life



Chesterton at the  
time of his  
engagement,  
1898

Born in Campden Hill, Kensington, London, Chesterton was educated at St Paul's School. He attended the Slade School of Art in order to become an illustrator and also took literature classes at University College London but did not complete a degree at either. In 1896 Chesterton began working for the London publisher Redway, and T. Fisher Unwin, where he remained until 1902. During this period he also undertook his first journalistic work as a freelance art and literary critic. In 1901 he married Frances Blogg, to whom he remained married for the rest

of his life. In 1902 he was given a weekly opinion

column in the *Daily News*, followed in 1905 by a weekly column in *The Illustrated London News*, for which he would continue to write for the next thirty years.

According to Chesterton, as a young man he became fascinated with the Occult and, along with his brother Cecil, experimented with Ouija boards. [4]

However, as he grew older, he became an increasingly orthodox Christian, culminating in his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1922.[5]

Chesterton was a large man, standing 6 feet 4 inches (1.93 m) and weighing around 21 stone (134 kg or 294 lb). His girth gave rise to a famous anecdote. During World War I a lady in London asked why he wasn't 'out at the Front'; he replied, 'If you go round to the side, you will see that I am.'<sup>[6]</sup> On another occasion he remarked to his friend George Bernard Shaw, 'To look at you, anyone would think there was a famine in England.' Shaw retorted, 'To look at you, anyone would think you caused it.'

He usually wore a cape and a crumpled hat, with a swordstick in hand, and had a cigar hanging out of

his mouth. Chesterton often forgot where he was supposed to be going and would miss the train that was supposed to take him there. It is reported that on several occasions he sent a telegram to his wife from some distant (and incorrect) location, writing such things as "Am at Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?" to which she would reply, "Home."<sup>[7]</sup>

Chesterton loved to debate, often engaging in friendly public debates with such men as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell and Clarence Darrow. According to his autobiography, he and Shaw played cowboys in a silent movie that was never released.

Chesterton died on June 14, 1936, at his home in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. The homily at Chesterton's Requiem Mass in Westminster Cathedral, London, was delivered by Ronald Knox. He is buried in Beaconsfield in the Catholic Cemetery. Chesterton's estate was probated at 28,389 pounds sterling, approximately equivalent to USD \$2.6 million in modern terms.

## **Writing**

Chesterton wrote around 80 books, several hundred poems, some 200 short stories, 4000 essays, and several plays. He was a literary and social critic, historian, playwright, novelist, Catholic theologian and apologist, debater, and mystery writer. He was a columnist for the *Daily News*, the *Illustrated London News*, and his own paper, *G. K.'s Weekly*; he also wrote articles for the Encyclopedia Britannica. His best-known character is the priest-detective Father Brown, who appeared only in short stories, while *The Man Who Was Thursday* is arguably his best-known novel. He was a convinced Christian long before he was received into the Catholic church, and Christian themes and symbolism appear in much of his writing. In the United States, his writings on distributism were popularized through *The American Review*, published by Seward Collins in New York.

Much of his poetry is little known, though well reflecting his beliefs and opinions. The best written is probably *Lepanto*, with *The Rolling English Road* the most familiar, and *The Secret People* perhaps the most quoted ("we are the people of England; and we have not spoken yet"). Another excellent poem is *A Ballade of Suicide*.

Of his nonfiction, *Charles Dickens* (1903) has received some of the broadest-based praise. According to Ian Ker (*The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845-1961*, 2003), "In Chesterton's eyes Dickens belongs to Merry, not Puritan, England" (see Merry England); Ker treats in Chapter 4 of that book Chesterton's thought as largely growing out of his true appreciation of Dickens, a somewhat shop-soiled property in the view of other literary opinions of the time.

Chesterton's writings consistently displayed wit and a sense of humour. He employed paradox, while making serious comments on the world, government, politics, economics, philosophy, theology and many other topics. When *The Times* invited several eminent authors to write essays on the theme "What's Wrong with the World?" Chesterton's contribution took the form of a letter:

*Dear Sirs,*

*I am.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*G. K. Chesterton*<sup>[8]</sup>



Typically, Chesterton here combined wit with a serious point (human sinfulness) and self-deprecation.

Much of Chesterton's work remains in print, including collections of the Father Brown detective stories. Ignatius Press is currently in the process of publishing a Complete Works.

## **Views and contemporaries**

The roots of Chesterton's approach have been taken to be in two earlier strands in English literature, Dickens being one. In the use of paradox, against complacent acceptance of things as they are, he is often categorised with Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, whom he knew well, as Victorian satirists and social commentators in a tradition coming also from Samuel Butler.

Chesterton's style and thinking were all his own, however, and his conclusions were often diametrically opposed to those of his predecessors and contemporaries. In his book *Heretics*, Chesterton has this to say of Oscar Wilde:

“ The same lesson [of the pessimistic pleasure-seeker] was taught by the very powerful and very desolate philosophy of Oscar Wilde. It is the carpe diem religion; but the carpe diem religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people. Great joy does not gather the rosebuds while it may; its eyes are fixed on the immortal rose which Dante saw.<sup>[9]</sup> ”

More briefly, and with a closer approximation of Wilde's own style, he writes in *Orthodoxy* concerning the necessity of making symbolic sacrifices for the gift of creation:

“ Oscar Wilde said that sunsets were not valued because we could not pay for sunsets. But Oscar Wilde was wrong; we can pay for sunsets. We can pay for them by not being Oscar Wilde. ”

Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw were famous friends and enjoyed their arguments and discussions. Although rarely in agreement, they both maintained good-will towards and respect for

each other. However, in his writing, Chesterton expressed himself very plainly on where they differed and why. In *Heretics* he writes of Shaw:

“ After belabouring a great many people for a great many years for being unprogressive, Mr. Shaw has discovered, with characteristic sense, that it is very doubtful whether any existing human being with two legs can be progressive at all. Having come to doubt whether humanity can be combined with progress, most people, easily pleased, would have elected to abandon progress and remain with humanity. Mr. Shaw, not being easily pleased, decides to throw over humanity with all its limitations and go in for progress for its own sake. If man, as we know him, is incapable of the philosophy of progress, Mr. Shaw asks, not for a new kind of philosophy, but for a new kind of man. It is rather as if a nurse had tried a rather bitter food for some years on a baby, and on discovering that it was not suitable, should not

throw away the food and ask for a  
new food, but throw the baby out  
of window, and ask for a new baby. ”  
[10]

Shaw represented the new school of thought,  
humanism, which was rising at the time.  
Chesterton's views, on the other hand, became  
increasingly more polarized towards the church. In  
*Orthodoxy* he writes:

“ The worship of will is the negation  
of will. . . If Mr. Bernard Shaw  
comes up to me and says, "Will  
something," that is tantamount to  
saying, "I do not mind what you  
will," and that is tantamount to  
saying, "I have no will in the  
matter." You cannot admire will in  
general, because the essence of will ”  
is that it is particular.<sup>[11]</sup>

This style of argumentation is what Chesterton  
refers to as using 'Uncommon Sense' — that is,  
that the thinkers and popular philosophers of the  
day, though very clever, were saying things that  
appeared, to him, to be nonsensical. This is  
illustrated again in *Orthodoxy*:

“ Thus when Mr. H. G. Wells says (as he did somewhere), "All chairs are quite different," he utters not merely a misstatement, but a contradiction in terms. If all chairs were quite different, you could not call them "all chairs."<sup>[12]</sup> ”

Or, again from *Orthodoxy*:

“ The wild worship of lawlessness and the materialist worship of law end in the same void. Nietzsche scales staggering mountains, but he turns up ultimately in Tibet. He sits down beside Tolstoy in the land of nothing and Nirvana. They are both helpless—one because he must not grasp anything, and the other because he must not let go of anything. The Tolstoyan's will is frozen by a Buddhist instinct that all special actions are evil. But the Nietzscheite's will is quite equally frozen by his view that all special actions are good; for if all special actions are good, none of them are special. They stand at the

crossroads, and one hates all the roads and the other likes all the roads. The result is—well, some things are not hard to calculate. They stand at the cross-roads.<sup>[13]</sup>

”

“ ‘All healthy men, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, know that there is a certain fury in sex that we cannot afford to inflame and that a certain mystery and awe must forever surround it if we are to remain sane’

”

Incisive comments and observations occurred almost impulsively in Chesterton's writing. In the middle of his epic poem *The Ballad of the White Horse* he famously states:

*For the great Gaels of Ireland  
Are the men that God made mad,  
For all their wars are merry,  
And all their songs are sad.*<sup>[14]</sup>

## **The *Chesterbelloc* and accusations of anti-Semitism**

*See G. K.'s Weekly for a fuller treatment.*

Chesterton is often associated with his close friend, the poet and essayist Hilaire Belloc. Shaw coined the name *Chesterbelloc* for their partnership, and this stuck. Though they were very different men, they shared many beliefs; Chesterton eventually joined Belloc in his natal Catholicism, and both voiced criticisms towards capitalism and socialism. They instead espoused a third way: distributism.

*G. K.'s Weekly*, which occupied much of Chesterton's energy in the last 15 years of his life, was the successor to Belloc's *New Witness*, taken over from Cecil Chesterton, Gilbert's brother who died in World War I.

Both Chesterton and Belloc have faced accusations of anti-Semitism, both during their lifetimes and subsequently.<sup>[15]</sup> George Orwell accused Chesterton of being guilty of "endless tirades against Jews, which he thrust into stories and essays upon the flimsiest pretexts."<sup>[16]</sup>

In *The New Jerusalem*, Chesterton made it clear that he believed that there was a "Jewish Problem" in Europe, in the sense that he believed that Jewish culture (not Jewish ethnicity/Semitism) separated itself from the nationalities of Europe.<sup>[17]</sup> He

suggested the formation of a Jewish homeland as a solution, and was later invited to Palestine by Jewish Zionists who saw him as an ally in their cause. In 1934, after the Nazi Party took power in Germany he wrote that:

“ In our early days Hilaire Belloc and myself were accused of being uncompromising Anti-Semites. Today, although I still think there is a Jewish problem, I am appalled by the Hitlerite atrocities. They have absolutely no reason or logic behind them. It is quite obviously the expedient of a man who has been driven to seeking a scapegoat, and has found with relief the most famous scapegoat in European history, the Jewish people.<sup>[18]</sup> ”

The Wiener Library (London's archive on anti-semitism and Holocaust history) has defended Chesterton against the charge of anti-Semitism: "he was not an enemy, and when the real testing time came along he showed what side he was on."

## **List of major works**



See List of books by G. K. Chesterton for all works.

- Charles Dickens (1903)
- *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) text
- Heretics (1905)
- *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1907) text
- *Orthodoxy* (1908)
- *The Ballad Of The White Horse* (1911) poetry
- Father Brown short stories (detective fiction)
- *The Everlasting Man* (1925)

## Influence

- Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* contributed to C. S. Lewis's conversion to Christianity. In a letter to Sheldon Vanauken (December 14, 1950)<sup>[19]</sup> Lewis calls the book "the best popular apologetic I know", and to Rhonda Bodle he wrote (December 31, 1947)<sup>[20]</sup> "the [very] best popular defence of the full Christian position I know is G. K. Chesterton *The Everlasting Man*." The book was also cited in a list of 10 books that "most shaped his vocational attitude and philosophy of life".<sup>[21]</sup>

- Chesterton's biography of Charles Dickens was largely responsible for creating a popular revival for Dickens's work as well as a serious reconsideration of Dickens by scholars. Considered by T. S. Eliot, Peter Ackroyd, and others, to be the best book on Dickens ever written.
- Chesterton's writings have been praised by such authors as Ernest Hemingway, Graham Greene, Frederick Buechner, Evelyn Waugh, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Karel Čapek, David Dark, Paul Claudel, Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, Sigrid Undset, Ronald Knox, Kingsley Amis, W. H. Auden, Anthony Burgess, E. F. Schumacher, Orson Welles, Dorothy Day and Franz Kafka.
- Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* is considered a religious classic by many. Philip Yancey said that if he were "stranded on a desert island ... and could choose only one book apart from the Bible, I may well select Chesterton's own spiritual autobiography, *Orthodoxy*."<sup>[22]</sup>
- Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* inspired the Irish Republican military leader Michael Collins with the idea: "if you didn't seem to be hiding nobody hunted you out"<sup>[23]</sup>

- His physical appearance and apparently some of his mannerisms were a direct inspiration for the character of Dr. Gideon Fell, a well-known fictional detective created in the early 1930s by the Anglo-American mystery writer John Dickson Carr.
- The author Neil Gaiman has stated that *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* was an important influence on his own book *Neverwhere*. Gaiman also based the character Gilbert, from the comic book *The Sandman*, on Chesterton, as well as featuring a quotation from "The Man who was October", a book Chesterton wrote "only in dreams", at the end of *Season of Mists*. Gaiman's novel *Good Omens*, co-authored with Terry Pratchett is dedicated "to the memory of G.K. Chesterton: A man who knew what was going on."
- Ingmar Bergman considered Chesterton's little known play *Magic* to be one of his favourites and even staged a production in Swedish. Later he reworked *Magic* into his movie *The Magician* in 1958. Also known as *Ansiktet* the movie and the play are both roughly similar although the two should not be compared. Both are essentially the work of two authors with widely different world views.

- The Third Way (UK) campaigns for the widespread ownership of property are inspired by the economic system Chesterton espoused: Distributism.
- *The Innocence of Father Brown* is cited by Guillermo Martinez as one of the inspirations for his thriller *The Oxford Murders*. Martinez explicitly quotes from Chesterton's story in Chapter 25 of *The Oxford Murders*.
- Computer game *Deus Ex* featured excerpts from *The Man Who Was Thursday*, as well as references in conversation to both *The Man Who Was Thursday* and *The Napoleon Of Notting Hill*.
- British heavy metal band Iron Maiden uses an excerpt from one of his hymns as the first verse in their song Revelations from 1983's *Piece of Mind*.
- Seton Hall University in South Orange New Jersey has a theological institute named after G.K. Chesterton.
- Chesterton's work has inspired lyricists like Daniel Amos's Terry Scott Taylor from the 1970s to the 2000s. Daniel Amos mentioned Chesterton by name in the title track from 2001's *Mr. Buechner's Dream*.
- The following Chesterton quote was used in the television program Northern Exposure

by Chris Stevens (played by John Corbett):  
"A woman uses her intelligence to find  
reasons to support her intuition."

## See also

- G. K.'s Weekly
- List of books by G. K. Chesterton
- Christian apologetics (field of study concerned with the defence of Christianity)

## Literature and biographies on Chesterton

- Cooney, A., "G.K. Chesterton, One Sword at Least", Third Way Publications, London, 1999. ISBN 0-9535077-1-8
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- Pearce, J, "Wisdom and Innocence - A Life of G.K.Chesterton", Hodder & Stoughton,

London, 1996. ISBN 0-340-67132-7

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- Marshall McLuhan wrote an article on G.K. Chesterton, titled "G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic" (*Dalhousie Review* 15 (4), 1936).
- EWTN features a television series, *G. K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense*, that focuses on Chesterton and his works.

## References

1. ^ Douglas, J.D. *G.K. Chesterton, the Eccentric Prince of Paradox*, May 24, 1974.
2. ^ *The Man Who was Thursday*, Chapter IV
3. ^ Illustrated London News (1924-04-19)
4. ^ *Autobiography*, Chapter IV
5. ^ G.K. Chesterton's Conversion Story
6. ^ A. N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*, Penguin Books. 1984.
7. ^ Ward, Maisie. *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, Chapter XV. Sheed & Ward. 1944.
8. ^ cited in Yancey, Philip. 2001. *Soul Survivor* p. 58.
9. ^ Chesterton, G.K. *Heretics*, Chapter 7.
10. ^ Chesterton, G.K. *Heretics*, Chapter 4.
11. ^ Chesterton, G.K. *Heretics*, Chapter 20.
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14. ^ Chesterton, G.K. *The Ballad of the White Horse*, Book 2.
15. ^ *Last orders*, *The Guardian*, April 9, 2005.
16. ^ Orwell, George: "Anti-Semitism in Britain"
17. ^ Chesterton, G.K. *The New Jerusalem*, Chapter 12.
18. ^ Coren, M. Gilbert: *The Man Who Was G. K. Chesterton*, p216
19. ^ Found in *A Severe Mercy*
20. ^ Found in C. S. Lewis: *The Collected Letters*, Vol. 2
21. ^ *The Christian Century* June 6, 1962
22. ^ Yancey, Philip. 2001. *Soul Survivor*, p. 45.
23. ^ Margery Forester, *Michael Collins - The Lost Leader*, p.35.

## External links

- Essays by G. K. Chesterton at Quotidiana.org
- Chesterton books published by Ignatius Press
- The American Chesterton Society
- Works by G. K. Chesterton at Project Gutenberg
- The Section on G. K. Chesterton at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library.
- Martin Ward An extensive collection of e-text links

- Bibliography of detective fiction 1st Editions
- G. K. Chesterton in Russian
- Gilbert Magazine: a magazine about Chesterton and topics of interest
- Chesterton House: A Center for Christian Studies at Cornell University
- The Chesterton Review: published by the Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture at Seton Hall University
- His Parish Church in Beaconsfield where he is buried
- Chesterton and Friends, a little blog dedicated to Chesterton
- DomingoPortales.BlogSpot, some Spanish translations of essays and poems by GKC
- Chesterton sites
- *G. K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense Produced by EWTN* - Real Audio Archives include 28 Episodes with an overview of Chesterton.

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