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THE FACE BEHIND THE MASK: SELECTED PLAYS OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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The 19th century saw the introduction of legislation that began a process of state intervention into the living and working conditions of the men and women of Britain. Many people's living conditions were shocking and degrading. As a young man, "Shaw worked for a firm of estate agents collecting tiny sums of rent from slum dwellers in Dublin. Shaw hated this job and that it was through this experience that … he saw how gentleman actually behaved and how they made their money out of working men and women … Landlords, it seemed to him, were little better than thieves."[1]

Shaw intended his first play to expose the practices of slum landlords and the corruption within local government that continued to line the pockets of those willing to exploit and abuse. At the time of its first performance in 1892, it excited a great of controversy, a sense of uproar which delighted Shaw and the reaction of the middle

[1] Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works, a Critical Biography, (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), P.96.

class audiences was understandable since they recognized the attack Shaw was making on them.

George Bernard Shaw hoped that Widowers' Houses, the first of his early plays that he dubbed as "Unpleasant" would prick people's social conscience. He was savy enough to know that a play must entertain before it can enlighten and so he wrapped a concept he described as "grotesque realistic exposure of slum landlordism"[2] around a romance between a Blanche Sartorius and Harry Trench. Shaw's fist play, completed in 1892 when he was already 35, is remarkably like the flood of his plays to come in its mix of conventional drawing-room comedy and ironic social criticism. It is really a perfect little conundrum, pointedly insisting that even the morally fastidious are compromised by the moral taint of their money.

Widowers' Houses would be the first in a series of "Plays Unpleasant" that tackled with "Shaw's noted pungent wit such issues as poverty, sexual politics and prostitution, quite racy topics for their time."[3] Shaw's socialist politics are never far from the surface, keeping the light-hearted romantic follies in check with their more serious couplings. One finds the play a decidedly pleasant experience. The play Widowers' Houses not only fulfils Shaw's aim to expose the hidden ties between pleasant people who imagine that such sordid matters as slum-lordism do not touch them, but also to entertain. Shaw, even in this fledgling effort managed to pursue a

[2] John William Cunliffe, Leaders of the Victorian Revolution, (The University of California, D. Appleton-Century Company, incorporated, 1934), P. 324.

[3] Toby Cole, Actors on Acting: The Theories, Techniques, and Practices of the Great Actors, (Crown Publishers, 1970), P.370.

moral agenda but without preaching, and leaves it to the viewers to draw their own conclusions about the parallels between the rot at the bottom of the polite and polished edifice of upper crust London circa 1890 and today's New York.

Widowers' Houses is remarkably well structured into three forward moving acts. The first act which allows the romance to blossom and the background differences to be established is staged during a traditional Victorian holiday abroad. The middle act starts like a comedy of manners, but turns more serious when the adage about money being the root of all evil comes into play and brings the wedding plans to a halt. The last act is Shaw at his most clever. It offers neither a plan for dealing with the social injustices brought to light nor does it have any of the characters change their hypocritical mindsets.

Harry Trench, the protagonist of the play, is completely ready to ignore Sartorius's humble background – until, that is, he discovers the source of Sartorius's income. Then he is appalled: how can a man make his living on the backs on the poorest of the poor, charging them inflated (if meagre) rents for horrific tenements that are mostly unfit for human occupation? But Sartorius is able to turn the tables on him:

Sartorius:	And now, Dr. Trench, may I ask what your income is derived from?
Trench (defiantly):	From interest: not from houses. My hands are clean as far as that goes. Interest on a mortgage.

Sartorius (forcibly): Yes: a mortgage on my property. When I, to use your own words, screw, and bully, and drive these people to pay what they have freely undertaken to pay me, I cannot touch one penny of the money they give me until I have first paid you your seven hundred a year out of it.

"Leave it to Shaw to insert such a succinct criticism of the capitalist system inside what has heretofore felt like an almost Wildean comedy of manners."[4] In the third act, he'll propose a rather cynical resolution; until then, though, he'll keep us rapt in a torrent of "theoretical discussion regarding how to improve the lot of the poor and, more pointedly, precisely who is ultimately responsible for said improvement, and how, and why."[5]

Sartorius is at his commanding best as the pragmatic and sometimes tyrannical, Harry Trench balances youthful decency with acute intelligence, Mr. William de Burgh Cokane is wondrously petty, a gentleman obsessed with appearances and tact, Lickcheese, who is one of Sartorius's rent-collector, is fine as a fellow with the improbable name. Blanche, Sartorius's daughter and Harry's intended, "is a sharp-tongued, selfish, avaricious little thing, not at all admirable and barely likable."[6]

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[4] R. J. Barry Jones, Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy: Entries A-F, (Taylor & Francis, 2001), P. 315.

[5] John Herbert Roper, U.B. Phillips, A Southern Mind, Volume 2, (Mercer University Press, 1984), P. 138.

[6] Charles Dudley Warner, The Warner library, Volume 29, (Warner Library Co., 1917), P. 549.

In this case, the money is squeezed out of the poor by the "Dickensian rent-collector, Lickcheese,"[7] then gathered by the wealthy, grasping property manager, Sartorius, and finally spent in blissful ignorance by the fine gentleman, Trench. This allows Shaw to paint the horrors of housing for the London poor, but his deeper point is that, without exception, the financial foundations of social standing and pretensions to moral virtue all involve some sort of structural economic exploitation. This just happens to be slum-lording. Since Shaw's words are fluid and captivating on their own, there is no need for extra embellishment on the part of the readers. Any decoration obscures from the point of the play. As in the play, the eventual reunion remains more ironic than idyllic.

Widowers' Houses, a play which begins as romantic comedy, and then suddenly changes into an angry indictment of landlords who shamelessly exploit the poor. It's a pre-Shavian play really; he hasn't yet mastered his ideas about theatre, so he's floundering quite a bit. The secret is that, the play is much more emotional than it appears to be on the page. As with Ibsen, one needs to find the play beneath the play, to get at the godless, unpoetic world where there's a seeming domestic situation, but something much more epic going on underneath.

The play's ostensible subject, the question of rent, is one that one finds it hard to get enthusiastic about. Because it's potentially dry, one feels the only wet way in is

[7] Christopher Innes, The Cambridge Companion To George Bernard Shaw, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), P. 108.

through the emotional life of the characters, one can observe that "Shaw's protective tone conceals a much messier underbelly, and violence hinted at in certain scenes."[8] The play is very untypical of his work, and the less typical one can make it, the better. One shall be deconstructing it within an inch of its life.

The lack of housing for the poor was an enormous problem at the time. By the end of the nineteenth century, the population of London was over 6 million, resulting in over-crowding and horrible living conditions. Lickcheese says "there is more to be earned from one crowded tenement than from a mansion, due to the cramming of many people into small spaces."[9] Integrity, gentrification and the haves and have-nots of 19th century London are the central ingredients in this 1892 Shavian debut effort. "Shaw weighs the struggle between personal ethics and professional judgement."[10]

Shaw's enduring genius is in his ability to imbue complex and timeless issues with sparkling humour, and comedy with trenchant social criticism. When the pitiful and lowly rent collector Lickcheese makes a shocking Pygmalion like transformation in the third act, he attributes his success not to money, but to his knowledge of the lower working class. It is this know-how; combine with a clever scheme and the right

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[8] Dan H. Laurence, Unpublished Shaw: Issue 16 of Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies, Vol 16, (Penn State Press, 1996), P. 90.

[9] E. Dean Bevan, A concordance to the plays and prefaces of Bernard Shaw, Volume 3, (Gale Research Co., 1971), P. 1168.

[10] J. Whitaker & Sons, Limited, Black Newspapers Index, Volume 22, (J. Whitaker & Sons, Limited, 1992), P. 71.

connections that ultimately bring Lickcheese, Sartorius and Trench together in a cunning gentrification plot that will no doubt strike familiar chords in the 21st century.

Widowers' Houses by Bernard Shaw brings us back to a time when ruthless self – made Capitalists were "'persona non grata' in proper society: sure it's a study in hypocrisy,"[11] but there's something somehow refreshing about the rigid politeness of the snobbish upper classes of Victorian England, but, Shaw, if still alive, would have been too surprised that the social ill of profiteering from rents collected from slum tenants is still with us.

"The Philanderer is a satire on marriage as an institutions involving economic slavery."[12] It dramatizes "grotesque sexual compacts made between men and women under marriages laws."[13] "It is also a satire on people's fake intellectual fads."[14] Shaw's purpose in the play is to show that no woman is the property of a man and that she belongs to herself and nobody else. The play shows Shaw's progress over his earlier play in dramatic technique. "The well-knit sub-plot concerned with Dr.

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[11] Albert Shaw, Review of Reviews, Volume 80, (The University of California, Review of Reviews., 1929), P. 302

[12] Surendra Sahai, English Drama, 1865-1900, (The University of Michigan, Orient Longman, 1970), P. 125.

[13] Bernard Shaw, Plays Unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P. 26.

[14] Surendra Sahai, English Drama, 1865-1900, (The University of Michigan, Orient Longman, 1970), P. 145.

Paramore emanates the best humour of the play."[15] The depiction of the conflict between passion and reason lends the play dramatic interest. The sub-plot of this play has been specially praised by critics for its structural excellence. Furthermore, Shaw succeeds fairly well in his attempt to achieve dramatic conflict in most of the plays. On the whole, "the early plays are suffused with dramatic interest while attaching the social evils of the day."[16]

With the production of Shaw's 1893 "topical comedy" The Philanderer, is the banner of "Love, sex, marriage, family – the lure of the domestic."[17] In the play, the smooth talking, slippery Leonard Charteris is anything but domesticated. "There is a disease to which plays as well as men become liable with advancing years, wrote G.B. Shaw in the preface to his early comedy The Philanderer (1893). In men it is called doting, in plays dating. The more topical the play the more it dates. The philanderer suffers from this complaint."[18] Shaw penned those words in 1930. The world had undergone a radical transformation in the 37 years since he wrote the play, what with the First World War, growing industrialization and globalization, and shifting attitudes toward race and sex. As a result, its' no wonder that Shaw deemed his

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[15] Ibid, P. 163.

[16] Miriam Gilbert, Stages Of Drama: Classical To Contemporary Theater, (The University of Michigan, Scott, Foresman, 1981), P. 607.

[17] Haskell M. Block, Masters of Modern Drama, Ed. 3, (The University of Michigan, Random House, 1962), P. 360.

[18] Bernard Shaw, Plays unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P. 98.

quirky, Victorian-era comedy, which deals with the constraints of contemporary marriage and divorce laws, to be "behind the times."[19]

And yet, the bewhiskered and famously contrarian man of letters no sooner condemned The philanderer as an anachronism than, in the very next paragraph of the preface, proclaimed it as being ahead of its time.

"My picture of the past," Shaw wrote, "may be for many people a picture of the future."[20] The play is not commonly produced today-Shaw's reputation among contemporary audiences rests with works like Pygmalion, Arms and the Man, Mrs. Warren's Profession, and Saint Joan – but readers' decision to view the play as a "Work of queer theatre"[21] makes Shaw's words appear particularly prophetic.

The male characters are all suitably fey. Despite all the gender – bending, the play succeeds in building a bridge between 21st century marital politics and the idea of the Ibsen club as a solitary outpost of progressive thinking in a landscape governed by traditional values – largely, one thinks, because of the persuasive nature of the Shaw's thinking. The queer reading of the play, although interesting and no doubt prescient, feels somewhat superimposed. The beauty of this play lies not so much in what it

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[19] Christopher Innes, The Cambridge Companion To George Bernard Shaw, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), P. 76.

[20] Bernard Shaw, Plays unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P.98.

[21] Mark Fortier, Theory/Theatre: An Introduction, (Routledge, 1997), P. 117.

says about marital rights in our times, but in its searing depiction of a more eternal theme – that of what it means to be an outcast or oddball in society.

Intrinsically, The Philanderer is a "misfit mutant"[22] of a play: Shaw wrote a fourth act, which he later cut, at the suggestion of a friend, making the published three-act version feel rather lopsided; and compared to the playwright's subsequent, conversation – heavy work, this early comedy seems curiously farcical and action – packed.

Leonard's characteristics fairly easily from his dapper appearance and florid conversation filled with affectionate phrases that sound well used. But his reluctance to prove Grace that he has broken up with his last paramour is our clue and hers that Charteris may have trouble parting with any of his past lovers. In fact, it will soon be evident that despite his protestations, he's still under the thumb of Julia Craven, who in very short time will come storming into Grace's drawing room unannounced, temperamental, and ready to claw her way back into Leonard's heart. Julia, as we'll soon see, is hardly the "New Woman"[23] she purports to be a member of the Ibsen club, an association of men and women whose sole membership requirement is that the men be unmanly and the women unwomanly.

Leonard Charteris and Grace Tranfield, who will turn out to be the most liberated woman of the lot, play off each other effortlessly, while Julia Craven rants and raves and proves herself more "stereotypical of a melodramatic heroine than an

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[22] John Pym, Time Out Film Guide: Edn,10, Illustrated, (Penguin, 2002), P. 979.

[23] Mark Lemon, Punch, Volume 206, (Punch Publications Ltd., 1944), P. 338.

independent one."[24] When Grace, lecturing Leonard about his relationship with the clinging Julia says, "No woman is the property of the man. A woman belongs to herself and to nobody else"[25], it rings an all too familiar bell for us having been rung endlessly over the years, but little for Julia whose fashionable liberalism is only play acting.

A handsome drawing room in London's Victoria District, the setting for the Ibsen Club, despite its both sex membership, is redolent of any men's club of the period with its dark wood and unobtrusive colours, especially Julia Craven's sister, the 'unwomanly', "Sylvia Craven whose stark men's clothing and slicked back hair style give her the appearance of Madame George Sand."[26] As Sylvia, will do a quick change later on, she's an interesting contract to sister Julia, whose very womanly pursuit of Charteris continues across the floor of the Ibsen Club.

The Philanderer is listed as one of Shaw's three 'Plays Unpleasant,' though up against the other two, Widowers' Houses and Mrs. Warren's Profession, it seems almost tame by comparison. With all its sport and quick wit, there isn't much that's unpleasant about The Philanderer unless one consider the weightier fourth act. As Grace's father, Joseph Cuthbertson, gives a sterling performance as a booming and

[24] E. Dean Bevan, A Concordance To The Plays And Prefaces Of Bernard Shaw, Volume 5, (The University of Michigan, Gale Research Co., 1971), P. 125.

[25] Bernard Shaw Plays Unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, Ed., Dan H. Laurence, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P. 103.

[26] Thomas J. Schoenberg, Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800, Volume 134, (The University of Michigan, Gale / Cengage Learning, 2007), P. 152.

opinionated theatre critic whose views are left to conservative even if he feels a manly man is best appreciated by a womanly woman, while Colonel Daniel Craven, a baleful looking ex-soldier who has been taken in by the witchcraft of modern medicine, believes he is dying but is more dead set against the infamous Ibsen Club and its rules of order. But then neither Cuthbertson nor Craven put much stock in the dress or behaviour code of the Ibsen Club, though Colonel Craven has fallen under the spell of the club's Dr. Paramore, a self-satisfied intellectual who performs experiments on guinea pigs and fancies himself in the forefront of medicine with his discovery of the Guinea Pig's liver duct.

With some sharp satire on medicine and its practitioners and romantic notions, The Philanderer is almost as breezy as a summer day even if doesn't have the depth of other Shavian works and neither heroine finds any satisfaction in love. "Never make a hero of a philanderer,"[27] says sensible Grace to Julia just before the play completes. Neither have come away with Charteris, "Grace by design, Julia by circumstance."[28] Shaw described the distraught Julia as having the presence of "keen sorrow"[29] but that emotion doesn't come across here.

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[27] Bernard Shaw, The Philanderer: An Unpleasant Play, (The University of Michigan, Brentano's, 1905), P. 90.

[28] R.R. Bowker Company, The Publishers' Trade List Annual, Volume 5, (The University of Michigan, R. R. Bowker Co., 1982), P. 38.

[29] George Bernard Shaw, The Philanderer, (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), P. 83.

This play is a "thriller about power and evil."[30] And one hopes that it energises the readers to ask questions – "My play is a vision of what the future may be like if people of good will, whatever their politics - do not win the day."[31]

Though Shaw's gifts for balancing expose with entertainment were to come to full bloom in his later plays, the much revived Mrs. Warren's Profession revolved around the same theme of hypocrisy, this time the baser trade being flesh peddling. Mrs. Warren's Profession is "'the oldest,' prostitution, and the woman herself has a positive gift for harlotry."[32] Shaw uses prostitution as an instance of capitalist "professionalism" in general, to point up contradictions in aristocratic, bourgeois and socialist moral codes. But Shaw is also dealing with libidinal force as a constant of human nature, and the distortions of character that result when it is repressed, denied, or sentimentalised. As the author says in his preface to the play, "the instinct on which (the prostitute's profession) is founded is a vital one."[33] And that's the one, central, thing that's wrong with this play of Mrs. Warren's Profession. "There is no

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[30] Kirkus Service, Kirkus Reviews, Volume 51, Issues 1-10, (The University of Michigan, Kirkus Service, 1983), P. 269.

[31] Sandra L. Williamson, Shakespearean Criticism, Volume 12: Shakespearean Criticism, (The University of Michigan, Gale Research Co., 1990), P. 431.

[32] Michel W. Pharand, Dionysian Shaw, Shaw: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies, Ed., Michel W. Pharand, (Penn State Press, 2004), P. 38.

[33] Bernard Shaw, A Concordance To The Plays And Prefaces Of Bernard Shaw, Volume 7, Ed., E. Dean Bevan, (The University of Michigan, Gale Research Co., 1971), P. 147.

sex in it. One of the masterful strokes of Shavian characterization in this play is the way the very young "modern" young people patronise their elders."[34]

The revelations about Mrs. Warren's past, not being the shocking revelations, they were a hundred year ago, the many arguments and confrontations seem overly talky and circular. Facts about Vivie's paternity are brought up and dropped without much concern to anyone for the readers. But, it still works, despite dramaturgical and thematic clunkiness because of the performances and because Shaw keeps the focus on the character and humour, rather than commentary, so that the play unfolds beautifully. Shaw may have been pointing finger at corrupt capitalism, but the deeper question – that of selling out, or refusing to do so – is certainly something that still resonates and makes the play a fascinating one.

In the most notorious scene of this play, which Shaw wrote in 1893, a mother who has grown wealthy through brothel – keeping and her respectably raised daughter clash head-on, and thrash though the terms on which a woman may earn a measure of independence and self respect. The mother has the best arguments:

> "You think that the way you were taught at school to think right and proper is the way things really are. But it's not. It's all only a pretence, to keep the cowardly, slavish, common run of people quite. The big people, the clever people, the managing people, all know it. They do as I do, and think as I think. ('Morality' means being) a mere

[34] Sharon K. Hall, Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Volume 3, Ed., Sharon K. Hall, Phyllis C. Mendelson, (The University of Michigan, Gale, 1980), P. 65.

> drudge, toiling and moiling early and late for your bare living and two cheap dresses a year."[35]

This scene and the play were so shocking that "Mrs. Warren's Profession was forbidden by the King's censor."[36] When a private performance was finally arranged in 1902, the scandal rocked the London theatre. It was, according to the testimony of the author, an "earthquake shock to the foundations of morality which sends a pallid crowd of critics into the street shrieking that the pillars of society are cracking and the ruin of the state at hand."[37]

Most of the threads of Warren's tangled circumstance are drawn out beautifully – the impoverished background, the managerial flair, the quick social perception; impatience with pretence combined with a healthy respect for keeping up appearances. But the scarlet thread, the natural and practiced voluptuousness that is the base of her temperament, is missing.

Shaw's view that woman must sacrifice love and relations with family members is the most disappointing aspect of his play. While the majority of his work represents a dramatic leap forward for women in the Victorian time, he hasn't allowed for women to progress in their intellectual growth and entrepreneurship without a

[35] Bernard Shaw Plays Unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, Ed., Dan H. Laurence, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P. 282.

[36] George Bernard Shaw, Mrs. Warren's Profession, (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), P. 6.

[37] Bernard Shaw Plays Unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, Ed., Dan H. Laurence, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P. 183.

consequence. He seems to support their advancement, but is at the same time, afraid of it. This is apparent in Praed's questions to Vivie, "What happens to the world of chivalry, felling, and beauty in the modern business world? Does practicality not appear more viable than romance in a world where sentiment has been reduced to sentimentality?"[38] Regrettably, these concerns are still present in today's society where it's argued that a woman going to work will negatively impact the unity of the family and the nurturing of their children.

Yet to dismiss the play as old-fashioned is to ignore the other themes in the play apart from prostitution which are as relevant today as they were towards the end of the 19th Century. Hypocrisy, exploitation and a fractions mother-daughter relationship are at time uncomfortably examined. Mrs. Warren is able to make the audience feel sympathetic towards her because of her determination to look after her daughter. Occasionally she-deliberately – drops the middle – class accent and confesses, "I always was a bit of a vulgarian."[39] It's not difficult to see how she rose from being a scullery maid and a waitress to being in a position of power and influence.

Vivie, the unconventional daughter who likes smoking a cigar and has a "powerful fist" of a handshake. She is vivacious and strong-minded; showing a touching side towards her mother when they grow close and at the end proving equally determined that their relationship must be severed. The issues that Shaw

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[38] Waldie. A, Waldie's Select Circulating Library, Volume 16, (Princeton University, A. Waldie, 1841), P. 312.

[39] Bernard Shaw, The complete plays, (Indiana University, Odhams Press, 1984), P. 77.

raises in his interesting "Secrets and lies"[40] early play (only his third) Mrs. Warren's Profession are as relevant today as they were more than a century ago.

Even today for too many women, careers in the sex industry offer a lifestyle of luxury far in excess of anything they could expect from other work. But this is not simply the matter of Shaw's play. It is also about the relationship between mother and daughter when the daughter has been raised in an affluent and educated environment which in turn can cause her to despise her own mother, whose efforts have paid for that education. It is about control and disaffection.

Shaw, who was famously a Fabian Socialist, also looks at the hypocrisy of society, the ethics of capitalism where all riches are perceived to be the result of exploitation. He examines the role played by men. Each of his male characters is representative of a type: the aesthete and artist Mr. Praed, the feckless young man Frank Gardner, the unscrupulous capitalist Sir George Crofts and the hypocritical Vicar, Reverend Samuel Gardner. These male characters are both strength of the play and its weakness. "Shaw's perception of Victorian society draws all these men as caricatures and all of them are nasty."[41]

The women however, are more complex. Vivie is a blue stocking, imbued with a work ethos in her ambition to earn a living as an actuary. She lacks an interest

[40] Russell Kick, Everything You Know Is Wrong: The Disinformation Guide To Secrets And Lies, (The Disinformation Company, 2002), P. 102.

[41] Michael Williams, Commonweal, Volume 77,(The University of Michigan, Commonweal Pub. Corp., 1962), P. 275.

in culture and the arts. Her mother Mrs. Warren is full of contradictions: victim and exploiter, kind hearted but manipulative and embarrassingly vulgar.

Shaw's premise that Vivie would have been initially so understanding of her mother's solution to her youthful, financial predicament. That seems to us the reaction of a mature and detached person who decries social injustice, someone like Shaw himself. This especially as Vivie is revealed to be so industrious and so uncompromisingly disinterested in culture, society, in social graces and flirting. She is very austere in her ambition. We are also unsure that those like Vivie, who have had "everything provided for them" tend to be obsessed with earning money. It is generally those brought up in deprivation, like Mrs. Warren herself, who strive for a healthy bank balance. But, a more spoilt Vivie would be more like the daughter Mrs. Warren wants her to be.

The relationship between Mrs. Warren, a prostitute, described by Shaw as "on the whole, a genial and fairly presentable old blackguard of a women,"[42] and her "prudish" daughter, Vivie. Vivie is horrified to discover that her mother's fortune was made managing high-class whorehouses. The two strong women make a brief reconciliation when Mrs. Warren explains her impoverished youth, which originally led her into prostitution. Vivie forgives her mother until learning that the highly profitable business remains in operation.

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[42] Bernard Shaw Plays Unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, Ed., Dan H. Laurence, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P. 220.

Shaw's claims and its title, the play barely touches the theme of prostitution. Rather, it focuses on the conflicts related to the "new women" of the Victorian era – issues arising because "middle-class girls wanted greater social independence in work and education."[43] Other themes include criticism of the sexual triteness of the times and a want for greater social sexual awareness along with equality in the workplace for working women. Shaw explained the source of the play in a letter to 'The Daily Chronicle' on 28 April 1898:

> Miss Janet Achurch (an actress and friend of Shaw's) mentioned to me a novel by some French writer (Yvette by Guy de Maupassant) as having a dramatisable story in it. It being hopeless to get me to read anything, she told me the story….In the following autumn I was the guest of a lady (Beatrice Webb) of very distinguished ability – one whose knowledge of English social types is as remarkable as her command of industrial and political questions. She suggested that I should put on the stage a real modern lady of the governing class - not the sort of thing that theatrical and critical authorities imagine such a lady to be. I did so; and the result was Miss Vivie Warren….Mrs. Warren herself was my version of the heroine of the romance narrated by Miss Achurch. The tremendously effective scene – which a baby could write if its sight were normal – in which she justifies herself, is only a paraphrase of a scene in a novel of my own, Cashel Byron's Profession (hence the title, Mrs. Warren's Profession), in which a prize

[43] Ron Ringer, Preliminary Modern History: Macquarie Revision Guides, (Macmillan Education, 2004), P. 251.

> – fighter shows how he was driven into the ring exactly as Mrs. Warren was driven on the streets.
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> (Guthrie Theatre Study Guide, 24-25).

The play speaks of prostitution, per se, probably would not have shocked a Victorian audience. "All references to the "profession" within the play are couched in euphemism."[44] What was truly shocking was the play's whole–hearted attack on the domestic imprisonment of women by the male–dominated culture of the period. Perhaps even more shocking was the suggestion that Mrs. Warren not only survived prostitution, but actually prospered from it in very real ways. And then, adding fuel to the fire of controversy, there was the sub-text of "incest in Vivie and Frank's romance."[45]

Shaw's plays can seem very dated but Mrs. Warren's Profession proves that he also has a message for the 21st Century. A man who could write that "Knowledge is power" in 1893 was arguably 100 years ahead of his time. The playwright described this as "a play for women" in his preface and he is undoubtedly correct, if only because none of his four male characters is more than a cipher.

Shaw's real target is hypocrisy. It was fine for a man in Victoria's England to entertain himself as he chose but for a woman to profit from it is completely

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[44] Wilfred Granville, The Theater Dictionary: British And American Terms In The Drama, Opera, And Ballet, (The University of Michigan, Philosophical Library, 1952), P. 127.

[45] Maryann K. Crawford, Shaw: The Annual Bernard Shaw Studies, Volume 25, (Penn State Press, 2005), P. 148.

unacceptable. Shaw's view is clear as he roundly attacks the odious Sir George Crofts. Kitty warren had to drag her way out of the white lead factory somehow. A baronet should not sully himself and force women into semi-slavery just to get a 35% return. The values of one hundred years ago are finely demonstrated by the banning of such a moral play for thirty-two years. Mrs. Warren's profession, likened to that of a nurse, may have been a matter to be brushed under the carpet and it is not even named. Shaw was forced to have Vivie write it down rather than allow sin to speak its name. Shaw's provocative comedy was considered to be too controversial for the English stage. Full of strong characters, witty and sharp dialogue, the play is "an indictment of the double standards in Victorian society regarding sex and money."[46]

Writing in 1894, Shaw embraced conventions surrounding sexual professionals while nailing society's hypocrisy. This means he writes elliptically and around the topic. Mrs. Warren alludes to her profession. Vivie throws about convention and respectability. And the play makes distinctions among respectable women, independent women, respectable women who have fallen from respectability, women who are a "caution," women who are "rowdy" and "devils," and at the bottom of the list – hinted at but never said directly – women who live off the virtue of other women, that is, manage bordellos. Mr. Shaw had the audacity, the courage and the vision to believe that theatre could change people's minds. Think about it. Yes, the mind is certainly a terrible thing to waste – but its a daunting thing to try and change. And Shaw wasn't just talking about his own; he actually had the temerity to set about changing other people's mind.

[46] Herbert. I, London Theatre Record, Volume 11, Issues 14-26, (The University of Michigan, I. Herbert, 1991), P. 1230.

Vivie was a rock star in our eyes – fierce, self aware, and determined to live in autonomy–free of the baggage of past legacies and social heritage. The original "you go", girl. We frankly barely remember the mother, except as prod for all that exhilarating rebellion. Vivie is the symbol of the modern 'Everywoman' who sets out to carve a niche for herself in the male dominated world. It is important to note that it was during this time that individualism, the Women's suffrage movements and other movements were on the rise.

Mrs. Warren's Profession is about modern social problems (often called "blue–book"[47] plays, after the traditional name for a parliamentary investigatory report), that were designed to force audiences to face unpleasant truths about themselves and their world. The "woman-with-a-past"[48] was a common theatrical theme in London in the 1890s, as for example in one of the decade's most celebrated plays, The Second Mrs. Tanqueray. What makes Shaw's treatment different – even revolutionary – is how the play refuses to preach, and how the woman in question refuses to apologise for her past behaviour. Shaw himself wrote the following in Plays Unpleasant:

> "Mrs. Warren's profession was written to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing and

[47] Bernard Shaw Plays Unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, Ed., Dan H. Laurence, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P.XX.

[48] Jean Chothia, The New Woman and Other Emancipated Woman Plays, (Oxford University Press, 1998), P. xiii.

> overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution…. No normal woman would be a professional prostitute if she could better herself by being respectable, nor marry for money if she could afford to marry for Love."[49]

"Shaw's greatest and most complete portrait of an artist is the character that he created for himself, G.B.S., the platform Orator, Corno di Bassetto - the music critic, the drama critic, the playwright, and, in his personal life, the philanderer, the socialist, the devil's disciple, etc."[50] Shaw reveals that he does indeed believe in it, even to the extent of suggesting, like Wilde, that "a mask enables a man to tell the truth or, like Yeats, that the mask is a link with the permanent in existence." [51] Shaw says that acting is self-realisation, not sham, that a great actor, given a great role, can achieve an expression of his total personality which is more real than life itself. In him individuality in concentrated, fixed, gripped in one exceptionally gifted man, and, if he were given a part that shows all sides of him and realises him wholly to us and to himself, he would become "Completely real" as he lost "the conventional mask" that man in everyday affairs has to assume. The argument is very similar to that of Yeats: "Active Virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask."[52] Shaw's fictional artists consciously pose; but he readily acknowledged his ability to act a role,

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[49] Bernard Shaw Plays Unpleasant: Bernard Shaw Library, Bernard Shaw Penguin Classics, Ed., Dan H. Laurence, (Penguin Classics, 2000), P.181.

[50] Elsie Bonita Adams, Bernard Shaw and The Aesthetes, (Ohio State University Press, 1971), P. 148.

[51] Ibid, P.149.

[52] Ibid, P.149.

justifying his pose by proposing, like Henry James, that "humanity is immense, and reality has myriad forms."[53]

Shaw explains:

"Like all men, I play many parts; and none of them is more or less real than another. To one audience I am the occupier of a house in Adelphi Terrace; to another I am "One of those damned socialists." A discussion in a club of very young ladies as to whether I could be more appropriately described as an old josser or an old geezer ended in the carrying of an amendment in favour of an old bromide. I am also a soul of infinite worth. I am, in short, not only what I can make of myself, which varies greatly from hour to hour and emergency to no-emergency, but what you can see in me."[54]

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[53] Sheldon M. Novick, Henry James: The Mature Master, (The University of Michigan, Random House, 2007), P. 68.

[54] Elsie Bonita Adams, Bernard Shaw and The Aesthetes, (Ohio State University Press, 1971), P. 148.