

**George Bernard Shaw's *Plays Unpleasant*: A Statement of Shavianism**

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**Abstract:**

George Bernard Shaw's *Plays Unpleasant* are mainly devoted to social criticism; the target of attack is capitalism, the ideologies and systems of ethical values which the dramatist considers are the weapons of capitalist system. The criticism he is putting forward is not purely negative. It has its positive aspects. The dramatist tries to evolve an alternative set of values which can serve as a guide to determine the strategy and tactics of socialism. Shaw lambasts the various social institutions in these plays. The whole of Shaw's vehement tirade against social, political, economic and religious institutions is explicable in terms of his plea for the reconstruction of society on the socialistic pattern. These plays make an argument not for creating a void of social instincts but for their adequate nurture.

**Keywords:** Socialism/Capitalism, Superman, Shavianism

George Bernard Shaw published *Plays Pleasant* and *Plays Unpleasant* in two volumes in 1898. These volumes constituted three plays of each genre. Each play proved a bombshell in contemporary literary world. The book heralded the advent of a powerful genius on the dramatic scene. The main purpose of the author seemed to be to shock and shake the people out of their moral, economic and social stupor. Shaw was clearly an adroit blend of the artist and the preacher.

In 1892, Shaw completed a play he had started in collaboration with William Archer several years before. The play called “Widowers’ Houses” dealt with the evils of slum landlordism. It was not a success, but it was a shock. G.B. Shaw left the theatre with the laurels of notoriety adorning his Mephistophelean brow and woke up next morning to find himself infamous.

The following year, he tried again, hugely enjoying his diabolical reputation and fully realizing that even bad publicity is still publicity. This time in 1893, the play was about the New Woman and he named it “The Philanderer”. Unfortunately, it had to be shelved because of slender resources of Independent Theatre. Moreover, it was doubtful whether any fashionable West End star would have risked his reputation by appearing in a play by the author of “Widowers’ Houses”. With nothing to lose and everything to gain, the undaunted author immediately wrote “Mrs. Warren’s Profession,” a play about prostitution, Mrs. Warren being a purveyor of the trade. This play was forbidden on the British stage until 1926, though it was produced in the United States in 1905.

“Widowers’ Houses” is Shaw’s first play. The dramatic essence of the play is the disillusionment of Dr. Trench and his re-education. Another point made out in the play is that slums which are the creation of social circumstances will be abolished when better circumstances replace the former ones.

“Widowers’ Houses” is a discussion play. Harry Trench, a young medical doctor, highly connected, wishes to marry Blanche Sartorius, daughter of a wealthy, self-made man. His moral sensibilities are outraged by the discovery that Sartorius’ money is derived from exorbitant rents on slum dwellings. He refuses to marry Blanche unless she will consent to forswear her father’s money. One circumstance after another discloses to Harry Trench that his own income is derived

from mortgages on Sartorius' properties. At the end, bewildered and disillusioned, Trench accepts the source of his own money, accepts Blanche with Sartorius' money and forgets his 'idealism' in the face of a web of corruption so intricate that it seems useless to try tearing it. Even Sartorius is not an unmitigated monster. He is a respectable man, a model father and a vestryman. This business is 'to provide homes suited to the small means of very poor people, who require roofs to shelter them just like other people.'(Shaw, *Complete Plays* 17)

It is "a propagandist play, a didactic play- a play with a purpose" (Shaw, *Complete Prefaces* 702). Shaw himself writes of it as follows:

I perversely distorted it to be a grotesquely realistic exposure of solemn landlordism and matrimonial ties between them and the pleasant people with 'independent' incomes, who imagine that such sordid matters do not touch their own lives. Thus the satirical intention of the author was combined with a good deal of farcical trivialities so that the result was that a serious subject was treated with a degree of annoying seriousness. (Shaw, *Complete Prefaces* 719)

"Widowers' Houses" is notable for its absence of a conventional happy conclusion and its lack of a villain, as the real villain is society at large. The theme is a problem of conscience in a society that does not allow conscience. The play is an attack upon society, not upon individuals. As a matter of fact, we are as guilty of slum landlordism as the landlord himself and, therefore, sentimental indignation against one particular person is not only futile but also ridiculous. We are all victims of the octopus of capitalism. He stresses the truth that an individual realizes his individuality not in a vacuum but in a social context, that he derives his thought, content and frame of mind from the community values and social ills amidst which he lives, that his very character and the sense of the meaning of life is conditioned by the social climate he

breathes in. Thus the subject of the play is the ethics of individualism. In this play, Shaw provides not the unhappy ending of the conventional naturalists, but the happy ending of ordinary English melodrama Shavianized. He himself said in the preface of the play dated March 1893, “you will please judge it, not as a pamphlet in dialogue, but as in intention a work of art as much as any comedy of Moliere's is a work of art, and as pretending to be a better made play for actual use and long wear on the boards than anything that has yet been turned out by the patent constructive machinery.”(Shaw, *Widowers'*)

The play closes with the problems of socialism unsolved. Referring to “Widower's Houses” Shaw remarked, “I heartily hope the time will come when this play will be utterly impossible and unintelligible” (Maurice, *Real* 313). “Widowers' Houses” is Shaw's protest against economic disparity which causes exploitation of fellow human beings. Shaw observed that, actuated by the principles of grab as much as you can, every individual considers it safe to exploit the weakness, destitution and helplessness of the other fellow human beings.

About “The Philanderer” Shaw wrote, “In The Philanderer I have shown the grotesque sexual compacts made between men and women under marriage laws which represent to some of us a political necessity (especially for other people), to some a divine ordinance, to some a romantic ideal, to some a domestic profession for women, and to some that worst of blundering abominations, an institution, which society has outgrown but not modified, and which “advanced” individuals are therefore forced to evade” (Maurice, *Real* 122).

In those times, Henrik Ibsen propagated a cult of his own, later known as Ibsenism. In it, the supreme importance was given to individual character and personality. In the development and enrichment of the individual, Ibsen saw the only hope of really cultured and enlightened society.

“The Philanderer” revolves around the New Woman, Henrik Ibsen’s special protégée. That Ibsen’s spirit pervades the play is not surprising, for it was written while the Ibsen controversy raged. The Norwegian is almost one of its characters and in the shape of a bust on the Ibsen club mantelpiece centre, it holds his own throughout the second act. At any moment, one feels, the bust may speak.

“The Philanderer” is a play of dramatic contrast between the positive and the negative characters with an anti-romantic and anti-climatic denouement. The contrast is made on the basis of Ibsenism; the positive characters are true blue Ibsenites; the negative characters, one an Ibsenite passing for such merely on the strength of a conduct certificate, and the other to whom the very name of Ibsen is anathema. Though Shaw greatly admired Ibsen, he was no Ibsenite and presents the Ibsenites in the play with detachment. Among those who take a negative attitude to change in the Ibsenite direction, Cuthbertson is the leader, the leading representative of manly sentiment in London. Col. Daniel Craven also accepts the old order with unquestioning credulity of the ‘manly woman’ interested in the ‘Scandinavian humbug’ Mrs. Grace Transfield is the elder one. She is the New Woman painted with vengeance. Sylvia Craven is the worst offender and a greater greenhorn as the New Woman who mimics the dress, language and manners of menfolk. In spite of the satiric slant, the positive qualities of the New Women are unmistakable and are thrown into refreshing relief by contrast with womanly woman, Julia, “a beautiful, dark, tragic-looking woman.”(Shaw, *Complete Plays* 31) She is extremely jealous and has no dignity and wants to marry Charteris at any cost. Charteris is the male positive character in the play, a true Ibsenite. He laughs at himself and has clever, imaginative and humorous ways. In no other play of Shaw’s is the conflict of the positive and the negative characters presented so directly and simply as in “The Philanderer”. Though the outer-action of the play is a story of two women and

one man, inner-action of the play is the defeat of a negative by a positive character. As for the construction of the play, it starts as a romance and ends as the burlesque of a romance.

Shaw wrote about "The Philanderer": "It is a topical comedy which contains one or two good scenes in a framework of mechanical farce and trivial filth" (Rook 55). Shaw has classified the play as "unpleasant" yet he vehemently asserts in a letter to Archibald Henderson, "Character is not passionless, not unscrupulous, and a sincere, not pseudo, Ibsenist"(302). But to tolerate him, it is necessary to get completely away from the code of honour and the romantic sinology of the French stage and of the Victorian stage dominated by it.

Shaw's next play "Mrs. Warren's Profession" had as its subject, prostitution. The play was written to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply underpaying undervaluing and maltreating women so shamefully that the poorer of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together.

The economic basis of slum landlordism is presented in "Widowers' Houses". Prostitution and economic motives that may lead to it are the theme of Mrs. Warren's Profession. Shaw as an artist-philosopher dug to the root of the matter, as a condition of rooting out the evil. He, as an artist, looks at every side of the question. He presented the play as an artistic presentation of a factually relentless analysis of a social problem, served ice-cold.

The play "Mrs. Warren's Profession" deals with an uncouth mother and a detached daughter; the mother drives the dirty trade of harlotry; the daughter does not know until the end, the appalling origin of all her own comfort and refinement. The daughter, when discovery is made, freezes up into an iceberg of contempt; which is indeed a very womanly thing to do. The mother explodes into pulverising cynicism and practicality; which is also very womanly. The

dialogue is radical and sweeping; the daughter says the trade is, loathsome, the mother answers that she loathes it herself; that every healthy person does loathe the trade by which she lives. And without any doubt, the general effect of the play is that the trade is loathsome. Undoubtedly, the upshot is that a brothel is a miserable business and a brothel keeper is a miserable woman. Vivie, the daughter, though she quite understands the story of her mother's career, turns to her with fury when she comes to know that her mother, now a wealthy woman, is still continuing her highly profitable business.

George Bernard Shaw said about this play: "I believe that any society which desires to found itself on a high standard of integrity of character in its units should organize itself in such a fashion as to make it possible for all men and all women to maintain themselves in reasonable comfort without selling their affections and their convictions" (Colbourne 123).

Mrs. Warren's case is well-presented and her moral standards are juxtaposed to those of the callous Sir George Crofts who is her business partner. As a socialist and economist, Shaw throws the blame for the condition exposed not upon Mrs. Warren and Sir George Crofts as individuals but upon the prevailing capitalist social order. Shaw explained that this play seemed to him as "a faithful presentation of the economic basis of modern commercial prostitution" (Henderson, 309). "Mrs. Warren's Profession" is an artistic masterpiece. As said in a speech made by Mr. Daly, one of the actors, after the presentation of the play, "This play is not presented as an entertainment but as a dramatic sermon and an exposé of a social condition and an evil, which our purists attempt to ignore, and by ignoring allow it to gain strength" (Evans141). It is an act of declared hostility against capitalistic society, the inertia of public opinion, the lethargy of the public conscience and the criminality of a social order which begets and permits such appalling social conditions. Shaw is not naive to believe that when poverty is

abolished every woman would become chaste. He makes Mrs. Warren continue her trade even after she becomes rich. He also makes Vivie reject her. Shaw's Mrs. Warren, as she is presented in the play does not illustrate the thesis, that it is the non-payment of a living wage that makes the prostitute. Her sister Lizzy and her niece may be better illustrations of the thesis. Even in a socialist society, Mrs. Warren's exuberance will make her attempt at seducing the commissars or the philosopher kings. But the point of the play is not lost. All that the play says is that in a decently organized society, where a living wage is a universally enforceable right, where a healthy homely atmosphere and sound education are within the reach of all, commercialized prostitution will become impossible. Mrs. Warren's Profession, as Shaw would see it, is not an expression and fulfillment of Mrs. Warren's innate depravity of sexual desire but an instance of how a corrupt system of economy might subvert dignity of an individual.

According to Shaw, socialism was the only means to arrest the process of dehumanization. Socialism for Shaw was not only a political and economic state but also a moral state that provided equal opportunities to all the individuals for self-development.

These three plays give an insight into typical Shavian females. In "Widowers' Houses" where men are common self-seekers, the heroine Blanche is a fury, who can half-strangle her maid in a fit of temper. She, very much unlike the heroine of melodrama, does not give up everything to follow her lover, when he rejects slum money. In "The Philanderer" we meet the first New Woman created by Shaw, Grace Transfield. She pontificates to Charteris, "I will never marry a man I love too much. It would give him a terrible advantage over me" (Shaw, *Complete Plays* 41). She wants not the love of a man but his respect. Where Vivie, in "Mrs. Warren's Profession", is an attractive specimen of the sensible, able, highly educated, young middle class English woman, "Proud, strong, confident, self possessed" (Shaw, *Complete Plays* 62). She is

practical and does not seek the bubble of academic reputation. She is the positive, professional New Woman of Shaw.

Shaw's Creative Evolution or Life Force was also introduced in these first plays of his. He presented the agents of Life Force on the stage. These may not be the Supermen but they were definitely the ancestors of Superman. The first among them was disillusioned, re-educated Dr. Trench. Starting as a negative character, on account of his ignorance of life and non-practical attitude to it, he ends as a positive character in both respects. Though we may say he seems quite a remote ancestor of Superman. Vivie is another agent of Life Force. She is sensible, able, highly educated, proud, strong, self-possessed, practical and very positive. Charteris, the true Ibsenite, was definitely destined by Shaw to be the father of Superman. Shaw intends us to look upon Julia as a victim or pawn in the game played by Life Force. Was not Julia unconsciously impelled by Life Force to find a suitable father for her children? Was it not her tragedy that Charteris escapes?

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