

GB SHAW'S *WIDOWERS' HOUSES*: CAPITALISTS' WORLD OF PANDEMONIUM

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Abstract

Twentieth century is one of the most vital and exciting periods in English drama, rivalling the Elizabethan theatre in thematic scope and stylistic ambition. It has produced a wider range of plays than any previous era: developing and cutting across traditional genres, as well as extending the subject matter of the stage. Stimulated by new ideologies, from Fabian socialism to Marxism and more recently feminism, playwrights achieved a public voice. The social importance of their work has been acknowledged by Nobel Prizes for GB Shaw, T.S. Eliot and Beckett as well as more recently a number of knighthoods awarded to major playwrights, from Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan to Alan Ayckbourn, Tom Stoppard, and even a dramatist with a radical reputation, David Hare. Bernard Shaw's lecture on "The Quintessence of Ibsenism," marks a watershed between traditionalism and new politicized forms of drama. Shaw bridges the vacuum between the two centuries where the revolutionary ideas regarding the societal conflicts empower and resonate in romantic tragedy, melodrama and the well-made play. The play *Widowers' Houses* (1885) reaches to a petrified height to uncover the ruthless atrocities in the name of shelter by the Capitalists of the eighteenth century to till today.

Problem Play' is a useful term to apply to the kind of play which treats a particular social or moral problem so as to make people think intelligently about it. It is also called discussion play, the comedy of ideas, thesis play and the propaganda play. It is somewhat tragic in tone in that it naturally deals with painful human dilemmas; it is the kind of play that, by implication, asks a definite question and either supply an answer or leaves it to us to find one. It is a popular mode of drama of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. This type of dramatic form was originated in France during the nineteenth century but it was popularised by the Norwegian

playwright Henrik Ibsen, the mentor and guide of Shaw and in one way, Shaw transformed himself completely into a flower with tact on his own writing under the ubiquitous shadow of Ibsen's ideologies, and of course *Widowers' Houses* is one such form of Problem Play.

Henry Arthur Jones, an English dramatist and A. W. Pinero, an English actor, dramatist and stage director in the eighteenth century introduced this form of dramatic art into England at the end of the nineteenth century. John Galsworthy, an English novelist and playwright and G. B. Shaw, a playwright, dramatist, critic and political activist of the eighteenth century took this form of drama to the pinnacles of glory and success in England. Harley Granville-Barker, an English actor manager, director, producer, critic and playwright was the last practitioner of this dramatic type in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Widowers' Houses is a play of a very different sort, 'unpleasant' rather than 'pleasant' in more ways than one. In his preface, Shaw calls it "a propagandist play... saturated with the vulgarity of the life it represents."ⁱ 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. The living conditions of many people were shocking and degrading. As a young man, Archibald Henderson points out, "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."ⁱⁱ In the formative years of his emergence as a playwright with *Widowers' Houses*, the course of Shaw's career was deeply influenced by his friend and self-proclaimed mentor, William Archer.

This play signifies 'Social Realism' with its dark cadence in focusing the grim living conditions of the down-trodden mercantile and poor people of Europe in late nineteenth century. 'Social realism' is a movement in 90s during the industrial revolution in Europe for developing the urban poor by considering their problems. This revolution is a work of art by great painters of the eighteenth century like Honore Daumier, Gustave Courbet and Jean Francois Millet: the French painters, caricaturists, sculptors who depicted the pathetic living conditions of the poor sufferers through their paintings and sculptures. Shaw has taken the stage to portray the oppression of the poor by the capitalists in the eighteenth century England. He brilliantly used the art of dramatizing the clamour of the slum-dwellers in a more realistic approach. The cry echoes even today with an ill-treated melancholy. The social realism of twentieth century was started in 1930 by 'The Eight' in the New York of the USA. These eight painter-reformists of New York City namely Robert Henri-the leader of the group, Everett Shinn, John Sloan, Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, Maurice Prendergast, George Luks, and William J. Glackens had a passion to narrate the grotesque enigma of the poor. George Bellows later joined them. So they started to define these people on their canvas and brought to light the amazing and hideous situations of the life of New Yorkers during the great depression in 1929 that lasted up to 1939. This great depression was an economic crunch all over the world, especially in the USA. Thus social realism got its roots in the eighteenth century France that spread to the whole world. The agitating issues of the poor, especially the slum-dwellers got into lime-light in the wondrous play *Widowers' Houses* by Shaw in 1885 itself!

Widowers' Houses was first performed in the year 1892 and was published in 1893. The play was written in 1885 by GB Shaw in collaboration with William Archer, but both discovered

that their ways were different from each other and could not continue working together. Shaw later wrote third act at the invitation of J. T. Grein, founder of the Independent Theatre Society in 1891. The play was first stage performed on 9 December 1892 at the Royalty Theatre under the guardianship of Independent Theatre Society.

This play discusses slum-landlordism and the exploitation of the destitute and homeless by the mercantile and the upper classes alike; its avowed intention is to implicate every member of the audience in that social crime. Slum-landlordism was a burning problem in London towards the close of the nineteenth century. For Shaw a play had to be “a vital growth and not a mechanical construction,”ⁱⁱⁱ opines Christopher Innes. Shaw writes plays with a strong purpose to transform the nation to his opinions. Slum-landlordism was a burning problem in London towards the close of the nineteenth century. He uses stage to reform the society. According to William Archer, as stated by Hisashi Morikawa, this play was titled as *Rheingold* because the first act was to begin “in a hotel garden on the Rhine, and in the end the hero was to succeed in throwing the tainted treasure of his father-in-law, metaphorically speaking, into the Rhine.”^{iv}

All the characters of this play depend upon their motives and situations where they see themselves in a more complex ways and are majorly recluse characters. William Archer comments on his characters as “Shaw’s leading figures are, as a rule, either his mouthpieces or his butts.”^v Harry Trench, the younger son of an aristocratic family is the protagonist of the play and possesses the quality of a subtle and soft spoken attribute in his nature. He is a doctor by profession who raises himself by hard means. Trench is a soft human with moral ethics in the beginning of the play but clever and intelligent at the last act. He is content in his life until he meets his beloved fortune of life Miss Blanche, the daughter of Mr. Sartorius. His impression towards Sartorius is not good for he does slum business in a nasty and vulgar way. His daughter is quiet indicative of depending on her father’s money. Trench could not digest this and tries to convince her but in vain. They get apart and meanwhile trench thinks about his tainted money that comes from Sartorius. He rejuvenates his ideology at the end of the play and discusses with Sartorius about his future, of course Miss Blanche. Trench confides about Sartorius’s money being involved in his income and is helpless to restore all that money to Sartorius and accepts his fate and Blanche. After lending an ear to Lickcheese’s poignant speech, Trench, who has held Sartorius in high esteem regarding his wealth and property, becomes perturbed and says:

Do you mean to say that all his property- all his means come from this sort of thing?

Lickcheese: Every penny of it, Sir.

Cokane Adds:

...the love of money is the root of all evil.

Lickcheese says:

....We’d all like to have the tree growing in our garden. ^{vi} (Act II, P.81)

When Lickcheese again solicits Trench to recommend his plea to Sartorius, he becomes furious and says:

I will not. It’s a damnable business from beginning to end; and you deserve no better luck for helping in it. I have seen it all among the out-patients at the hospital; and it used to make my blood to think that such things couldn’t be prevented. (Act II, P.81)

Trench meets Blanche and their romance suddenly turns into a heated discussion on Sartorius’ ill-gotten income. After having been told by Lickcheese that Sartorius would do anything for

his daughter's sake, Trench refuses to accept the income that Blanche gets for him as dowry. He declares:

Yes, impossible. I have resolved not to take any money from your father. (Act II, P.85)

When Trench encounters Sartorius later, he tells him:

You are nothing of the sort. I found out this morning from your man-Lickcheese, or whatever his confounded name is that your fortune has been made out of a parcel of unfortunate creatures that have hardly enough to keep body and soul together-made by screwing, and bulling, and threatening, and all sorts of pettifogging tyranny. (Act II, P.91)

Trench's conscience turns to ashes when he is told that he too like Lady Roxdale and her entire social circle lives on "tainted money derived from investments in Sartorius's slums. Morally beggared, he is reduced to a living picture of disillusion."^{vii} However the disillusionment of the hero is not the process of education to something better, as it subsequently becomes in Pleasant Plays such as *Arms and the Man* and *Candida*. In the third act, Roper says, 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."^{viii}

Harry Trench learns nothing to save his own guilt and his powerlessness to change society. In this respect, he resembles the 'average homebred Englishman' described by Shaw in the preface to *Plays Unpleasant*, willing at once "to shut his eyes to the most villainous abuses if his own welfare is threatened,"^{ix} as pointed out by Innes. And even though the wretched Harry Trench allows himself to be persuaded by Sartorius's arguments, he is still chucked out by his angry fiancée, who refuses to marry a man who always thinks like a fool.

Mr. Sartorius changes his attitude in a very astounding way and surprises us with his witty austere and is completely utilised by Shaw for his message to be known by the audience who admits his business authoritatively before everybody. He is a good man to his daughter Blanche and a harsh, calculated hypocrite to Trench and Lickcheese. Mr. Sartorius is the villain who derives pleasure in collecting the rents from the poor and destitute of London slums that he owns. He makes his day by doubling the property through the hideous means of atrocities on the helpless with his nostalgic and wicked allegiance. He is complex by nature and redeems the situations around him to his own consideration. He believes in a practical world and not in an emotional one. His attitude is shocking and often surprises with a tinge of arrogance and pride. He is a man who thinks that rich people have the right to live in beautiful houses, middle class people are satisfied with nice houses and poor people have no choice and they should live in slums who have no emotions and feelings at all. But, Sartorius tries to defend the means of his earning when he pleads:

....as to my business, it is simply to provide homes suited to the small means of very poor people, who require roofs to shelter them just like other people. Do you suppose I can keep those roofs for nothing? (Act II, P.92)

When Trench retaliates saying that it is better to live elsewhere or go to jail than living in such ragged houses, Sartorius replies:

My young friend: these poor people do not know how to live in proper dwellings: they would wreck them in a week. You doubt me: try it yourself. You are welcome to replace all the missing banisters, handrails, cistern lids and dust hole tops at your own expense; and you will

find them missing again in less than three days; burnt, sir, every stick of them. I do not blame the poor creatures: they need fires, and often have no other way of getting them. But I really cannot spend pound after pound in repairs for them to pull down...I prefer to save my money in order to provide additional houses for the homeless and to lay by a little for Blanche. (Act II, P.92-93)

The play, in the own words of Shaw, is a “grotesquely realistic exposure of Slum landlordism.”^x The title of *Widowers’ Houses* is indicative: Sartorius is a widower whose emotional nature seeks fulfilment in the relationship with his daughter, and the unnatural intensity of his concern for her is the motive force behind his ruthless pursuit of wealth. In the beginning of Shaw’s first production of this play, it got a lot of criticism from the landlords who were in London in the nineteenth century, but after interpreting clearly by the local audience *Widowers’ Houses* became the cynosure of the century. Shaw was at his best in poking the rich with his spontaneous and quick wit dialogues. Trench was thinking that his income is through honest means, and is disillusioned when Sartorius explains that the income he has got in through interest on a mortgage on the property of people like Sartorius. Sartorius says:

Yes: a mortgage on my property....What Lickcheese did for me, I do for you. He and I are alike intermediaries: you are the principal. (Act II, P.99)

Then, Trench remorsefully confides:

Well, people who live in glass houses have no right to throw stones. But, on my honor, never knew that my house was a glass one until you pointed it out. (Act II, P.94)

The lack of housing for the poor was an enormous problem during the eighteenth century. 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.”^{xi} Integrity, gentrification and the haves and have-nots of the nineteenth century London are the central ingredients in this 1892 Shavian debut effort. As Whitaker says “Shaw weighs the struggle between personal ethics and professional judgement.”^{xii}

Works Cited

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