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George Bernard Shaw's View Drama a Medium

*GB. Shaw, who is considered second to Shakespeare for his prolific writings looked at drama as a medium of expressing his ideas. In his plays pleasant and unpleasant, he aims at reflecting the society with a number of social problems which appear insolvable. Each play exposes a particular problem for which the characters almost act as mouth pieces of Shaw with a reformative zeal to change the society. Of course, the plays may lose its sheen after the problem is solved with the suitable solution. Ironically, the plays have received much impetus because of effective ideas and a constructive vision to transform the society in an exemplary way. Shaw no doubt demonstrates his artistic ability in his own way to bring about a perennial impact on the society. The present write up evaluates his dramaturgy to allure the readers to ponder over his ideas are really noteworthy. Besides, the paper pinpoints analytically the purpose behind Shaw's writings in a dramatic way. **Key Words** : prolific writings, social problems, reformative zeal, constructive vision, artistic ability, perennial impact. "In Widowers' Houses I have shown middle class respectability and younger son gentility fattening on the poverty of the slum as flies fatten on filth. That is not a pleasant theme." (George Bernard Shaw, in the preface to "Plays Unpleasant")*

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George Bernard Shaw is not, primarily, either a character-drawer or a psychologist but a dealer in personified ideas. Shavian plays bear unmistakable evidence of the new direction in which he was already trying to go in the 1890s toward a more organic, dialectical, musical form of composition focused squarely on a mechanical construction. He believed that "a play should need no plot, because if it has any natural life in it, it will construct itself, like a flowering plant, far more wonderfully than the author can possibly construct it."⁽¹⁾

Widowers' Houses written in 1892 is a play of a very different sort, unpleasant rather than pleasant. It is a propagandist play saturated with the vulgarity of the life it represents. Its theme is the ruthless exploration of the destitute and homeless by the mercantile and the upper classes. The tenants were treated like pigs and insects. The owners never gave their ears to the problems or improved the basic living standards. Shaw through his brilliant characters in the play has beautifully assembled the shocking situations of the life in the streets of London in the late eighteenth century. The bitterness of the play may be suitable to expose the hypocrisy of a class viewing itself as guardian of higher values while violating them continuously. However,

it is not to cause doubt about their income on their part, mainly because the attack is too frontal (Strauss: 126) and hence they almost rioted on the night of the first performance (Peters: 137).

Mr. Sartorius is a self-made businessman and depends on his most notorious and run-down tenement houses of rent-collection from slums where he gives slum-housing for rents to the poorest of the poor of London. Shaw comments: "Sartorius is absolutely typical in his unconscious villainy. He lacks conviction of sin, now, the didactic object of my play is to bring conviction of sin-to make the Pharisee ... recognize that Sartorius is his own photograph."⁽²⁾ Thus, behind the absurd antics of his reconstituted stereotypes-the sweet reasonableness of the rent-gouging slumlord, the foul-tempered eroticism of his daughter, the ineffectual contrition of the good-natured but spineless hero remains the condemnation implicit in Shaw's farfetched Scriptural title, with its allusion to "the greater damnation which Jesus calls down on the Pharises and hypocrites who devour widows' houses" (Mathew 23:14). His assistant-friend Mr. Lickcheese, an unctuous, melancholy rent-collector of Dickensian format is an accomplice in rent-collecting with Sartorius. Harry is a young doctor who relies on his small

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income who was kept on high moral grounds in the beginning of the play but is made realized that his own income is a tainted one, as his salary comes from the interest from mortgaged tenements. William Cokane is a friend of Harry who binds with Lickcheese and both of them in their dialogue to please Harry, discusses and puts Shaw's idea forward:

Cokane: Ah, my dear fellow, the love of money is the root of all evil.

Lickcheese: Yes, sir, and we'd all like to have the tree growing in our garden. (p. 31)

The cynical humor of the wisecrack captures the growing sense of universal corruption that invades the play and ultimately engulfs it. The crucial scene in Shaw's reconstituted version that the lover's quarrel over money but the ensuing confrontation between the naïve idealist and the cunning and unscrupulous Sartorius, who blandly justifies his iron-handed treatment of his tenants as the best means to provide additional houses for the homeless, and to lay by a little for Blanche, the daughter of Sartorius. Charity is impractical, he reasons: when people are very poor, you cannot help them, no matter how much you may sympathize with them. So his course of action is not only reasonable but inevitable: Every man who has a heart must wish that a better state of things was practicable. But unhappily it is not. Harry learns nothing save his own guilt and his powerlessness to change society and shut his eyes to the most villainous abuses if his own welfare is threatened.

Blanche's contempt for the poor is exaggerated and unrealistic. Most of all, though, the play lacks a proletarian representative. Lickcheese may serve as one, but he turns into a capitalist himself. The criticism of economic and social conditions comes from above and considers those above. In an approach that could almost be described as patronizing, Fabianism is not about workers' self organization, but about organizing on their behalf (Davis: 13), and next to its lack of political and ideological coherence, this is probably Fabianism's weakest point.

Henry Mayhew was an investigative journalist who wrote a series of articles for the 'Morning Chronicle' about the way the poor of London lived and worked. In an article published on 24th September 1846 he described a London Street "With a tidal ditch running through it, into which drains and sewers emptied. The ditch contained the only water the people in the street had to drink, and it was 'the color of strong green tea', in fact it was 'more like watery mud than muddy water'."⁽³⁾ Many people could not afford the rents that were being charged and so they rented out space in their room to one or two lodgers who paid between two-pence and four-pence per day. Great wealth and extreme poverty lived side by side because the tenements, slums, rookeries were only a stone's throw from the large elegant houses of the rich and people lived without separate living accommodation for each family.

In his book *The Victorian Underworld*, Kellow Chesney gives a graphic description of the conditions in which many

were living: "Hideous slums, some of them acres wide, some no more than crannies big, once handsome houses, thirty or more people of all ages may inhabit a single room."⁽⁴⁾ Consequently available housing became scarce and therefore expensive, resulting in extremely overcrowded conditions. All these problems were magnified in London where the population grew at a record rate. Large houses were turned into flats and tenements and the landlords who owned them, were not concerned about the upkeep or the condition of these dwellings.

Shavian drama is the type of politically and socially charged "discussion play" made popular by George Bernard Shaw and his contemporary, Oscar Wilde. Shavian theatre is in direct contrast to the simplistic fare deplored by Shaw and typically found on the Victorian stage. For background on Shaw's philosophical and literary ideals, ask students to read Richard H. Goldstone's "Introduction" and "George Bernard Shaw: Pygmalion" in the Signet Classics Edition of *Pygmalion*.

Shaw, an established critic in his own right, took issue with the notices he received, and answered them in letters newspapers and in appendices to the original published edition of the play: "I do not hesitate to say that many of my critics have been completely beaten by the play simply because they are ignorant of society."⁽⁵⁾

Shaw's attacks had worked: Confronted with his world, in which even the protagonist was far from heroic and the antagonist was given sympathetic shadings, the critics blinked. Shaw, an established critic in his own right, took issue with the notices he received, and answered them in letters to various newspapers and in appendices to the original published edition of the play. "I do not hesitate to say that many of my critics have been completely beaten by the play simply because they are ignorant of society."⁽⁶⁾

Progressive reform is then not only carried out in the workers' interests, but very much for the middle classes and those even higher to remain above. Concessions are made, but only to prevent the threat from below, and, even worse, could be reversed once the threat is no longer acute. Having worked in an estate office in Dublin as a young man, where he 'made collections of weekly rents from very poor tenants,' he was familiar with the conditions and attitudes towards slum housing. His portrayals of Sartorius, the slum landlord, and Trench, the protagonist who finds his money is tainted by the exploitation of the poor, suggested less that they were at fault due to their actions and more that they failed as citizens because, once conscious of their unwitting participation in a society that exploited the poor to their benefit, they did not seek to change anything.

Along similar lines, and to return from the political sphere to that of drama, *Widowers' Houses* is a play about the poor without any poor in it; it is a play about socialism without a socialist in it. Shaw remedied this shortcoming in future plays or at least gave plays a more entertaining character, but *Widowers' Houses* lacks such elements. This is to arguing against the use of the stage for political or even

propagandistic purposes in general. On the contrary, many dramatists and writers followed and follow a political agenda. However, even though audiences do not necessarily always want to see pleasant plays, the contrary, i.e. unpleasant plays, are bound to fail, at least if their success is in part to be measured at the box office. May be this was not Shaw's first criterion for a play, but even Shaw the writer must live, Shaw the propagandist must reach an audience if he wishes to make an impact, and Shaw th socialist, when writing about the working class, should avoid making the same mistake as the bourgeois: blending the poor out and leaving the discourse among those already equipped with all the commodities they can hope for.

In the Victorian Era, the British attitude towards the poorest classes was shaped by two seemingly paradoxical beliefs. As God- fearing Protestants, they were obliged to provide help as their Christian duty. Yet the ideas of Charles Darwin and Samuel Smiles whose best- seller Self-Help was published in 1859, suggested that God helped those who helped themselves.

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