

A Feminist Reading of George Bernard Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession

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Keywords: Mrs, Warren's profession, Feminism, Court theatre, Performance

Abstract: George Bernard Shaw is one of the most eminent playwrights in history. Shaw is a feminist and many of his plays are widely studied from the feminist perspective. This paper focuses on one of his masterpieces, Mrs. Warren's Profession, and explores the feminist ideas in it by an analysis of the two main female characters: Vivie and Mrs. Warren. As a stupendous play, the performance of it is not a smooth-running one, and the result of it is firstly controversial but later well received. And its influence is far-fetching and its contribution to the feminist movement is great.

1. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on July 26, 1856. He was the third child of the family, which is a rather unhappy one. His father drunk heavily and frequently and his mother was a Protestant who sang at the Catholic churches and had an affair with her voice teacher, George J. Vandeleur Lee. When Shaw was young, he was often bullied by other students at school and his father refused to pay for his higher education even he could afford it. Later, Shaw left London, where he spent most of his rest life there, to reunite with his mother and his sisters, who had exerted a great influence on Shaw, like Peters said, that: "both women rebelled against their gender-defined roles and were crucial in Shaw's sympathy with the plight of the independent woman" (6). Born in a circumstance where women who are closest to him are feminists, it is no wonder that many new women appears later in many of his plays and feminism becomes one of the major themes in his works. Peters also points out that: "it was his mother's assertion of female power and her defiance of assigned female roles concerning sexuality, respectability and career fulfillment that most affect Shaw" (6). Mrs. Warren's Profession is one of Shaw's earliest plays and is generally regarded as a feminist play. In the play, Shaw depicts Vivie as a woman who is independent and desires for self-respect and self-fulfillment, which is part of the character of his mother's. Furthermore, Shaw even dares to address to an issue which is not supposed to be talked about at his time in British society, that is, Prostitution. Meanwhile, it is believed that it is women who should be blamed for Prostitution, but for Shaw it is the fault of society and women are the unfortunate victims of it.

Feminist movement in the United Kingdom has started in the middle 19th century. With the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and other feminist works written by other early feminists, women in the middle class began to realize that women are in a rather unequal status compared to men, they rebelled against the Victorian norms for women and asked for equal education rights, reproductive rights and the right to vote (Wikipedia). They

paid attention to numerous situations that reflected the unequal status of women and asked for reform. The phenomenon that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was criticized for its innovative ideas on women's passive and inferior position was no longer in existence, and many other feminist works sprung up with the development of the feminist movement. Writers supported for the feminist movement and for the equality of men and women through exposing the unequal situation of women from various perspectives. Meanwhile, with the fast development of the first feminist movement in Britain, one kind of women appeared on the stage, that was, the new women. According to Stevens, the term "new woman" became popular through the use of the British-American writer Henry James and new woman referred to those feminists who were educated and independent and who mostly had their own career (27). In George Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Vivie is definitely a new woman who is well-educated and independent and aspires for a career. Yet Shaw's feminist ideas are not only exposed through the depiction of the new woman Vivie, but also through the shaping of another female character, her mother, Mrs. Warren, a woman who runs a brothel. This paper focuses on a close reading of George Bernard Shaw's play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* from the feminist perspective by analyzing the two main characters in the play: Vivie and Mrs. Warren, to make a clear understanding of Shaw's feminist ideas and by reflecting on the significance of the performance of the feminist play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

2. A Feminist Analysis of Two Main Characters in Mrs. Warren's Profession

Mrs. Warren's Profession is one of the many masterpieces of George Bernard Shaw. People speak highly of the play for its successful shaping of two female characters in the play: Vivie and Mrs. Warren. The play shows Shaw's sympathy with women and his encouragement of new women and criticizes the society for its infliction of women's bitterness. This part will mainly focus on the analysis of the two main female characters in the play and offers a close reading of Shaw's feminist ideas. According to Xu Cui, "there are mainly two kinds of women, one is the 'angel in the house' who obeys the rules of this patriarchal society and the other one is the representative of "new woman" who denies orders and requirements of this system" (21). Here in the play Vivie represents the new woman, while Mrs. Warren is more pathetic than the "angel in the house", she belongs to the kind of "fallen woman" (Marshik I) who is stuck in prostitution.

2.1 The New Woman: Vivie

Vivie lives in an age when Victorian lady prevails. During the era symbolized by the reign of British monarch Queen Victoria, women did not have suffrage rights, the right to sue, or the right to own property. This can be viewed as a precise description of Victorian lady in the 19th century, and women were supposed to be inferior to men and they were not equally treated with men. There were even two terms to describe the women who were confined by Victorian norms, the first is "angel in the house" and the second is "the household general" (Wikipedia). These two terms are the best description of women in the 19th century. They were confined to their family, they had no independency and all their responsibility was to please their husbands and to take care of the family, and they were "angel" and "general" in the family house.

However, with the development of the first feminist movement, middle class women who received higher education started to get rid of the Victorian norms imposed on them. They tried to get out of the house and to have a career of their own. They were well-educated and independent and called for a change in women's social status. And they were the new women that we mentioned above.

Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is no doubt a new woman. In the first act of the play, when

Shaw tries to offers us a general picture of Vivie, he describes her like this:

“she is an attractive specimen of the sensible, able, highly-educated young middle-class Englishwoman. Aged 22. prompt, strong, confident, self-possessed. Plain, business-like dress, but not dowdy. She wears a chatelaine at her belt, with a fountain pen and a paper knife among its pendants” (Act1)

As what Shaw describes Vivie, she is “highly-educated” and actually as he later points out that: “she has what amounts to a high Cambridge degree” (Act1). Having received equal higher education with men, Vivie is certainly not a Victorian lady who regards taking care of the family as their whole responsibility and who are totally dependent on their husbands. In terms of the dresses of Vivie, it is also rather unconventional. Women in the 19th century were supposed to wear delicate dress mostly with laces to manifest the femininity, but Vivie wears a “business-like” dress which is unorthodox in women’s dresses. What makes her look the most extraordinary is perhaps the “fountain pen” and “paper knife” she carries with her, since “pen” and “knife” are definitely not accustomed to be seen with a woman. Another important feature of Victorian women was that they stayed at home most of their life, but for Vivie, this will never happen to her. In the end of the play, when Vivie finally know the details of the business that her mother has dealt with, she decides to leave her mother who has supported her financially and “ goes at her work with a plunge, and soon becomes absorbed in her figures” (Act IV). Therefore, Vivie is a new woman also for the reason that she is an independent woman who can live on her own without relying on her mother or her husband in the future. She is courageous enough to go out of the family and is capable to support herself. In this sense, Vivie is a new woman indeed.

2.2 The Fallen Woman: Mrs. Warren

Prostitution was a sensitive topic in the 19th century and literary works were cautious dealing with it. However, Stevens pointed in his thesis that:

“Despite this fear of the erotics of reading, the nineteenth-century also saw an explosion of texts that attempted to explain, condemn, defend, or otherwise address prostitution. As social historians and literary scholars have demonstrated, prostitution was the topic of heated debate, particularly in the second half of the century, and inspired countless novels, poems, and plays” (2).

Mrs. Warren’s Profession belongs to such kind of works. In the play, Shaw does not only address to the sensitive issue “Prostitution” directly, but also shows great sympathy to Mrs. Warren, the brothel runner. He throws the guilt of Mrs. Warren’s to the British public.

Although Shaw shrewdly avoids the word “Prostitution” in the play, but we can still know that Mrs. Warren is involved in that “business”. Prostitutes and pimps are immoral professions which people all hate and avoid mentioning. Traditionally, they are often blamed for their earning money through sex trade and people who involve in it always carry the social stigma. By contrast, when Shaw writes about Mrs. Warren, the brothel runner, he describes her from a brand- new perspective.

Shaw defenses for Mrs. Warren by an exposition of her miserable provenance. Mrs. Warren is born in a very poor family of four daughters and no father. One of her sisters works in a lead factory and has work twelve hours a day so that she will be paid for nine shillings a week. She works there “until she died of lead poisoning”, but “she only expected to get her hands a little paralyzed” (Act II). Another sister of Mrs. Warren’s is a model to them, “because she married a Government laborer”. This sister of hers lives a heavenly life “until he (her husband) took to drink” (Act II). The last one of Mrs. Warren’s sisters neither wants to work in the lead factory ending up dying nor to totally depend her life on a man, so she choose to be a prostitute. Later, poor and desperate, Mrs. Warren follows her sister Liz’s advice and does the same “job” as her. In doing this, Mrs. Warren’s reason is simple and great, she exclaims that: “How could you keep your self-respect in such

starvation and slavery? And what's a woman worth? What's life worth? Without self-respect" (Act II)! Mrs. Warren refuses to do as most women do at that time for the reason of self-respect. By making clear this harsh fact, Shaw wants to show that it is not the prostitute who is immoral herself and that it is the cruel and unequal society who pushes a woman who is in want of self-respect to do the filthy job. Therefore, the real immoral one is the society, and women like Mrs. Warren are just victims of it. The misery of Mrs. Warren is finally alleviated by the fact that her daughter Vivie abandons her after knowing that her mother is still dealing with prostitution. Shaw attempts to draw the society's attention to the miserable and unequal situation of women through depiction of the controversial character, Mrs. Warren.

3. The Performance of Mrs. Warren's Profession and Its Influence

The time period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century was the culminating period of Shaw as a playwright. Most of his extraordinary plays were written in between. Usually, his plays were put on stage at the Court Theatre, which was rather influential at that time and Shaw even selected the actors and actresses and directed the whole play himself. However, Mrs. Warren's Profession was an exception. Although it was composed early, it was not performed there. And actually, it was not allowed to be performed in Britain until thirty-two years later after it was written.

3.1 A Production History of a "Banned" Play

Shaw wrote Mrs. Warren's Profession in 1893, and in the next year, 1894, the play was banned by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, who declared the piece "immoral and otherwise improper for the stage". In his work, Mrs. Warren's Profession: Production History, Wansley believes that the real reason of the prohibition of the performance of the play is not due to its dealing with prostitution but because of the "unrepentant" attitude of Mrs. Warren's. In spite of the banning of the censor committee, the play was first produced in the New Lyric Club in 1902, since the club was in the exemption of the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays. Later, the play was firstly officially performed in America in New Haven and New York respectively in the year 1905 and 1907. Finally, in the year of 1925, after the play was written for 32 years, it was officially permitted to be performed in Britain at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Birmingham. Nowadays, with the development of the feminist movement, the play is no longer as controversial as before and it is performed everywhere in the UK.

3.2 The Influence of the Performance of Mrs. Warren's Profession

Wansley wrote in her work Mrs. Warren's Profession: Production History that in 1897, in the letter to actress Ellen Terry, George Bernard Shaw said that: "It's much my best play; but it makes my blood run cold: I can hardly bear the most appalling bits of it. Ah, when I wrote that, I had some nerve". As to me, it is apparent that Shaw was well aware of the result of publishing and performing the play. He knew that the play must arouse scandal in the society. Shaw was right, soon after the first informal performance of the play, a review published in the St. James Gazette the next day pronounced, "That the tendency of the play is wholly evil we are convinced. The second act contains one of the boldest and most specious defenses of an immoral life for poor women that have ever been written"(qtd. in Wansley). The remarks were harsh, but it was the result that Shaw expected and desired for. In writing the play, Shaw intended to arouse controversy in the society and pushed people to ponder upon the situation of the poor and desperate women and to rethink the real criminal who induced women to the immoral profession and draw the society's attention to women

in the inferior position.

Therefore, when Mrs. Warren's Profession was eventually staged in British theatres, it marked that Shaw's goal was finally achieved and it meant that people finally could understand such an "unrepentant" character like Mrs. Warren, who is a prostitute. George Bernard Shaw, "a feminist in spite of himself" (Peters 3), made his due contribution to the improvement of women's situation and the achievement of more women's rights as a playwright.

4. Conclusion

George Bernard Shaw, the Nobel Prize winner, who formed his feminist ideas under the influence of his mother and sisters at a young age, establishing a series of unconventional new women in his realistic dramas, including Mrs. Warren's Profession (Liu 85). The play is a bold innovation in promoting women's status, not only because of its description of a new woman who receives higher education and has an independent mind, but also for its directness in referring to prostitution. Shaw attempts to make a declaration that it is not Mrs. Warren's fault of running a brothel and involving in the immoral profession, instead the corrupt society is the real immoral one.

The performance history of the play was winding and the result of it was scandalous at first. Yet Shaw had already known that and those were his expectations indeed. What his true intention was the chaos in critics and even the society, thereby establishing a new social status for women thereafter.

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