

Mrs Warren's Profession

G.B.Shaw

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Shaw was a disciple of Ibsen so to speak, and his plays tend to be mixtures of Ibsen and Oscar Wilde. With Ibsen he shares the care of composition, including extensive and detailed stage directions with a lot of pointers to the actors. But while Ibsen is sombre and dead serious, Shaw is often flippant and always entertaining, whether intentionally or by default, can be discussed. Could it be that the English language was debased, while Norwegian at the time Ibsen came on the scene, was still in fairly pristine condition as to literary expression, and hence carried with it a sincerity of purpose, that no longer was the case with English. Fanciful maybe.

The play has a definite purpose, namely to reveal the hypocrisy of prostitution, how it is built into the system which much prefers to reward vice rather than virtue. That prostitutes are not fallen women, but driven to it by circumstances. As a result Shaw had problems with the censors, so although the play was actually written in 1894 it would take eight years before it was actually performed, and then not in a regular theatre but in a private setting where the governmental censor had no jurisdiction. The irony is, the author points out, that there is no explicit sex at all in the play, none of the kind to titillate the audiences, only its political ramifications. Plays of the former kind (and he gives some examples in his preface) have no problems passing through the eyes of the censors, being politically harmless as opposed to morally so. It is not that he in principal objects to censors, but to the choice of them, that those have been chosen badly. The censors who would be qualified to judge this kind of play should be taken from the ranks of the Salvation Army or similar bodies, well understanding the social situation of prostitutes rather than profiting from it.

The play centers around Mrs Warren, a well-preserved woman in her forties past her youthful bloom, and her clever daughter, who has been brought up separately from her mother ignorant of her actual profession. There is a reunion between the mother (Mrs Warren) and her daughter (Vivian) in a cottage in the countryside where the latter is temporarily lodging, They are joined by the mothers entourage, two gentlemen in the upper middle age, as well as the local clergyman, who by coincidence has had dealings with Mrs Warren in his youth. The daughter critical of her absent mother is completely won over by her, as she is being told by her about her background and the circumstances that forced her into the life he led. Once again nothing explicit is being mentioned, and had I seen this play performed as a child I would have been kept in the dark. One subplot consists in Vivian being courted by the son of the clergyman (maybe a reason for her residing temporarily in the village) a good-for-nothing used to sponging off, while Vivian herself is as noted very clever having done well on the Math tripos and seeing herself pursuing a career as an accountant in the City. She is depicted as a very modern woman smoking cigars and bent upon supporting herself on her wits. Now it all comes to a head when one of Mrs Warren's male companions proposes to her, in a rather straightforward

if somewhat brutal manner. He does not beat about the bush, what he can offer her is money and a social position, and when he will die before her, leave her with a substantial inheritance. She is not interested. He then discloses that he is still doing business with her mother, and that she cannot very well be so ungrateful. To cap it off, to get back at his rival, the son of the clergyman, he reveals (although it can only be a hypothesis on his part) that their romance is off, as they are half-siblings (the son actually being the issue of Mrs Warren as well).

In the final act we see Vivian in her office, where she now is a partner, smoking cigarettes (as cigars are forbidden). She tells her suitor that she now dispenses with her mother's allowance and fortune, which incidentally makes him lose interest, because after all he was only in it for the money, and to her distraught mother, who cannot make out what is meant by a returned check, she bids good-bye for ever. One thing to have made money in the past, quite another thing to continue the business as an adult. Her mother thinks she is a most unnatural daughter and goes off without even pressing her hand. Good riddance, and curtain.

Entertaining no doubt, with an assemblage of stock characters. A limited cast of six characters and no extras, and not quite the unity of time and place, but almost.

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