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APPRECIATION GUIDE



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SEASON 14

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Season 14 Connections

Promethean’s first show of the season, *Blue Stockings* by Jessica Swale, followed a group of Girton College students in their fight to earn degrees at Cambridge University. It’s not too much of a stretch to think that the high-achieving, female academics of the period, which were so beautifully fictionalized by playwright Swale, were the inspiration for the character of Vivie Warren. In *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, we see Shaw’s willingness to examine the role an educated woman could play in society; the themes of class division; and the stark economic choices faced by vulnerable populations. When this play was written, these issues were only beginning to be recognized. We’re still wrestling with them today.

MRS. WARREN’S PROFESSION BY GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

★ ABOUT THE PLAY

George Bernard Shaw wrote *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, a Play in Four Acts in 1893. He claimed that his objective was “to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together.”

📖 PLAYWRIGHT’S BIO

George Bernard Shaw, known at his insistence simply as Bernard Shaw, was born in 1856 in Dublin. He grew up in an atmosphere of genteel poverty, which, according to many of his biographers, he found more humiliating than being merely poor. Shaw moved to London in 1876, and in 1884 he joined the Fabian Society. This organization’s belief in democratic socialism, to be achieved through reform rather than revolution, informed much of his early writing. His first three full-length plays, including *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, dealt largely with social issues and were identified by the playwright as “Plays Unpleasant.” A prolific writer, Shaw wrote novels, essays, theatrical criticism, and more than forty plays, including major works such as *Man and Superman* (1902), *Pygmalion* (1912) and *Saint Joan* (1923). He is recognized as the leading dramatist of his generation, and in 1925 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died in 1950 from complications following a fall while pruning a shrub in his garden.



PROMETHEAN THEATRE ENSEMBLE

In the fall of 2005, a group of theatre artists founded Promethean Theatre Ensemble with the goal of creating productions that would emphasize rich, vivid language and imaginative storytelling. Over the following years, PTE has evolved into a committed ensemble of artists who collaborate to tell resonant, timeless stories through fresh perspectives in a style that prompts audiences to imagine the world of the play alongside its creators.

Waitaminute!

Was this play really censored? Cause that's hard to believe.



Read the contemporary account in the 1905 New York Times here: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/documents/the-uproar-over-mrs-warren-and-her-profession>

only when they are beautiful, exquisitely dressed, and sumptuously lodged and fed," and at the end of the play they are expected to "die of consumption to the sympathetic tears of the whole audience, or step into the next room to commit suicide, or at least be turned out by their protectors and passed on to be 'redeemed' by old and faithful lovers who have adored them in spite of all their levities." Shaw's pragmatic, prosaic, and political take on sex work was simply too scandalous to be seen.

In 1902 the Stage Society staged a private production of only two performances. The play was staged in the U.S. (New Haven and New York) in 1905, after a great uproar. But there would not be a public performance of the complete script in England until 1925.

When Shaw wrote *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in 1893 he believed it was unlikely to ever see a public performance. He said, "I do not think there is the least chance of the play being licensed." And it was not; the Lord Chamberlain refused to grant permission for a production, calling it "immoral and otherwise improper for the stage."

It wasn't that prostitutes and promiscuity could not be shown on the English stage – they frequently were. But they needed to conform to certain expectations. Shaw wrote, "members of Mrs. Warren's profession shall be tolerated on the stage

A Creative Work-Around

Anticipating that censors would deny permission to produce the play, in 1897 Shaw began "mutilating" (a.k.a. crafting a cleaned up version of) the script. By omitting the entire second act and making careful cuts throughout, he was able to transform Mrs. Warren into a pickpocket instead of a prostitute/procuress. This ingenious plan allowed him to retain performance rights and thwart unscrupulous "pirates" who might produce the play outside of the censors' jurisdiction. His edited version of *Mrs Warren's Profession, a Play in Three Acts*, was given a single public reading in 1898 and secured Shaw's legal rights.



Stuff to think & talk about

during intermission, with your friends after the show,
or while tossing and turning in bed tonight

Who assigns value to our labor? How has that changed in the last 125 years?

How do we justify our life choices? Why do we try?

Do you think we are more comfortable discussing distasteful topics today than we were in 1893?

Are there works *you* would consider censoring? (Be honest, now.)

What are the advantages and disadvantages of traditional marriage?

Under what circumstances does respect for our elders stop being useful?

In a culture where we are bombarded with other people trying to define us, how do we make decisions for ourselves?

What is the role of dramatic literature? How is its creation and on-stage production influenced by cultural bias and individual perspective?

What does it mean to be morally right?

The number of women sex workers in late 19th century London is estimated to have ranged from 8,000 to 80,000. The exact number can never be known, but without a doubt, the “profession” was an integral part of society throughout the United Kingdom.

In keeping with the rampant double standards of the period, the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 allowed for the forcible detainment of female sex workers while the men who frequented brothels remained at liberty to spread any disease they happened to be carrying.



Prison photograph, 1905. Selina Rushbrook was a petty criminal, prostitute and brothel keeper in Swansea, Wales. Her life was examined by local historian Elizabeth Belcham in her book Swansea's 'Bad Girls': Crime and Prostitution 1870s–1914. Image is public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons

The World's Oldest Profession United Kingdom vs. The Continent



*Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec,
Salon at the Rue des Moulins, 1894.
Public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons*

When brothels were licensed in Continental Europe in the 1870s, England developed a brisk business exporting British women to Brussels, Vienna and Paris to work in them. Brothels in London were illegal – although corrupt police could be bribed to ignore them – but on the Continent, brothels became an established social institution, the better ones sometimes run as private clubs. Businessmen like Crofts and entrepreneurs like Kitty Warren built significant personal wealth by investing in and managing them.



A satirical photo from 1901, with the caption "New Woman – Wash Day". Shown is a woman wearing traditional male attire and smoking a cigarette, supervising a man doing the laundry. Public domain, US Library of Congress

The New Woman

Autonomy was a radical goal for women at the beginning of the 20th century. The growing respectability of education and employment for women meant that wealthy, upper class young ladies suddenly felt free to shrug off dress and decorum requirements. Unlike previous generations, the quintessential New Woman delighted in independence. She wished to support herself and sought out meaningful work.

By turns comical, inspirational, and threatening, these feminists inspired quite a few “enlightened” male writers of the period like novelists Henry James and Bram Stoker, and playwrights Henrik Ibsen and, of course, Shaw. Have a little time? Re-read Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* with the New Woman in mind.

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Go ahead, work these cool words & phrases into your conversations about the play. Wow your friends.

Actuarial calculations – compilation and analysis of statistics, usually done to calculate insurance premiums

Chambers – In the late 1900s ‘chambers’ could mean a number of things: law offices, private sleeping quarters, or a large public room.

Freemasonry – fraternal organizations that trace their origins to the local fraternities of stonemasons; a slang expression meaning “brotherhood”

Facer – sudden difficulty



Philippa Fawcett in her room at Newnham College. In 1890 Philippa Fawcett was the first woman to obtain the top score in the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos exams. Her achievement was widely publicized. The image is in the public domain of the United States, source: Wikimedia Commons

Patrimony – property inherited from one’s father upon his death

Philistine – someone who has no appreciation of the arts

Publican – tavern owner

Razzle-dazzle – a show designed to amaze an audience, but which has no substance

Siphons – bottles of soda or carbonated/aerated water

Temperance restaurant – a public eating establishment that doesn’t serve alcohol

Tripos – Cambridge University honors courses exams, so called because of the medieval tradition of the examiner sitting on a three-legged stool

Waster – a person who does little or nothing of value

Whitelead factory – White lead is a chemical salt, which was used to produce white pigment in paint and cosmetics until it was banned for causing lead poisoning.

Wrangler – a student who earned a first-class honors degree in mathematics at Cambridge University. Only men could earn degrees at the time of this play.

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Victorian Period vs. Edwardian Period. Where are we?!?

Queen Victoria (1837–1901) Shaw wrote *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* in 1893, during the late Victorian period. Its references are accurate for that time.

King Edward (1902–1910) The play was first produced in the United States in 1905, which would have corresponded to the Edwardian period in England.



Portrait of Queen Victoria of England, Empress Victoria of India (1886)
Public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons



Portrait of King Edward VII of England from a postcard print (undated)
Public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons

Bad with money?

Here’s what you need to know:

Theatre historian L.W. Conolly explains that fifty pounds in 1893 was a significant sum. With it, you could have bought 25 gold watches, 500 dinners at a restaurant, 25 good coats, 600 bottles of claret, or five bicycles. Or you could have rented a three-bedroom house for a year, or stayed in a hotel for 150 nights. It would have taken most working class women two years to earn fifty pounds.

So here’s the lowdown: Kitty gave Vivie a lot of money to compete for wrangler; Reverend Gardner offered to pay a lot of money to get his letters back; Crofts claims to have invested a huge amount of money in Kitty’s business; Kitty is probably well and truly rich; and Vivie would be in a position to support herself very comfortably working as an actuary.

The stakes were high.

If everything else failed, you went to the poorhouse.

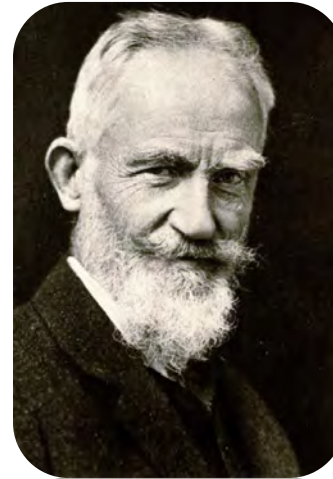
Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, in both England and the United States, poorhouses, almshouses and workhouses were the last stop for society's most vulnerable members. Their construction coincided with an increasingly negative attitude toward poor people. These facilities were designed to punish individuals for their poverty and, hypothetically, make being poor so horrible that people would do any work, regardless of conditions or wages, rather than live in one.

Because being poor carried an intense social stigma, poorhouses were usually located outside of public view to shield respectable society from their existence. Purportedly run as charities, these establishments more closely resembled penal colonies, requiring hard manual labor from the indigent in exchange for minimal food and shelter. Residents were frequently subjected to brutal physical punishment. Thanks to writers like Charles Dickens, as well as first-hand testimony from people like Florence Nightingale and Anne Sullivan, the specter of the poorhouse haunts our history and literature to this very day.



A group of female workhouse residents (undated).
The image is in the public domain of the United States, source: Wikimedia Commons

A few of the many quotable things Bernard said....



George Bernard Shaw,
from p.30 of the December 1922
Shadowland. Public domain,
source: Wikimedia Commons

If you leave the smallest corner of your head vacant for a moment, other people's opinions will rush in from all quarters.

The test of a man or woman's breeding is how they behave in a quarrel.

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

An Englishman thinks he is moral when he is only uncomfortable.

The truth is, hardly any of us have ethical energy enough for more than one really inflexible point of honor.

If there was nothing wrong in the world there wouldn't be anything for us to do.

Why, except as a means of livelihood, a man should desire to act on the stage when he has the whole world to act in, is not clear to me.

All genuinely intellectual work is humorous.

The International Shaw Society maintains a comprehensive website with both historical and current information on all things Shaw. You don't need to be a member of the society to access their research. Check them out at <https://shawsociety.org>

The terms prostitute/prostitution have historically negative connotations relating to crime and immorality. Using sex work/sex worker instead recognizes that sex work is work. In consideration of language and history representing important facets in our production, we have used both terms in this guide.

– Promethean Theatre Ensemble
