



Plays Unpleasant

George Bernard Shaw , Dan H. Laurence (Editor)

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With the plays in this 1898 collection-*Widower's Houses*, *The Philanderer*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*-Shaw challenges his audiences' moral complacency in the face of serious social problems and inequities.

Author Bio: George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was one of the most prolific writers of the modern theater. He invented the modern comedy of ideas, expounding on social and political problems with a razor-sharp tongue, yet never sacrificing the comic vitality that ensures regular revivals of his plays. He also wrote several important political works, including *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*.

Dan H. Lawrence, edited Shaw's Collected Letters, his *Collected Plays with their Prefaces*, and *Shaw's Music* and (with Daniel Leary) *The Complete Prefaces*. He is Series Editor for the works of Shaw in Penguin.

David Edgar is a playwright, critic, and professor of Playwriting Studies at the University of Birmingham.

Plays Unpleasant Details

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From Reader Review Plays Unpleasant for online ebook

Jessica Shelley says

Read this for my romanticism course at university. Really enjoyed the messages of the plays and how Shaw challenged society and their rules/pre-conceptions of marriage and women.

52 books around the year challenge: 15) A book set in the past (more than 100 years ago)

Susan Trezins says

I read "The Philanderer". It will be produced at the 2014 Shaw Festival.

Scott says

Widowers' Houses and Mrs. Warren's Profession are amazing. The Philanderer starts well but wears thin.

David Sarkies says

Three plays about unpleasant men

13 April 2011

Bernard Shaw excels himself once again. Okay, one might ask what is a Christian doing reading Bernard Shaw. Well, ever since I read Pygmalion I have simply loved his work, and in fact he is one of the best modern playwrights to have ever walked this earth. His plays are well structured, characters very realistic, and themes very topical. The theme that seems to run through most of his plays deals with the rights of a woman. To understand this theme one does need to understand the context in which these plays were written.

My Dad had a quick read of one of the prologues to these plays and noticed his comment upon marriage, which immediately confirmed our suspicions that Shaw was not a Christian. However he is not antagonistic towards Christianity, and his Christian characters in the plays are not evil or manipulative. In fact, many of them are very noble characters. However, it is to the theme of marriage which we will look because that is the key to understanding Shaw's attitude towards women.

Simply put, Shaw considers marriage to be little more than white slavery. Once again we need to understand the cultural context. His plays were written around the turn of the 20th Century in England, and if you were a woman in that time you had no rights whatsoever. This is the key to the final play in this book 'Mrs Warren's Profession'. The prologue is an explanation as to the play, because the play itself is about prostitution. As he explains, unless a woman were to get married she would either live her life as a pauper or a prostitute. If the woman had money she could not hold onto it - she had to get married, and when she did the rights of all her property would instantly transfer to the husband.

It is the male characters in these plays who are unpleasant. The first play, The Widower's House, is about a landlord. Is he dodgy? It is questionable as he defends his actions by saying that if he were to properly

maintain his houses then the poor who live in them would not be able to live in them. Therefore he believes that he is providing a community service, albeit a suspicious one. The male in the second play, The Philanderer, is much more unpleasant. The play opens with him sleeping with one woman, and rejecting the advances of a second, and closes with him losing both of them. He only becomes interested in the second woman when she decides she wants to marry another man. At the end of the play we have no sympathy for him - he brought it all upon himself. As he said, he will always be a philanderer (the English definition, not the Greek), and he does not say this with pride, but with regret.

While the theme of two of the Plays Unpleasant are with the treatment of women, the theme of the Widower's House is of the exploitation of the working class. Further, the man who, at the beginning of the play, ends an engagement over dirty money made from a slumlord ends up selling his soul in a business dealing and marrying anyway.

It is also noteworthy that despite Shaw's polemic against the institution of marriage, he did end up having a long and happy marriage. I guess it had to do with his desire not to behave like the society that he spent his life criticising,

Yamini Chandra says

3 good plays from one of the most distinguished writers. I liked The Philanderer, Widowers' Houses and Mrs Warren's Profession- in that order.

Linda says

I read the plays but Shaw's prefaces were unreadable.

Denise M says

Read at the end of high school. The Plays Pleasant are so much more fun!

Laboreta says

Mrs. Warren's Profession is the best one in this book. Also the first play, Widowers House is pretty good even though i didn't liked the end.

Ishita says

Perceptive and ahead of its times.

Drew says

George Bernard Shaw has done it again. I got to know GBS's works through performances at the Washington (DC) Stage Guild in the 1990s. What depth of insight. And never a dearth of words. I think he might be one of the world's greatest playwrights, equaling and at times surpassing, Shakespeare. It doesn't hurt that Shaw's take on society, politics and economics meld with many of my own, but I think that he gets to the heart of things quickly and in a way that the reader might not have expected. Drawing the reader (or viewer) in, he sets you up to like one person and dislike the other. Then, the curtain is pulled back and you realize that maybe the one you like isn't as clean as you thought and maybe the evil one isn't quite as two-dimensionally villainous as you assumed.

Plays Unpleasant consists of three plays that are "unpleasant" only in that they confront the viewer with a serious social or economic problem yet without a comedic factor to soften the blow. I really loved *The Widowers' House*. Then I liked *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. I wasn't a huge fan of *The Philanderer*, but I wonder if that would come across better as a performance rather than a read-through.

Shaw's prefaces are sometimes difficult to read but they are worth the effort. The one to *Mrs Warren's Profession* is just as insightful in 2012 as it was in 1902 (revised 1930). In reference to those who sought to ban performances of that play, he wrote, "No doubt it is equally possible that they were simply stupid men who thought that indecency consists, not in evil, but in mentioning it."

I highly recommend this book. The only people who might take legitimate umbrage with GBS are those actors who have to memorize the massive amount of words!

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in February 2000.

The three plays in this volume, *Widowers' Houses*, *The Philanderer* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, are Shaw's earliest plays. Considered extremely daring at the time - it proved impossible to produce *Mrs Warren's Profession* for over twenty years - they can still in places shock us today. Each play is a blatant attack on Victorian society, on the hypocrisy of those who believe themselves morally blameless yet condemn the poor to live in degrading squalor and then live off the money this produces. This is clearest in *Widowers' Houses* (about slum landlords) and *Mrs Warren's Profession* (prostitution); *The Philanderer* is about attitudes to women, and has dated rather more.

The plot of *Widowers' Houses* is the simplest. Harry Trench falls in love with a girl he meets on holiday in Germany. Accepting her father's description of the source of his income as the respectable "property", they get engaged. Then Trench discovers that the property in question is one of London's most unpleasant slums and is horrified, and eventually he is astounded when it is revealed that his own wealth comes from the interest on a mortgage on the property. The idea is that even the most respectable are not far removed from the immoral and degrading, and this is also the central idea in *Mrs Warren's Profession*.

Though today most of the Victorian slums in Britain have long been cleared, prostitution is still a surprisingly important part of the economy. Shaw's message, though, is perhaps better applied in other areas. In the West, our relatively affluent lifestyles are to an extent dependant on the poverty of the Third World. People starve not just while our supermarkets are full, but to keep them full. Without the arms trade vital to the economy of many Western nations, much suffering would be eased. Pornography continues to degrade both those involved in making it and those addicted to it, while making fortunes.

Shaw manages to avoid the pitfall of preachiness which traps so many who write fiction to support a campaign, except perhaps in *The Philanderer*. The central location of this play is the fictional Ibsen Club, which stands for everything progressive in society. Today Ibsenism is an obsolete word, and it is clearer that Ibsen wrote about far more than Shaw thought, blinded as he was by his own social agenda. But at the turn of the century, plays like *An Enemy of the People*, *Ghosts* and (above all) *A Doll's House* seemed iconoclastic attacks on injustice in society. Ibsen was the subject of violent denunciation for the immorality seen in his plays (to the extent that he had to write an alternative happy ending to *The Dollshouse* before it could be performed in Germany), and this is what attracted Shaw the social campaigner. These plays are far simpler than Ibsen's, and much more obviously making a non-dramatic point. Their effect was much the same, and Shaw (unlike Ibsen) revelled in it.

Dr.J.G. says

Plays Unpleasant:-

WIDOWERS' HOUSES: -

In a way this play is a companion of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, both about money earned by a parent through unsavoury means of varying questionable repute, of course this one being far more common than the other both in practice and held not so often repugnant by society - rich society that is - but morally no less, in fact in some ways more, reprehensible.

Mrs. Warren's profession is held in a good repute anywhere in the world, but it can be argued that most people in that profession are not in it from choice as much as from either being kidnapped and brought into it or from necessities of survival of a family which often when needed to be provided by a woman she might find little or almost no recourse. When one is safe, moralising about another's circumstance is all very well; it is likely to be another story when it is your own child's survival in question and you have not much of a choice.

This one is about rich people who earn their living by providing housing bordering on slum to the poor and then charging extortion level rents while providing little or no amenities, and evicting those that default at short notice without care about if they could in fact survive.

And yet most rich could hardly stand a scrutiny about the roots of their wealth - if it is not opium or colonial (robbery) it might be something akin to this, or worse - it might be selling things that actually damage those that pay for them. Not just illegal substances, either - often legal substances can be just as bad for health, even lethal, and yet they take time to become known as dangerous or worthless at best. Even today that is true of much that forms multibillion industries, in much misused names of fun or beauty.

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THE PHILANDERER: -

Women - and too, enlightened men - were in favour of womens' education, property and voting rights, enfranchisement, suffragists demanding and chaining themselves. many identified these movements with left for obvious reasons - it seemed against interest of any conservatives to lose any source of free labour, and women just as slaves or colonial possessions were source of it.

But most people also misunderstood womens' liberty and freedom first and foremost in the wrongest possible direction - one that would actually benefit men. Some people saw it coming and they were not all against

womens' rights - and Mr. Shaw was one such man.

With women free, and access to women granted freely to any man, those that had no honourable intentions were in heaven. They could play with womens' hearts and discard them - all in name of womens' freedom, since the misunderstanding was, it was about no chaperone watching over to make sure their real important rights were guarded - those related to just such men not destroying hearts and lives.

This is the story of just such a woman who has a heart and would hide it behind talk of freedom, so she can try to attract one playing with her heart, her subsequent - or even, consequent - heartbreak when it is clear he never had any intention that could be then called honourable (now the word has gone out of usage, almost), and the philanderer who nevertheless sees what havoc he has wreaked, with clear eyes.

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MRS WARREN'S PROFESSION: -

Age old dilemma of society - "respectable" vs. the other side, and the need of one for the other. It must have of course been extremely controversial when it was written - and published - but this writer was always more than equal to any criticism and could always argue either side of a debate with reason.

This one is not a comedy, though, and one is presented with Mrs. Warren's side quite reasonably.

Friday, July 9, 2010.

Sana says

I liked it a lot.

Stephanie says

Definitely early plays. Glad I read it, because I'm interested in Shaw, but I didn't love any of the plays.

Monica says

The book contains three of Shaw's plays; *Widow's House* (about landlords), *The Philanderer* (about polyamorous relationships) and *Mrs Warren's Profession* (about prostitution). Each of Shaw's plays takes an unconventional look at cultural stigma; the views that were controversial back in 1894 and still so in 2016. My personal favourite was 'Tropical Comedy' *The Philanderer* about different groups of people all thinking they had the right morals yet they all contradicted each other. I will be looking out for Bernard Shaw and more of his works, because his ideas and creations are fantastic.
