



## **Plays and Pinot: Mrs Warren's Profession**

### **Synopsis**

Mrs. Warren's Profession is a play written by George Bernard Shaw in 1893, and first performed in London in 1902. The play is about a former prostitute, now a madam (brothel proprietor), who attempts to come to terms with her disapproving daughter. It is a problem play, offering social commentary to illustrate Shaw's belief that the act of prostitution was not caused by moral failure but by economic necessity. Elements of the play were borrowed from Shaw's 1882 novel Cashel Byron's Profession, about a man who becomes a boxer due to limited employment opportunities. The story centres on the relationship between Mrs Kitty Warren and her daughter, Vivie. Mrs. Warren, a former prostitute and current brothel owner, is described as "on the whole, a genial and fairly presentable old blackguard of a woman." Vivie, an intelligent and pragmatic young woman who has just graduated from university, has come home to get acquainted with her mother for the first time in her life. The play focuses on how their relationship changes when Vivie learns what her mother does for a living. It explains why Mrs. Warren became a prostitute, condemns the hypocrisies relating to prostitution, and criticises the limited employment opportunities available for women in Victorian Britain.

### **About the Playwright**

George Bernard Shaw was born in 1856 in Dublin and died November 2 1950 in Ayot St. Lawrence, Hertfordshire. He was an Irish comic dramatist, literary critic, and socialist propagandist, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925. George Bernard Shaw was the third and youngest child (and only son) of George Carr Shaw and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw. Technically, he belonged to the Protestant "ascendancy"—the landed Irish gentry—but his impractical father was first a sinecure civil servant and then an unsuccessful grain merchant, and George Bernard grew up in an atmosphere of genteel poverty, which to him was more humiliating than being merely poor. At first Shaw was tutored by a clerical uncle, and he basically rejected the schools he then attended; by age 16 he was working in a land agent's office. Shaw developed a wide knowledge of music, art, and literature as a result of his mother's influence and his visits to the National Gallery of Ireland. In 1872 his mother left her husband and took her two daughters to London, following her music teacher, George John Vandeleur Lee, who from 1866 had shared households in Dublin with the Shaws. In 1876 Shaw resolved to become a writer, and he joined his mother and elder sister (the younger one having died) in London. Shaw in his 20s suffered continuous frustration and poverty. He depended upon his mother's pound a week from her husband and her earnings as a music teacher. He spent his afternoons in the British Museum reading room, writing novels and reading what he had missed at school, and his evenings in search of additional self-education in the lectures and debates that characterized contemporary middle-class London intellectual activities. His fiction failed utterly. The semiautobiographical and aptly titled *Immaturity* (1879; published 1930) repelled every publisher in London. His next four novels were similarly refused, as were most of the articles he submitted to the press for a decade. Shaw's initial literary work earned him less than 10 shillings a year. A fragment posthumously published as *An Unfinished Novel* in 1958 (but written 1887–88) was his final false start in fiction. Despite his failure as a novelist in the 1880s, Shaw found himself during this decade. He became a vegetarian, a socialist, a spellbinding orator, a polemicist, and tentatively a playwright. He became the force behind the newly founded (1884) Fabian Society, a middle-class socialist group



that aimed at the transformation of English society not through revolution but through “permeation” (in Sidney Webb’s term) of the country’s intellectual and political life. Shaw involved himself in every aspect of its activities, most visibly as editor of one of the classics of British socialism, *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889), to which he also contributed two sections. Eventually, in 1885, the drama critic William Archer found Shaw steady journalistic work. His early journalism ranged from book reviews in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885–88) and art criticism in the *World* (1886–89) to brilliant musical columns in the *Star* (as “Corno di Bassetto”—basset horn) from 1888 to 1890 and in the *World* (as “G.B.S.”) from 1890 to 1894. Shaw had a good understanding of music, particularly opera, and he supplemented his knowledge with a brilliance of digression that gives many of his notices a permanent appeal. But Shaw truly began to make his mark when he was recruited by Frank Harris to the *Saturday Review* as theatre critic (1895–98); in that position he used all his wit and polemical powers in a campaign to displace the artificialities and hypocrisies of the Victorian stage with a theatre of vital ideas. He also began writing his own plays.

## **Characters**

### **Vivie**

Vivie Warren is practical and confident. Defying gender norms, she is happily single and plans to support herself. She enjoys leisure activities typically associated with middle-class men, like drinking whiskey and smoking cigars. The play follows Vivie's character growth and transformation as she considers her future. When she realizes her education was financed by money her mother earned through prostitution, she confronts her own complicity in the profession. She finally decides to disown her mother and support herself independently.

### **Mrs. Warren**

Mrs. Warren is charismatic and flirtatious. She thrives on male attention. She's also a hardworking, discreet professional who takes pride in doing her job well. In Act 2 she reveals she entered prostitution as a way out of poverty. She later continued in the business to build wealth. Because of the stigma surrounding her profession, she is often socially shunned.

### **Crofts**

Sir George Crofts is a brutally pragmatic man concerned with building a business empire. Though he claims to have strong values, he's comfortable running morally compromised operations. His unapologetic attitude toward business advancement arouses contempt, disgust, and admiration in the other characters. He attempts to threaten Vivie when she rejects his proposal of marriage.

### **Praed**

Praed is generous, good-natured, and romantic. He loves art and culture. But he's overly oblivious and sentimental, often clashing with more pragmatic characters like Vivie. He remains unaware of the true nature of Mrs. Warren's work until Act 4. Shaw includes Praed as an example of a typical Englishman who worships romance and beauty without considering the problems of the real world.

### **Frank**

Frank is charming, cynical, and lazy. He treats everyone, especially his father, with disregard. Shaw suggests Frank's irreverence and refusal to enter a profession are rebellious responses to his strict minister father. Despite Frank's casual manner, he is highly attuned to the social power dynamics of the group. He attempts to woo Vivie but is unsuccessful.



**Reverend Samuel Gardner**

Reverend Samuel Gardner is pompous and naive. It is implied he is incompetent at his job. For example, he buys his sermons instead of writing them. Though he assumes an air of moral superiority, he engages in behavior that is considered sinful, such as drinking and visiting prostitutes.

***References: [Britannica.com](http://Britannica.com)***