



# George Bernard Shaw

(1856-1950)

## 1 COMPLETE the life and work of George Bernard Shaw with the words from the box.

critic  
failed  
singerself-realisation  
joining  
audiencescity slums  
ideological  
heroismimpulse  
hierarchy  
dishonesty

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856, the youngest child of a (1) ..... corn-merchant. His education was musical rather than literary since his mother was a professional (2) ..... At the age of 20 he moved to London and became a (3) ..... of music and art and contributed to several periodicals. Later he took an active part in the Fabian Society (→ 5.3), (4) ..... debating clubs and lecturing on social questions. In 1892 his first play, *Widowers' Houses*, was performed; this text dealt with the problem of (5) ..... At first, Shaw's comedies were generally more successful outside England, and only gradually did he make an impression on London's (6) ..... and critics. In 1898 the collection *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* was published. These plays were (7) ..... attacks on the evils of capitalism, and explorations of moral and social problems. The collection included, among others, *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893), about the (8) ..... of those who benefited from prostitution, *Arms and the Man* (1894), a parody of military (9) ....., and *Pygmalion* (1912), about social (10) ..... in Victorian Britain.

In 1905 his play *Man and Superman*, whose title echoes Nietzsche, firmly established his reputation. In this play Shaw expressed his theory of 'Life Force', according to which life is a vital (11) ..... that strives to gain a greater power of contemplation and (12) ..... through woman, who is not an inferior being but the main instrument of procreation. In 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1950.

### A prophet of realism

Shaw considered himself a realist with a mission; 'Though my trade is that of a playwright,' he stated, 'my vocation is that of a prophet.' He did not want to write for entertainment, but at the same time he was not an enemy of entertainment or scornful of success. He described himself as a Puritan reformer who used drama, which was his proper means of expression, to present his ideas and criticise Victorian institutions. Shaw's aim was the improvement of society.

Two aspects of contemporary drama had disgusted Shaw: the former was a mental tendency he called 'sentimentalism' or 'idealism', which prevented man from facing up to unpleasant facts; the latter was the uncritical adulation of Shakespeare. He suggested replacing 'idealism' by 'realism' and Shakespeare by Ibsen (→ 5.9), who, according to Shaw, had presented real life on the stage and had introduced discussion into his plays.

### Style

Shaw's writing followed upon his long experience as a platform speaker, so that it was as effective when spoken as when read. Facts and arguments are skilfully ordered, and although sentences are usually long and contain several statements, the whole effect is one of speed and simplicity and the tone is generally one of vitality and gaiety. His main devices are the paradox, the inversion of traditional ideas and values, the unexpected, the outspoken truth and exaggeration: his characters say exactly what they think, instead of what is conventionally expected they should say. Stage directions are written in narrative style and are extremely detailed, since Shaw had realised that the play-reading public was larger than the theatre-going public.

Shaw tried to create a simple, phonetic orthography alphabet, known as the Shavian alphabet, in order to remove some of the difficulties of conventional spelling.

### Key idea

#### The plays of ideas

Shaw invented the 'drama of discussion or ideas', where he combined contemporary moral problems with comic, ironic tones and paradoxes. His originality lies in infusing the discussion play with the spirit of the English comedy.

His characters are identified with particular ideas and social institutions, they are brilliant speakers but they have only the life of the mind, since they lack the warmth of human

beings. The dialogue remains the best element, since it conveys consistent ideological implications about the consequences of capitalism and it also deals with other contemporary problems, such as militarism, the equality of women, the relationship between husband and wife, and religion. Shaw prefaced his plays with introductory essays, which dealt with the plays themselves as well as with the themes suggested.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**2 READ** the texts and make notes under the following headings.

- 1 The playwright's task according to Shaw.
- 2 The aspects of contemporary drama that had disgusted Shaw.
- 3 The main stylistic devices he adopted.
- 4 The alphabet he created.
- 5 The originality of his plays.
- 6 The contemporary issues he was interested in.

## Mrs Warren's Profession

(1893)

**PLOT AND SETTING**

The action of most of the play takes place in and around a **country cottage in Surrey**, where **Vivie Warren**, a 22-year-old Cambridge graduate, is visited by **her mother, Kitty**, who spends most of her time abroad, and two of her mother's friends, **Sir George Crofts** and **Mr Praed**. It is evident from an early conversation between Vivie and Mr Praed that there is something mysterious about Mrs Warren, and it is upon this that the play revolves. Gradually the audience learns that Mrs Warren's life is not 'respectable' and that there is some doubt as to the identity of Vivie's father. Two more characters are introduced in the first act, **Frank Gardner**, a young man who is in love with Vivie, and his father, **the local vicar**. Mrs Warren shows a great concern for the future of her daughter, whom she wants to protect from Frank's advances, especially when she learns that he will bring no money with him if he marries.

The second act ends with the brilliant scene in which Vivie confronts her mother with a demand for information about her past. In this exchange the girl learns that Mrs Warren chose prostitution as a trade because it offered more security and better conditions than any others which were open to her as an uneducated working-class girl (→ *Mother and daughter*). This act ends with Vivie having gained new respect for her mother.

In the following scenes the girl learns that her mother still continues to manage a chain of brothels with Sir George Crofts. In the end she decides to go off to the city to work for herself in order to gain independence from her mother and her 'unrespectable' source of income.

**MOTHER AND DAUGHTER**

**Mrs Kitty Warren** was born in poverty. Over the years she was able to become a **financially secure lady thanks to her work in prostitution**, which was the result of economic necessity, not of moral weakness. She has a daughter, Vivie, but she does not have much contact with her. Because of

her profession, Kitty is **separated both from her family and from respectable Victorian society**.

**Vivie Warren** is Mrs Kitty Warren's 22-year-old daughter, who has received an **excellent education** paid for by her mother. She is an **emancipated woman**; she is rational and **self-reliant**. She is different from her mother because she does not want money to buy beautiful dresses and go to parties, but to be successful and gain independence.

**THEMES**

Shaw completed *Mrs Warren's Profession* in 1893, but the play was banned for many years. When it was finally produced on the London stage in 1902, **the public** was **shocked by its content**. Reviewers condemned the play as immoral, because of its **thesis that prostitution was forced on women by the economic system** rather than being the product of corrupt self-indulgence. Today, however, the play is applauded for its cunning view of the corruption at the heart of Victorian society.

*Mrs Warren's Profession* is a deliberately provocative **attack on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century issue of sexual morality in marriage**.

In his preface Shaw argued that if his play were to cause an increase in the number of persons entering the profession or employing it, its performance might well be made an indictable offence. Indeed, the playwright allows his characters to state his case that there is something wrong with a society that rewards prostitution better than the so-called honest work. It is debatable, however, whether he makes prostitution sound too attractive in his anxiety to condemn those who created a system that forced girls into poorly paid jobs. The playwright's aim in this play is **to cause his mainly middle-class audience to reconsider all their accepted ideas about the employment of women**, who were widely exploited at that time.

The importance of the play lies also in the fact that **Vivie's relationship with her mother** symbolises the **relation of the individual to society**. Vivie tries to treat her mother like a stranger, but she cannot, and in discovering what kind of woman her mother is, the girl finds out what kind of society she is part of.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** about *Mrs Warren's Profession* and answer the following questions.

- 1 Where does the play take place?
- 2 Who are the main characters?
- 3 What does the audience gradually learn about Mrs Warren?
- 4 How does the second act end?
- 5 How do mother and daughter differ?
- 6 Did the audience welcome the play when it was performed in 1902? Why?
- 7 What is the main theme developed by this play?
- 8 What is the playwright's aim?
- 9 What does Vivie's relationship with her mother symbolise?

**Mother and daughter**

*In the scene that follows Mrs Warren tells her daughter, Vivie, the story of her life; her childhood in the fried-fish shop down by the Mint with three sisters and a mother, a job as a barmaid at Waterloo Station, until one evening her sister Lizzie came in for a drink, asked her why she was wearing out her health and appearance for other people's profit, and lent her a little money to start on the streets until they managed to save enough to open a high-class house in Brussels. Not as a prostitute, not as a brothel-keeper, but as a woman from the slums, Mrs Warren dismantles her daughter's bourgeois individualistic rationalism.*

*This text is a clear example of Shavian alphabet since some difficulties of the conventional spelling, such as the use of the apostrophe, have been removed.*

George Bernard Shaw  
***Mrs Warren's Profession***  
**(1893)**

Act 2

- MRS WARREN** You! you've no heart. [*She suddenly breaks out vehemently in her natural tongue – the dialect of a woman of the people – with all her affectations of maternal authority and conventional manners gone, and an overwhelming<sup>1</sup> inspiration of true conviction and scorn<sup>2</sup> in her.*] Oh, I won't bear it: I won't put up with<sup>3</sup> the injustice of it. What right have you to **set** yourself up above me like this? You boast<sup>4</sup> of what you are to me – to me, who gave you a chance of being what you are. What chance had I? Shame on you for a bad daughter and a stuck-up prude<sup>5</sup>!
- VIVIE** [*sitting down with a shrug<sup>6</sup>, no longer confident; for her replies, which have sounded sensible and strong to her so far, now begin to ring rather woodenly and even priggishly<sup>7</sup> against the new tone of her mother*] Don't think for a moment I set myself above you in any way. You attacked me with the conventional authority of a mother: I defended myself with the conventional superiority of a respectable woman. Frankly, I am not going to stand any of your nonsense; and when you **drop** it I shall not expect you to stand any of mine. I shall always respect your right to your own opinions and your own way of life.
- MRS WARREN** My own opinions and my own way of life! Listen to her talking! Do you think I was brought up like you? able to **pick** and choose my own way of life? Do you think I did what I did because I liked it, or thought it right, or wouldn't rather have gone to college and been a lady if I'd had the chance? [...]
- But where can a woman get the money to save in any other business? Could you save out of four shillings a week and keep yourself dressed as well? Not you. Of course, if you're a **plain** woman and can't earn anything more; or if you have a **turn** for music, or the stage, or newspaper-writing: that's different. But neither Liz<sup>8</sup> nor I had any turn for such things at all:

1 **overwhelming.** Opprimente.

2 **scorn.** Disprezzo.

3 **I won't put up with.** Non

sopporterò.

4 **You boast.** Ti vantì.

5 **stuck-up prude.** Presuntuosa

santerellina.

6 **shrug.** Alzata di spalle.

7 **rather ... priggishly.** In modo

piuttosto impacciato e presuntuoso.

8 **Liz.** La sorella maggiore di Mrs Warren.



all we had was our appearance and our turn for pleasing men. Do you think we were such fools as to let other people trade in our good looks by employing us as shopgirls, or barmaids, or waitresses, when we could trade in them ourselves and get all profits instead of **starvation wages**? Not likely.

**VIVIE** You were certainly quite justified – from the business point of view.

**MRS WARREN** Yes; or any other point of view. What is any respectable girl brought up to do but to catch some rich man's fancy and get the benefit of his money by marrying him? – as if a marriage ceremony could make any difference in the right or wrong of the thing! Oh, the hypocrisy of the world makes me sick! Liz and I had to work and save and calculate just like other people; elseways<sup>9</sup> we should be as poor as any good-for-nothing drunken waster<sup>10</sup> of a woman that thinks her luck will last for ever. [*With great energy.*] I **despise** such people: they've no character; and if there's a thing I hate in a woman, it's **want** of character.

**VIVIE** Come now, mother: frankly! Isn't it part of what you call character in a woman that she should greatly dislike such a way of making money?

**MRS WARREN** Why, of course. Everybody dislikes having to work and make money; but they have to do it all the same. I'm sure I've often **pitied** a poor girl, tired out and in low spirits, having to try to please some man that she doesn't care two straws for<sup>11</sup> some half-drunken fool that thinks he's making himself agreeable when he's teasing<sup>12</sup> and worrying and disgusting a woman so that hardly any money could pay her for putting up with it. But she has to bear with **disagreeables** and take the rough with the smooth<sup>13</sup>, just like a nurse in a hospital or anyone else. It's not work that any woman would do for pleasure, goodness knows; though to hear the pious people talk you would suppose it was a bed of roses.

**VIVIE** Still, you consider it worthwhile. It pays.

**MRS WARREN** Of course it's worthwhile to a poor girl, if she can resist temptation and is good-looking and well conducted and sensible. It's far better than any other employment open to her. I always thought that it oughtn't to be. It can't be right, Vivie, that there shouldn't be better opportunities for women. I stick<sup>14</sup> to that: it's wrong. But it's so, right or wrong; and a girl must make the best of it. But of course it's not worthwhile for a lady. If you took to it you'd be a fool; but I should have been a fool if I'd taken to anything else.

**VIVIE** [*more and more deeply moved*] Mother: suppose we were both as poor as you were in those wretched old days, are you quite sure that you wouldn't advise me to try the Waterloo bar<sup>15</sup>, or marry a laborer, or even go into the factory?

**MRS WARREN** [*indignantly*] Of course not. What sort of mother do you take me for! 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! Why am I independent and able to give my daughter a first-rate education, when other women that had just as good opportunities are in the gutter<sup>16</sup>? Because I always knew how to respect myself and control myself. Why is Liz looked up to in a cathedral town? The same reason. Where would we be now if we'd **minded** the clergyman's foolishness? Scrubbing<sup>17</sup> floors for one and sixpence a day and nothing to look forward to but the workhouse infirmary. Don't you be led astray<sup>18</sup> by people who don't know the world, my girl. The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. If she's in his own station of life, let her make him marry her; but if she's far beneath him she can't expect it: why should she? it wouldn't be for her own happiness. Ask any lady in London society that has daughters; and she'll tell you the same, except that I tell you straight and she'll tell you crooked<sup>19</sup>. That's all the difference.

**VIVIE** [*fascinated, gazing at her*] My dear mother: you are a wonderful woman: you are stronger than all England. And are you really and truly not one wee bit<sup>20</sup> doubtful – or – or – ashamed?

9 **elseways**. Altrimenti.

10 **waster**. Fannullone.

11 **she ... straws for**. Non le importa nulla.

12 **he's teasing**. Sta importunando.

13 **take ... smooth**. Prendere il mondo come viene.

14 **I stick**. Rimango fedele.

15 **Waterloo bar**. Bar alla stazione di Waterloo.

16 **gutter**. Fango.

17 **Scrubbing**. A lavare.

18 **astray**. Fuori strada.

19 **crooked**. In modo indiretto, contorto.

20 **one wee bit**. Un pochino.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY****1 READ** the text and match the highlighted words and phrases with their Italian translation.

- |                          |                                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 salari da fame .....   | 7 inclinazione .....              |
| 2 fare una scelta .....  | 8 ascoltato .....                 |
| 3 sgradevoli .....       | 9 provato compassione .....       |
| 4 sicura, certa .....    | 10 disprezzo .....                |
| 5 mancanza .....         | 11 semplice .....                 |
| 6 lascerai perdere ..... | 12 considerarti superiore a ..... |

**> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT****2 READ** lines 1-18 again and answer the following questions.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1 How does Mrs Warren speak to Vivie?            | 4 How does she call her daughter?                |
| 2 What language does she use?                    | 5 How does Vivie react to her mother's words?    |
| 3 What is the cause of Mrs Warren's indignation? | 6 What is Mrs Warren about to tell her daughter? |

**3 READ** lines 19-36 again and complete the sentences about their content. Use your own words.

- Women who have a turn for ..... can get .....
- Neither Mrs Warren nor her sister Liz .....
- They only had .....
- Therefore, they decided to .....
- Respectable women could only aspire to .....
- Kitty Warren also states that she despises ..... because of their want of .....

**4 READ** the rest of the text again and note down the following information.

- Why Mrs Warren has often pitied poor girls.
- Where she and her sister Liz would be now if they had minded the clergyman's foolishness, who had preached morality at them at church school.
- What the only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is.
- How Vivie looks at her mother at the end of their exchange.

**> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT****5 SAY** which adjectives describe the conversation between the two women. Tick as appropriate.

- |  |                                    |                                    |                                    |
|--|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Ironical. | <input type="checkbox"/> Formal.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Tragic.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conventional. | <input type="checkbox"/> Witty.    | <input type="checkbox"/> Informal. | <input type="checkbox"/> Romantic. |

**6 CONCENTRATE** on the character of Mrs Warren. The extract you have just read explores the woman's emotional world.

- Look back at the text and complete the table about Mrs Warren's past life conditions and her reactions to them.

Mrs Warren's past	Mrs Warren's reactions

- What kind of woman is Kitty Warren?



- 3 Shaw uses this female character as a metaphor for his diagnosis of the malaise in society. Explain this statement quoting from the text.

**7 FOCUS** on Vivie. In the first act of the play, Shaw presents this woman as a character who has planned her life; who is going to make her money by doing actuarial calculations and watching the Stock Exchange; who is used to spending her evenings drinking whisky, smoking cigars and reading detective stories; who has no time for holidays, friends and love.

- 1 This scene presents a peculiar side of her personality. Tick as appropriate to describe it.
- ☐ She is aggressive.
  - ☐ She is cool and detached.
  - ☐ She is extremely rational and full of contempt for whatever cannot be justified by her practical reasoning.
  - ☐ She is romantic.
  - ☐ She represents the literary type of the emancipated woman.
- 2 At the end of the exchange, after an unexpected explosion of feelings on Mrs Warren's side, Vivie's certainties are shattered. What does she now accept?

**8 STATE** the functions of the stage directions in this text.

**9 DEFINE** the language used in this scene. You can choose from the following adjectives or add any other you consider suitable.

natural	simple	humorous	essential	old-fashioned
snobbish	complex	realistic	modern	

**10 FOCUS** on the two most important semantic areas developed in the text, that of conventional morality and that of the real state of things.

- 1 Complete the table below with examples from the text.

Conventional morality	Real state of things

- 2 Which character embodies the code of conventional morality and hypocrisy? Which one embodies the code of the real state of things?

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➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE**

**11 REFER** to 5.9 and to the introduction to *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Then sum up some of Shaw's favourite themes and dramatic techniques.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**

**12 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph to compare Shaw's play with *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (→ Text Bank 44) as regards dramatic techniques, characters, themes and language.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

**13 DISCUSS.** If you had to choose the cast for a performance of Shaw's play, what sort of actors or actresses do you envisage for each part?