



Inventing Shavian Dramaturgy: Origins of “Unpleasant” Dilemmas in George Bernard Shaw’s *Widowers’ Houses**

Shavian Dramaturjiyi İcat Etmek: George Bernard Shaw’un Widowers’ Houses Oyununda “Nahoş” İkilimlerin Çıkış Noktası

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Abstract

Initiated as a collaboration between George Bernard Shaw and William Archer, *Widowers’ Houses* was planned to be an example of ‘a well-made play’. Later, Shaw decided to complete this unfinished text to turn it into a play that would eventually present his socialist ideas influenced by Henrik Ibsen. Challenging the melodrama tradition of the Victorian stage, Shaw introduced realism under the influence of Ibsen and Karl Marx and provoked his audience regarding the unpleasant problems in his view. Eventually, Shaw’s first staged play *Widowers’ Houses* turns into a preliminary example of his dramaturgy. The socialist ideas Shaw reflects dedicatedly throughout his career begin to appear with this play. Moreover, Shaw’s treatment of such themes like marriage, class, and money through characters can be considered as part of his legacy and consistent dramaturgy. Thus, the origins of the meaning of the adjective ‘Shavian’ can be traced in this first staged play of Shaw. Consequently, this study aims to revisit George Bernard Shaw’s first staged play *Widowers’ Houses* with the aim of pursuing the origins of Shaw’s Shavian dramaturgy and to discuss the early impact of the unpleasant on the British stage.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw, *Widowers’ Houses*, Henrik Ibsen, Shavian

Paper Type: Research

Öz

George Bernard Shaw ve William Archer arasında ortak bir çalışma olarak başlayan *Widowers’ Houses* isimli oyun aslında ‘well-made play’ (iyi kurulu oyun) örneği olarak planlanmıştır. İlk yazma denemelerinin üstünden geçen yedi yıl sonrasında, Shaw yarım kalmış bu oyun metnini Henrik Ibsen etkisinde kalarak, edindiği sosyalist düşüncelerini yansıtabilecek bir biçimde tamamlamaya karar verdi. Viktorya dönemi sahnesine hâkim olan melodram geleneğine karşı çıkan Shaw, Ibsen ve Karl Marx’tan etkilenerek gerçekçilik akımını sahneye taşıdı ve tiyatro izleyicisini aktardığı nahoş problemlerle yüzleşmeye zorladı. Neticede Shaw’un sahnelenen ilk oyunu olan *Widowers’ Houses*, onun dramaturjisinin ilk örneği haline gelir. Kariyeri boyunca oyunlarında aktardığı sosyalist fikirler bu oyun ile aktarılmaya başlanmıştır. Bununla beraber, evlilik, sınıf, para gibi temaların karakterler üzerinden işlenişi Shaw’un dramaturjisinin örnekleri olarak sayılabilir. Böylelikle bir sıfat olan ‘Shavian’ kavramının kaynağı bu ilk sahnelenen oyununa dayandırılabilir. Sonuç olarak bu makale, George Bernard Shaw’ın *Widowers’ Houses* adlı oyunu Shaw’un Shavian dramaturjisinin izini sürmek için yeniden ele almayı ve İngiliz Tiyatrosunda nahoş konuların ilk etkisini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: George Bernard Shaw, *Widowers’ Houses*, Henrik Ibsen, Shavian

Makale Türü: Araştırma

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Introduction

The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw is a pioneer who has introduced Henrik Ibsen to the British stage and challenged the tradition of melodrama as the most popular genre on the stage during the 19th century. He first familiarized the name Ibsen with British audience through criticism of Ibsen’s plays and later exemplified Ibsen’s presentation of realism by devoting himself to playwriting in which he reflects social issues of the time on the stage. As a prolific playwright, apart from his political and social writings, Shaw has written more than sixty plays throughout his career in which he reflects turbulent years of the country and the world ranging from social problems of the late Victorian society to the suffragette movement. While this long writing career of Shaw can be divided into different stages, socialism can be considered like a trademark of the playwright. The first play to be staged by Shaw, *Widowers’ Houses* (1892) clearly demonstrates the playwright’s socialist worldview. Shaw himself defines this dark comedy in his preface as “a propagandist play – a didactic play – a play with a purpose” (1965, p. 702). In this didactic play, Shaw aims to draw attention not only to a social issue of the Victorian era, the housing problem of the working class as appears in the background, but also to marriage, as an institution, as well as class and heredity. Thus, in terms of its themes, *Widowers’ Houses*, as a first play, set the tone for what is now be defined as “Shavian.” Consequently, Shaw’s *Widowers’ Houses*, one of his “unpleasant plays” as Shaw himself categorizes, will be reframed as his first staged play that presents, first to the British stage then to the world, renowned George Bernard Shaw as a socialist playwright who challenged the melodrama tradition of the period. The study of both social and political themes of the play and the presentation of morally confused characters will reveal the major characterization of Shavian dramaturgy. What Shaw displays in *Widowers’ Houses* would be reevaluated by Shaw in plays like *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, *Pygmalion*, *Candida*, *Major Barbara*, marking the significance of this first play for Shavian dramaturgy as the main argument underlined in this study.

1. Method

This article will carry out textual and contextual analysis of the play. A close reading of George Bernard Shaw’s *Widowers’ Houses* will be conducted with the aim of tracing Shaw’s dramaturgy. To fulfil this aim, the origins of the plotline will be traced and Shaw’s relation to William Archer will be discovered. To explain the source for Shaw’s socialist ideas, the influence of Henrik Ibsen and Karl Marx will be touched upon. Following such background information, a close reading of the play will be provided explaining the term “Shavian” and Shaw’s origins of his dramaturgy.

2. The Journey of the Text

Widowers’ Houses was staged first in 1892; however, the writing process of the play started in 1884 in collaboration with Shaw’s friend William Archer as Shaw indicates in his “Preface” (1965, p. 699). The acquaintance between Shaw and Archer goes back to the British Museum Reading Room where they met and established a friendship. In an article published in *The World* upon the staging of the play, Archer reveals the terms of their collaboration, “I was to provide him with one of the numerous plots I kept in stock, and he was to write the dialogue” (1997, p. 49). Archer continues depicting the original plot he has suggested to Shaw as follows:

I drew out, scene by scene, the scheme of a twaddling cup-and-saucer comedy vaguely suggested by Augier’s *Ceinture Doree*. The details I forget, but I know it was to be called *Rhinegold*, was to open, as *Widowers’ Houses* actually does, in a hotel-garden on the Rhine, and was to have two heroines, a sentimental and a comic one, according to the accepted Robertson-Byron-Carton formula. [...] All this I gravely propounded to Mr. Shaw, who listened with no less admirable gravity. (1997, p. 49)

According to Wisenthal, the plot Archer provided Shaw to write the dialogues “[...] was of the school that dominated the English theatre in the late nineteenth century, that of the French well-made play – the school of Scribe and Sardou, in which plot and incident are the essence of tightly constructed works” (1991, p. 158). In fact, Shaw has used the basis of Archer’s story to turn it into a realistic play on the social corruption of his time. What Shaw eventually has accomplished is a first play that “[...] denies the established moral principles of the well-made-play plot provided by Archer” (Morikawa, 2011, p. 46).

Based on the account of Archer, Shaw came to him about six weeks later following their initial meeting to make him tell more on the plot for Shaw to continue writing dialogue. At this point, Shaw and Archer disagreed on the plot and the aim of the plot and unofficially called off the deal which Shaw himself narrates in his preface as an answer to the criticism of Archer’s article:

The collaboration was therefore dropped; and after finishing the second act, so as to avoid leaving a loose end, and noting such beginnings of the third as had already sprouted, I left the work aside for seven years and thought no more of it. (1965, p. 701)

Sidhu explains the reason why Shaw chooses to complete this play seven years after his first attempt in relation to the impact of Ibsen on the English stage. While Ibsen’s plays were quite successful in England, English playwrights could not produce anything original in the light of the new techniques and themes Ibsen has introduced. Sidhu states that “[i]n this ‘humiliating national emergency,’ Shaw took out a manuscript of an incomplete play, hastily completed it, and proposed to Grein to produce it” (1989, p. 111). As a result, *Widowers’ Houses* was “given two performances by J. T. Grein’s struggling Independent Theatre in 1892” (Marker, 1998, p. 105). Carried beyond Archer’s initial idea, Shaw has used this opportunity to initiate his aim of carrying his political ideas to the stage.

3. Ibsen and Shaw

While Shaw owes the main storyline to Archer, the play is mainly influenced by Ibsen. Frederick J. Marker refers to William Archer as “one of the foremost early translators of Ibsen’s dramas” (1998, p. 103); nevertheless, Shaw is referred as the name who has familiarized English stage and the audience to the plays of Ibsen. D. R. Decker also explains that “Ibsen’s literary reputation in Victorian society centres about three men: Gosse, who introduced his writings to the public; Archer, who translated and produced them; and Shaw, who, with characteristic vigour, defended them against the onslaughts of the hostile” (1935, pp. 632-633). From this point, it can be deduced that Shaw has publicized Ibsen in terms of introducing realism as advocated by Ibsen. Shaw is best known for his criticism of drama in *Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891). It is regarded as the study of Ibsen’s plays, rather than being a critical study of the plays. However, since he has continued his criticism of Ibsen in his prefaces and in journal articles throughout the years, he just aims to familiarize his readers to Ibsen as Gerould comments on the aim of the work: “[*Quintessence of Ibsenism*] has value as a general introduction to Ibsen for the uninitiated and as a study in the relations between Ibsen and the English theatre” (1963, p. 138).

When the dates of Shaw’s criticism of Ibsen and the completion of his first play are considered, it can be understood that Shaw has studied plays of Ibsen at least before he has completed the play. In the appendix, as an answer to criticism of his play that compares him and his play with Ibsen, he admits that when the first two acts were written, he “knew nothing about Ibsen” (1965, p. 704). Yet, the completion date of the play indicates that Shaw studied Ibsen’s play before he completed *Widowers’ Houses*. Eventually, this brings the possibility of analysing the play not only under the impact of Ibsen but also within the later established meaning of “Shavian”. Shaw owes realism and the awareness he arouses towards the political and economic issues in the play to Ibsen. In the play, parallel to Shaw’s depiction of it as a play with purpose, the capital system and the institutions are being criticized. As will be discussed further, as in the

case of Ibsen’s plays, the play leads to questions on the problems rather than offering solutions. Shaw himself draws attention to this innovation on the stage as,

[t]he technical novelties of the Ibsen and post-Ibsen plays are, then: first, the introduction of the discussion and its development until it so overspreads and interpenetrates the action that it finally assimilates it, making play and discussion practically identical; and, second, as a consequence of making the spectators themselves the persons of the drama, and the incidents of their own lives its incidents [...]. (1987, p. 33)

As inspired by Ibsen and his theatre, Shaw declares his own dramaturgy through his first staged play *Widowers’ Houses* as a playwright who is deeply concerned about social and political problems of the period. Ultimately, the concept “Shavian” is primarily presented in the play as aimed to be discussed in this study through the presentation of characters, social problems of the period and the tone of the play. Used as an adjective as pointed of in the dictionary, “of or like George Bernard Shaw or his works”, the term Shavian can be traced back to Shaw himself. Oncins-Martinez extensively discusses the term part of Shaw’s identity as a playwright suggesting that,

[i]t must also be noted that this search for a personal brand name was part of a broader process that—questions of self-promotion aside may also have to do with Shaw’s interest in euphony, spelling, typography, and his dislike for his father’s name (George). (2020, p. 70)

The term Shaw sided with almost as “a personal brand” to define himself has turned into an independent adjective that can be re-interpreted based on analysis and criticism of Shaw. Understanding of the term begins at the outset of the play *Widowers’ Houses* for presenting a preliminary case for Shaw’s upcoming writing career in terms of his writing style including his characters and his approach to social problems.

4. Marx and Shaw

Besides Ibsen, Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* can be considered as an important impact on Shaw’s socialist outlook as reflected in this play. In his account, Archer points out Shaw’s interest in Marx’s ideas in relation to his first impression of Shaw: “Day after day for weeks he had before him two books, which he studied alternately, if not simultaneously – Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* (in French), and an orchestral score of *Tristan und Isolde*” (1997, pp. 48-49). As Archer would comprehend later, these two sources through their juxtaposition constitute Shaw’s social realist ideas (1997, p. 49). As Shaw is interested in the conditions of the working class, Marx has become a compulsory reading for him to develop his socialist ideas in a much more focused way. According to Bishop, “[Shaw] interpreted Marx’s *Capital* as a criticism of the bourgeoisie, its religious, educational, social and legal institutions which drain the working class dry” (2007, p. 4). In *Widowers’ Houses*, rather than protecting and advocating the rights of the working class, Shaw directs his criticism towards the capitalist system, the bourgeoisie, and the institutions of this system. Yet, rather than bringing a reform to the system, he leads the audiences and/or the readers to question the system based on their perspectives. C. B. Purdom softens the socialistic ideas of Shaw by articulating that “Shaw’s socialism was the outcome of his passion for order. His constant charge against the existing social order was that it was inefficient, wasteful, cruel, stupid, and shameful” (1966, p. 99). In this regard, Shaw questions the existing order pointing out the shortcomings of the system without proposing a new order; nevertheless, he leaves the audiences and/or the readers to contemplate on the problems of the system. Eventually, Marx’s ideas are influential in terms of shaping Shaw’s presentation of bourgeoisie as will be discussed in line with *Widowers’ Houses*. Marx would continue to be a significant source to shape Shaw’s political agenda as he would extend his criticism of bourgeoisie as would be further displayed in plays such as *Pygmalion* and *Major Barbara*.

5. From Entertainment to Social Problems

Distinguishing himself from the tradition of melodrama, beginning with *Widowers' Houses*, Shaw devotes himself to the social problems of his time. While for Booth melodrama is “emotional theatre dealing with suffering, suspense, romance and evil deeds” (1965, p. 117), by turning such definition upside down, Shaw introduces social problems for the audience to think about them as inspired by Ibsen. In this regard, in the play, Shaw touches upon one of the main social issues of the Victorian era, that is the housing problem. He bases his plot on the system of slum lording which Shaw himself witness during his Dublin years. This is explained by Clare as follows: “In an 1892 letter to his former collaborator Archer defending the play’s realism, Shaw emphasized that his knowledge of the play’s subject matter came from his time as a clerk in an estate office in Dublin” (2016, p. 128). Slum housing appears in that period as the large houses were divided into little tenements enabling families and individuals to find just a shelter for cheaper. In his study, Martin makes a further calculation for housing based on the inflation rate to clarify the economic conditions of the working class of the period for the contemporary audience and/or reader (2016, p. 85). To keep the rents cheap, the conditions of these houses were neglected, but still the renters must spare the majority of their income for the rent. The play presents the hierarchal management of such a slum house. While shedding light upon the conditions of these slum houses, the play also exemplifies the management system of these houses, as Lady Roxdale is the owner, Sartorius the manager, and Lickcheese the money collector. Through the slum housing and its management, Shaw also gives a glimpse of the capitalist system that depends on possessing the capital and getting richer over the poor. Accordingly, Shaw has challenged the over-emotional stories on the stage by forcing his audience to face with the realities of the period. By drawing attention to housing problems, Shaw also declares that he is willing to dedicate himself to the social problems that require immediate solutions.

Related to the capitalist system reflected in the play, morality appears as another key theme that is displayed in the play which can be counted as one of the key characteristics of Shavian dramaturgy as well. In the play, Trench, idealistic young doctor who falls in love with the daughter of a slumlord, is caught between what is moral and what is required by the system. As Trench could not comply with accepting his father-in-law’s money collected from London’s slums, Trench’s dilemma exemplifies one of the important themes of the play and Ibsen’s impact on Shaw is reflected by Purdom: “[Shaw] presents the classic themes of drama, the clash within the individual mind, the clash between individual characters, and between the individual and the customs, manners, religion, and policies of his time” (1966, p. 99). *Widowers' Houses* represents all these issues especially through Trench since the play presents social issues based on moral problems with the depiction of a character who experiences a conflict of decision and duty. The confused state of Trench can be deducted from his reply to Sartorius regarding his political stand. When he is asked whether he is a socialist or not he replies saying that: “Certainly not. I’m a Conservative. At least, if I ever took the trouble to vote, I should vote for the Conservative and against the other fellow” (17). Politically he declares an opinion; yet he is not so sure of his position within the political system. As a character, he has conscience, but he is not fully capable of questioning his acts. The conflict of Trench comes in the form of deciding whether to listen to his moral thinking or adapting to the system. In his decisions and acts, he must pursue the characteristics of his upper-class background.

Shadowed by the conflict Trench deals with, Shaw criticizes the system and the institutions as influenced by Marx as an explanation of the term Shavian. As revealed in the play, there is not one character that can be solely blamed and ascribed as the responsible party. All the characters exist within the system attached to the institutions. While Sartorius is shown in the foreground as the so-called villain as the slumlord, because of him earning money out of the poor and miserable working class, the source of Trench’s money is the same as Sartorius as the play reveals that is demonstrated as a dilemma of the characters as well as of the audience and/or the

readers. Trench assumes that he is noble by not accepting money from his father-in-law Sartorius due to its source; in fact, he only proves how ignorant he is regarding his own class and on the conditions of other classes. From the first impression of Trench, the audience and/or the readers perceive him as an idealist who reacts to social injustices as he fiercely reacts to Lickcheese’s account:

It’s a damnable business from beginning to end; and you deserve no better luck for helping in it. I’ve seen it all among the out-patients at the hospital; and it used to make my blood boil to think that such things couldn’t be prevented. (1965b, p. 13)

Shaw first presents the character as a social reformer who is all good. Nevertheless, as Sartorius, Trench and his friend Cokane sit down to discuss the issue in Act II, Sartorius reveals to Trench that he is a part of the system: “What Lickcheese did for me, I do for you” (1965b, p. 18). The disillusionment of Trench comes through learning that he is the real slum lord. After all, the play depicts a picture in which all the characters are a part of the social system, and the attack is against the system itself. Through the individual characters, Shaw exemplifies how system works stealthily and how individuals cannot be effective enough to change the system. Both ideas are represented through the character of Trench. We see him trapped within the system unconsciously. Yet, gathering awareness cannot be enough to change the system. On the other hand, he consciously contributes to the system at the end of the play. Moreover, through his so-called noble action – rejecting money from Sartorius – Shaw gives the message that it takes more strength to change this ill-order. In fact, Sartorius becomes the one who utters the fact that individuals are powerless to fight social evils. Defending his position as a slumlord, Sartorius draws Trench’s attention to the real problem in the social system against which he can do little as an individual to change it: “No, gentlemen: when people are very poor, you cannot help them, no matter how much you may sympathize with them. It does them more harm than good in the long run” (1965b, p. 18). Questioning the system rather than blaming the individuals regarding the social problems reoccurs in plays such as *Mrs Warren’s Profession* and *The Philanderer* as his unpleasant plays. In this regard, Clare also draws attention to the theme of landlord-tenant relation as the core of the social problem in this play turning into a major theme in the later plays of Shaw as initiated by *Widowers’ Houses* (2016, pp. 136-137).

6. Shavian Characters

In relation to the criticism of the system and individuals being captive of it, the characters in the play are not presented as stereotypes as either black or white. Since the motivation of the characters’ acts is out of necessity, the necessity of the capitalist system, they are depicted as grey characters. Such characterization is also a necessity for Shaw to reflect on his own political agenda. As a result of how Shaw presents them within the system, they can neither be blamed solely nor supported on their acts. As Sidhu comments upon, Shaw depicts his characters as a “[...]fusion of the drama of human emotions and instincts with burning social questions[...].” (1989, p. 111). The main characters, like Trench and especially like Lickcheese, learn to adapt to the system which is crucial for Shaw to deliver his message on the social problem the play focuses on.

In the play, Sartorius acts within the system in a way the system requires him to do. Unlike Trench, he acknowledges the system and his place within it, and he abuses it for his own well-being. As his background story reveals, he is a perfect example of a capitalist mind who improves his economic and social status by taking advantage of others’ weaknesses and falls. In Act III, Sartorius reveals his past to Blanche that he also comes from the working class and his mother “was a very poor woman” who “stood at her wash-tub for thirteen hours a day and thought herself rich when she made fifteen shillings a week” (1965b, p. 24). Yet, he finds his way within the system to earn his money over the working class he comes from. However, as the audience and/or the readers lose their sympathy for Trench as he encounters reality and gets stuck in a moral

dilemma, the attitude towards Sartorius also constantly changes. Throughout the play, Sartorius presents his good intentions and reasons his acts revealing that he is also powerless as an individual to change the situation and he is acting within the system in a way to protect not only his personal interests but also interests of the working class. Sartorius explains his good intentions to Blanche in Act III: “My dear: if we made the houses any better, the rents would have to be unable to pay, and would be thrown homeless on the streets” (1965b, p. 24). To some extent, Sartorius claims that he is on the side of the oppressed working class. He pulls away himself from the problem by claiming that he already exercises his authority to help the people in slums and by defending himself that he cannot alter the system individually as he reveals to Trench in Act II: “No, gentlemen: when people are very poor, you cannot help them, no matter how much you may sympathize with them” (1965b, p. 18). Shaw himself defends the character in the appendix:

I have drawn [Sartorius] as a man of strong and masterful character, unscrupulous but not a law-breaker, a kind and unselfish father [...] He is, in short, distinctly an exceptional and superior specimen of the middle-class man whose business it is to deal directly with the poor. (1965a, pp. 706-707)

Under these conditions, Sartorius cannot be considered a villain. On the other hand, through Sartorius, Shaw draws attention to the fact that it is everyone’s responsibility to act upon the system according to the socialist outlook of Shaw.

When the play is accepted to be a socialist play, Lickcheese is presented as a more interesting character in terms of his relation to the capitalist system. To some extent, he is the embodiment of Shaw’s criticism towards capitalism. He appears first on the stage in Act II as he comes to bring the money he collected from the slums. In the stage directions, he is depicted as a typical working-class man: “He is a shabby, needy man, with dirty face and linen, scrubby beard and whiskers, going bald” (1965b, p. 10). His economic despair is also given through his pleading to Trench to get back his job: “[...] I have four children looking to me for their bread. [...] you don’t know what loss of employment means to the like of me” (1965b, p. 12). Through this first impression of Lickcheese, the audience and/or the readers feel sympathy towards him. Yet, as a similar change in the case of Trench, Lickcheese alters this first image when he reappears in Act III as a character who mastered his ability to use the system for his personal benefits. This time, stage direction describes him contrary to his first appearance:

He is in evening dress, with an overcoat lined throughout with furs representing all the hues of the tiger. His shirt is fastened at the breast with a single diamond stud. His silk hat is of the glossiest black; a handsome gold watch-chain hangs like a garland on his filled-out waistcoat; he has shaved his whiskers and grown a moustache, the ends of which are waxed and pointed. (1965b, p. 21)

Lickcheese takes advantage of his connections and the first-hand experience in the business and creates his economic rebirth. With this sudden change in fortune, Shaw sacrifices his credibility for the message he uploads to the character and his change in the play. Eventually, his transformation from poverty to wealth is demonstrated as Sartorius experienced off stage years ago. While the character is an important part of the plot, by first revealing the truth to Trench in Act II and then later by becoming partners with Sartorius in Act III, he is also the embodiment of how the system works by taking advantage of the individuals. Lickcheese also support what Fred Mayne claims on the paradox of the characters: “In *Widowers’ Houses* [...] the innocents are as guilty or more guilty than the guilty, the emphasis being on collective responsibility for individual sin” (1967, p. 46).

When Lickcheese is compared with Trench, however, he is more honest to himself and aware of the truth of the system. Although he is introduced when he is still hopeful, since he strives to make things better by making some of the mandatory repairs, he accepts the process of the system and adapts to it more easily. This can be observed from his attitude towards the possible marriage between Trench and Blanche which he treats as a business agreement:

Why not Dr Trench marry Miss Blanche, and settle the whole affair that way? [...] I know Miss Blanche: she has her father’s eye for business. Explain this job to her; and she’ll make it up with Dr Trench. Why not have a bit of romance in business when it costs nothing? (1965b, p. 26)

Shaw presents him as a straightforward character who abuses the system to its full extent. Meanwhile, his change from a helpless member of a working class to a cunning member of middle class is displayed to fulfil Shaw’s social criticism of the period which he would pursue as a significant point of attention throughout his career as a playwright.

The name “Lickcheese” also has an interesting word structure. As an informal usage, Oxford Online Dictionary states that “lick” means “overcome (a person or problem) decisively.” Such meaning fits in perfectly with Lickcheese as he manages to persuade all the parties to cooperate for the sake of the capitalist system. The word “cheese,” on the other hand, has the informal meaning of “the quality of being too obviously sentimental” again according to the dictionary. This meaning of the word sounds quite ironic in the case of Lickcheese who acts craftily for his own interest. In fact, all the characters turn into pragmatic thinking when they are making a decision on the houses in the slums. Lack of emotions and emphasis over reason, at the same time, indicate the shift Shaw makes with his first staged play by turning the tradition of melodramas on the stage. Lickcheese is a part of Shaw’s criticism, since he deserts his individual attempt to make changes in the system and adapts to the system to save himself from economic perspective. His name also supports this role of Lickcheese.

Shaw, in fact, applies the same word play to the names of all characters of the play. The meaning of the word “sartorius” also supports the role the character plays in *Widowers’ Houses*. As Oxford Online Dictionary defines, it is a name of a muscle located inside of leg from hip to knee. The word is also associated with the meaning “tailor” as the sewing position leads to contraction in this muscle. To relate this to the character in the play, the meaning “tailor” dovetails with Sartorius’s role. The meaning can be associated with his position as managing the slum houses. He controls the houses and rents to fit into his own benefits. On the other hand, he also tries to manage the characters around him, like Trench, to contribute his place within the system. For the word “trench,” the dictionary gives the meaning of “a long, narrow ditch.” While the word used in military discourse, or as an ocean trench, the word can be interpreted in terms of the moral dilemma Trench encounters in the play. As the play process and Trench agrees to cooperate with Sartorius and Lickcheese, he digs a ditch within the system for himself. In the case of Cokane, it can be commented upon his name being homonymous with the word “cocaine.” In this case, his inaction and lack of affection for the social problems, as will be discussed further, parallel to the hypnotic side of cocaine.

Another character who contributes to the construction of the play is Cokane who is mainly presented with Trench. His name connotes the illegal drug cocaine. As a stimulant drug, it fakes euphoric effects on brain partly explaining Cokane’s position in the play as an indifferent character to the problems. According to Bernard F. Dukore, “[...] Cokane gives an impromptu performance with Trench” (2000, p. 162). Dukore further states that “[b]y making Cokane an improvisatory actor, Shaw conveys exposition to the audience as well as to Sartorius, he provides a way for Trench and Blanche to meet formally, and he establishes a reason for Sartorius to become interested in Trench” (2000, p. 162). After setting the relation among Trench, Blanche, and Sartorius, Cokane cannot be an influential character in the course of the events. In his comments he neither takes a side nor proposes a solution to the controversy between Sartorius and Trench. As a representative of aristocracy, he has neither knowledge and experience, nor economic and political power. According to Morikawa, “Cokane utters a number of moralistic clichés, but his platitudes never affect the development of the play. [...] In other words, Cokane’s personal ineffectuality symbolizes the ineffectuality of his class as a whole” (2011, p. 53). In this respect, Cokane becomes a tool for Shaw to criticize aristocracy on their inaction, since Shaw points out all classes as responsible for the situation. In Act I, Shaw introduces Cokane as an

English gentleman who is obsessed with his appearance as his outlook is the only thing he can hold on to show his upper-class origin. Cokane scolds to Trench warning him to pay attention to his appearance as an indication of his class: “How are they to know that you are well connected if you do not shew it by your costume?” (1965b, p. 1). Although Cokane is an aristocrat by origin, his lack of economic and political power is indicated by showing him acting as a secretary to Trench. This also can be taken as a foreshadowing for the end of the play, since he starts to work for Lickcheese.

Aristocracy, and its lack of power as a class, is also represented through Lady Roxdale who is Trench’s aunt and the real slum lord. The character is never presented on the stage but constantly referred to. Just like she is not functional enough to appear on the stage, the class she belongs to is not functional according to Shaw. As the owner of the properties, she is the head of the system. Yet, rather than exercising power, she has Sartorius manage her properties. This distances her from the core of the problem. She remains indifferent to the situation. By not interfering, she also exemplifies the powerlessness of the aristocracy and becomes a target of Shaw’s criticism of aristocracy.

7. Marriage as an Unpleasant Dilemma

Through the play, Shaw also criticizes marriage as an institution and presents as another target of his social criticism. In the play, marriage is referred to as a business transaction through Blanche and Trench. The play, in fact, is constructed on a possible marriage between these two in the first act. As the economic and social truth interfere the relation, marriage as an institution begins to be questioned. While the economic side of the marriage is highlighted, Blanche is also depicted as an untraditional female character. In this respect, the connotation of her name, meaning white, juxtaposes her attitude in the play. She is not a moral character; she merely protects her own benefits. She does not serve to satisfy the expectations of a patriarchal society; on the other hand, she thinks and acts as a businessman as Lickcheese points out in Act III. The economic power she has surpasses morality. She fiercely reveals her passion for money and position to her father as a reaction to his confession of his working-class past:

Would you like us to go and live in that place in the book for the sake of grandmamma? I hate the idea of such things. I don’t want to know about them. I love you because you brought me up to something better. I should hate you if you had note. (1965b, p. 24)

Marriage for Blanche is a tool to secure her social position and economic power. As Blanche and Trench try to dominate each other in the last act, it is more about money than sexual power over each other. On the other hand, the final scene between Blanche and Trench where a sexual tension can be felt strongly is an innovation for Victorian society. Presentation of a sexual tension is an indication for realism as introduced by Ibsen to the stage. As promoted by Ibsenism, rather than complying with the social norms of the period, Shaw, quite realistically, reflects the real nature of the relation between Blanche and Trench. As a result, marriage between the two becomes a business transaction guaranteeing their economic and political power. Shaw’s presentation of Blanche as a female character and discussion of marriage in *Widowers’ Houses* turns into an element of Shavian dramaturgy that Shaw continuously digs into in his later plays.

If the plot itself is taken for a business transaction, just like marriage, then each character gains what they desire. Morikawa comments on the ending of the play “[...] in which every character onstage is prosperous and satisfied, while those offstage bewail their misfortune and predicament” (2011, p. 47). Sartorius, Trench, and Lickcheese agree upon their business. Cokane is involved in Lickcheese constituting a partnership in which Lickcheese has the money and relations and Cokane has manners of the upper class as completing each other. Also, a possible relation between Trench and Blanche is hinted satisfying both parties. While the play reaches a conclusion and provides satisfaction for each character, Wisenthal argues that

[w]hen we reach the end of either *Widowers’ Houses* or *Cymbeline Refinished* we are left with a feeling of dissatisfaction [...] this effect is part of Shaw’s dramatic strategy, to leave his audience feeling that the action is not complete and that any resolution is in their hands and is their responsibility. (1991, p. 160)

This draws attention to the element of the play as a new drama emerged in the steps of Ibsen. Shaw points out this aspect of the play in his criticism of Ibsen:

In the new plays, the drama arises through a conflict of unsettled ideals rather than through vulgar attachments, rapacities, generousities, resentments, ambitions, misunderstandings, oddities and so forth as to which no moral question is raised. The conflict is not between clear right and wrong [...]. (1987, p. 28)

This uncertainty bothers the audiences and/or the readers leading them to question themselves about the problems staged in the play. While this is a happy ending for the characters of the play, it justifies Shaw’s classification of the play as unpleasant on the side of the audiences and/or the readers. Eventually, the problems presented in the play remain unresolved for the audiences and/or the readers triggering the questioning of the play as a dark comedy. Shaw pursues a similar unresolved ending later in his career as can be seen in the case of *Pygmalion* as a part of his Shavian dramaturgy.

8. Shift from Melodrama to a Shavian Play

Until the play reaches such an ending, the first act, first of all, presents a scene among the main characters that introduce their relations to the audiences and/or the readers. Especially when the conversation between Blanche and Trench is considered, the play starts as a romantic comedy. Hence, it hints the misunderstanding that it is going to be another melodrama example. In the second act, the romantic tone of the play changes as social problems and moral dilemmas are presented. Frederick J. Marker points out the change between the two acts as the following: “In the second act – which, in a sense, might almost mark the beginning of an entirely new play – the tone and development of the courtship comedy are now subverted by melodrama” (1998, p. 106). Indeed, in terms of tone and its relation to the main themes of the play, the first act is as different and distinct from the second act as the differences in setting. The play moves from an outside setting to the house of Sartorius and more specifically to the drawing-room of Blanche. They perform their carefree attitude towards life while they are in the hotel garden on the Rhine; yet, when it is time to face with the real problems of the time, a domestic problem of England, they move to an inside setting. In this domestic setting, the moral conflict Trench experiences in Act II transforms the tone of the play to melodrama. If this inside setting, Blanche’s drawing room, is associated with Blanche’s characteristics, it can be perceived one more time that she is not a romantic character but a businessman just like other characters. Shaw alters the tone of the play one more time in Act III. The outrageous realities of the system are pointed out as all the characters come together in support of the capitalist system. According to Wisenthal, “[...] the play produces its fullest effect on an audience that is simultaneously aware of both the original genre and the Shavian reversals” (1991, p. 160). In this respect, it is in fact the third act of the play that strikes the audience and/or the readers. Furthermore, this act even bothers as it depicts the facts of the time reflecting Shaw’s socialist criticism. As Henry William Massinger states that “[*Widowers’ Houses*] is neither tragedy nor melodrama, nor comedy nor burlesque” (1997, p. 53); what Shaw succeeds in this play is that he realistically depicts the modern life of his time creating his own style as Shavian. In this style, Shaw also popularizes a new trend on the Victorian stage as stated by Holder as well:

While *Widowers’ Houses* is notable for incorporating poverty into plot and theme while refusing to put the poor themselves on display, by the 1890s the wholesale exclusion of London’s poor became the new theatrical norm (a trend already apparent in the 1870s). (2012, p. 69)

He also carries out this tradition by discussing the social problems of his time by focusing on the upper and upper-middle classes as a part of a characteristic of his dramaturgy.

Shaw also takes advantage of another historical document to establish his understanding of realism in the play. While the twist in the tone and in the plot is carried on by Lickcheese, the bluebook becomes the embodiment of this twist. The drastic change in the appearance of Lickcheese indicates that he has found a way out of his economic misery. Yet, the proof of his business intelligence materialized through the bluebook. With another saying, the bluebook constitutes the credibility of Lickcheese's present position in the system. As she touches upon the impact of the historical blue book on the Victorian writers, Sheila Smith explains the concept of blue book as "[...] the contemporary habit of examining social problems by means of reports commissioned by the Government, that is, Blue books, so called because they were bound in stiff blue paper" (1970, p. 23). As the books that collect the statics of the era, the blue book contributes to the realistic depictions in the play. Smith continues that "[t]he Blue books, generally speaking, explored social problems rather than settled them" (1970, p. 26) which is in accordance with Shaw's aim in this play. Just like the blue books point out the social problems based on statistics, the play lays out the social problems and the moral problems they cause without proposing a definite solution to them. Sartorius also comments on the realistic depiction of the social problem in blue books that goes against his good intentions for the working class:

It's a curious thing, Blanche, that the Parliamentary gentlemen who write such books as these should be so ignorant of practical business. One would suppose, to read this, that we are the most grasping, grinding, heartless pair in the world, you and I. (1965b, p. 24)

The blue book in the play also acts as a tool to get a glimpse of Blanche's materialistic characteristic. She secretly reads it as her father and Lickcheese leave the room, and she cannot endure the harsh realities depicted in the book. Blanche is shown in denial of the realities of the social problem. The stage direction reflects the frustration of Blanche: "She tries to tear the book across. Finding this impossible she throws it violently into the fireplace" (1965b, p. 23). As Smith expresses, "some of the Victorian novelists used the novel as though it were a popular form of Blue book in order to make their readers explore social problems and give them evidence to draw some conclusions" (1970, p. 29). As a late Victorian, Shaw also takes advantage of the blue book – just like Charles Dickens as an example among many Victorian writers – as evidence to the social problems appears in the play and as a representation of realism.

Conclusion

George Bernard Shaw's first staged play, *Widowers' Houses* sets the tone for Shaw's career as a playwright. The play delivers Shaw's socialist messages, as inspired by Ibsen, through the characters and the moral and social dilemmas presented in the play. Massinger appraises the play through accomplishment of Shaw as "[Shaw] gives us love-making without romance, friendship without sincerity, landlordism without pity, life as it is lived in the upper middle-class without charm" (1997, p. 54). Indeed, Shaw's realist depiction in the play leads the audience and/or the readers to question institutions such as marriage and power structures, economic and political, in society. Rather than highlighting a possibly romantic interplay between Blanche and Trench and turning the play into a romantic comedy, to initiate Shawian dramaturgy, Shaw emphasizes economic concerns and class distinctions. Thus, Shaw turns the original idea of Archer into a play with a purpose in which he dives into questioning of social problems from a socialist point of view. Marker, on the other hand, defines the play as "[...] one of Shaw's darkest and bleakest comedies, concerned more with human depravity than with the traditional comedic subject of human folly" (1998, p. 110). The moral side of the play makes its themes universal, enabling the audience and/or the readers to continue questioning the ill systems of their society. Consequently, through the influence of Ibsen, along with the political and social atmosphere of his time, Shaw produces this didactic play as constructed through his perspective of socialist

realism. As introduced in this play, class, money, and marriage continue to be pivotal themes in Shaw’s dramaturgy throughout his career. As Shaw carried out his career as a playwright, he revisited such pivotal themes introduced in *Widowers’ Houses* in his later plays. Reasserted not in his plays but also in the analytical study of his plays, Shavian dramaturgy including presentation of social problems, discussion of moral dilemmas, introduction of complex characters is primarily set forth by this first staged play. While prolific career of Shaw enables numerous studies of his works, thematically or theoretically, any discussion of Shavian dramaturgy can be initiated through *Widowers’ Houses* based on play’s significance for Shaw’s career as a playwright.

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