

Influence of Late Victorian English Dramaturgy on the Formation of B. Shaw Aesthetics

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the influence of late Victorian English dramaturgy on Bernard Shaw's aesthetics, focusing on how the era's realism, social critique, and moral didacticism shaped his works. Shaw adopted and redefined these elements, transforming drama into a platform for intellectual debate and societal reform. Through an analysis of plays like Mrs. Warren's Profession and Pygmalion, the study highlights Shaw's innovative fusion of Victorian traditions with modernist ideals, establishing his legacy as a transformative force in modern theater.*

Key words: *Bernard Shaw, late Victorian dramaturgy, realism, social critique, moral didacticism, modern theater, dramatic aesthetics, societal reform, intellectual debate, modernist ideals.*

Introduction. The realm of late Victorian English dramaturgy offers a compelling backdrop for exploring the evolution of modern theatrical aesthetics. Known for its emphasis on moral didacticism, social critique, and realism, this era marked a significant shift in the purpose and presentation of drama. While earlier forms of Victorian theater often relied on melodrama and spectacle, the late Victorian period introduced more nuanced narratives that reflected the complexities of modern life. This transformation set the stage for playwrights like Bernard Shaw, whose works not only absorbed the era's prevailing themes but also redefined them through innovative approaches[1,p5]. The formation of Shaw's dramatic aesthetics within the context of late Victorian dramaturgy is a crucial aspect of understanding his contribution to modern theater. Shaw's works are characterized by their ability to intertwine social critique with intellectual debate, using wit and paradox to challenge conventional norms and provoke reflection. His approach to dramaturgy reflects a deliberate blending of traditional theatrical elements with forward-thinking ideals, resulting in a unique narrative style that resonates with audiences and addresses pressing societal concerns.

Discussion. One key feature of Shaw's dramaturgy is its use of realism and moral engagement to explore universal themes. In plays such as Mrs. Warren's Profession and Pygmalion, Shaw employs dramatic techniques to address issues like gender inequality, social mobility, and the role of morality in society [2]. These works transform the stage into a space for intellectual exploration and societal critique, engaging audiences in discussions that extend beyond the confines of the theater. This thesis examines how late Victorian dramaturgy shaped Bernard Shaw's aesthetics, focusing on the interplay between tradition and innovation in his works. Through an analysis of his major plays, the study explores how Shaw used the conventions of his time to craft narratives that challenge, inform, and inspire, ultimately solidifying his legacy as a transformative figure in modern theater.

Bernard Shaw's work in the late Victorian period reflects a deep engagement with the dramaturgy of his time, but he also challenged and reshaped the conventions of the era. The late Victorian theater

with dominating melodrama and social realism provided the foundational platform for Shaw's aesthetic development. Yet Shaw transcended these conventions by incorporating intellectual depth, social critique, and moral engagement into his plays, marking a departure from the often shallow moralizing of earlier works.

In plays like *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *Pygmalion*, Shaw masterfully employed the conventions of late Victorian dramaturgy, such as the focus on realism and the depiction of social issues, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of traditional theater. He infused his works with a modernist approach that went beyond the conventions of the time, engaging deeply with the pressing issues of his era. Shaw's commitment to realism was not only evident in his use of realistic settings and dialogue but also in his exploration of the complexities of character psychology and the systemic forces that shape human behavior [4, p12]. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw uses realism to probe the economic and moral dilemmas faced by individuals caught in oppressive social structures. Mrs. Warren, the protagonist, is a woman who resorts to prostitution as a means of survival and a way to provide her daughter, Vivie with opportunities for a better life. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the simplistic moral narratives often found in Victorian plays, where characters were typically judged based on adherence to social norms.

«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 the profits instead of starvation wages? Not likely.»

This speech highlights the economic realities that force women into morally questionable professions. [act II, page 12]

Shaw refuses to cast his characters as one-dimensional figures; instead, he provides a nuanced exploration of the intersection between personal choice and societal constraints. Mrs. Warren is not simply portrayed as a «fallen woman» but as a product of her environment, forced into her profession by the limitations imposed on her as a woman in a patriarchal society. The tension in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* revolves around Vivie's discovery of her mother's past and the confrontation between their differing worldviews. Vivie represents the emerging modern woman - independent, educated, and focused on personal success - while Mrs. Warren represents the previous generation's survival tactics in a society that limits women's options. Shaw critiques the hypocrisy of the Victorian moral system, which condemns women like Mrs. Warren for their perceived immorality while ignoring the broader societal forces that push them into such positions. The play challenges Victorian ideas of respectability and exposes the structural inequalities that affect women's lives, particularly the lack of economic agency available to them. By portraying his characters as complex individuals whose actions are shaped by the social systems around them, Shaw transforms the Victorian melodrama into a vehicle for social critique, underscoring the way society, particularly gender norms, and restricts individual freedom.

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw takes a similarly critical stance, albeit with a different focus. While *Mrs. Warren's Profession* delves into issues of morality and survival, *Pygmalion* critiques the rigid class system of late Victorian society. The play tells the story of Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower girl who is transformed into a «lady» through the intervention of phonetics professor Henry Higgins. Through Eliza's journey, Shaw explores the fluidity of class and the power dynamics that come with it. The play addresses the harsh realities of class mobility and the superficiality of the Victorian obsession with appearances and social status.

I ain't pretending to be deserving. No, I'm undeserving, and I mean to go on being undeserving. I'm one of the undeserving poor: that's what I am. But, my dear, think what that means!»

This speech satirizes Victorian moral attitudes, suggesting that being «deserving» is often a social construct used to maintain inequality. [Act II, page 17]

In this way, Shaw challenges the assumptions of Victorian society, where social roles were seen as fixed and individuals were judged based on their class rather than their character or intellect. The structure of *Pygmalion* reflects Shaw's modernist sensibilities. While the play begins with a focus on

the personal transformation of Eliza, it shifts in the second half to a more philosophical exploration of identity and self-worth. The tension between the characters of Eliza and Higgins - one representing social mobility and the other embodying the power of education and intellectual authority - reveals Shaw's belief in the potential for individual change, but also the limitations of external forces in determining one's true self.[5] Eliza's struggle to reconcile her new identity with her original self, along with her realization that her transformation has not granted her the freedom and agency she sought, speaks to the broader societal critique Shaw offers. He suggests that, while the class system may be malleable, it is still deeply ingrained in the social fabric, and no amount of surface-level change can free individuals from its influence.

In both plays, Shaw's use of realistic dialogue and characters allows him to engage with social issues in a way that feels grounded and immediate. Unlike earlier Victorian playwrights who focused on personal relationships within the confines of the domestic sphere, Shaw's dramas break open the doors of the home to explore broader societal issues. In *Pygmalion*, for example, the play's exploration of class and education is framed through the relationship between Higgins and Eliza, but it speaks to the larger forces at work in society. Shaw's approach to social realism highlights how individuals are shaped by the systems around them, whether it be the class structure, gender roles, or the moral expectations of society. His plays reflect the complexities of modern life and the tension between individual desires and the forces of social conformity. Shaw's modernist approach to late Victorian dramaturgy also involved a rejection of the melodramatic tropes that had been prevalent in earlier theater. His characters are not purely good or evil but are complex and multifaceted. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw's focus is not on presenting moral lessons but on exposing the contradictions within Victorian society, which purports to be moral but is deeply hypocritical. Similarly, in *Pygmalion*, Shaw avoids the typical «rags to riches» narrative and instead portrays a more nuanced examination of how social mobility is not just a matter of individual effort but is constrained by the pervasive power structures in place [6, p 7]. By using the conventions of late Victorian dramaturgy - realism, complex characterization, and social critique - Shaw infused them with a modernist sensibility that transcended the moralistic narratives of earlier plays. His works do not offer simple solutions to the issues they raise but instead provoke thought and discussion about the systems of power that shape human lives. Shaw's dramas highlight the tension between personal agency and social structures, illustrating how individuals are often trapped within the confines of their environment, and how the very systems that are supposed to provide order and stability often serve to reinforce inequality and injustice.

In **conclusion**, George Bernard Shaw's plays, such as *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *Pygmalion*, represent a turning point in late Victorian theater, where the focus shifted toward realistic portrayals of society's issues. Shaw's works not only reflected the social realities of his time but also critically examined the systems that influenced the lives of his characters. By using drama to explore topics like class, gender, and morality, Shaw challenged the traditional views of Victorian society. He created characters who were shaped by their environment but also had the agency to challenge and question these societal structures. Shaw's modern approach to theater went beyond just telling a story; it was about making the audience think deeply about the problems and injustices in the world. His plays stand out because they don't just entertain - they provoke important questions about how we live together, the roles we play, and the values we hold. Even today, Shaw's work remains relevant because it encourages us to reflect on the world around us and the power dynamics that continue to affect our lives.

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