

Reversing the Conventional Patterns: Shaw's First Attempt at Repudiation to Social Norms

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Abstract

*To be a real playwright or to leave playwriting at all is George Bernard Shaw's turning point in the beginning of his playwriting career and *Widowers' Houses*, his first play, is a challenge after his failure in his previous five novels. The playwright criticises the magnates' sources of income and the negative effect of this income on the matrimonial life. With the help of William Archer, Shaw defies all the vows of Victorian norms and portrays his new logocentric thinking. The dramatist calls for woman's repudiation to social norms whereas his example of woman in this play exceeds his expectations and she manages to achieve her ends in the society she lives in successfully. Woman character in this play is not only supported to liberate herself and to become free woman in a patriarchal society but also she is enlisted to save her father and fiancé from the curse of their 'tainted' income. She challenges the conventional patterns and she flips them upside down in a way seemingly to say that social norms are what can be accepted rationally and what cannot, will be reversed so as to make it acceptable in a rational way.*

Keywords: Repudiation, Victorian woman, matrimonial life, reversing, Social conventions

Introduction

Reversing the conventional patterns is a contemporary technique of criticism which is presented by modern playwrights, one of whom is George Bernard Shaw who brings about a new 'way of the world'. The study, however, deals with the core of Derrida's phrase *Metaphysics of Presence* which "has invented a variety of terms that can function as centres" (Bressler 120) – like logocentrism, binary oppositions and phonocentrism – and its applications on George Bernard Shaw's *Widowers' Houses*.

It projects a feminist perspective in a way in which Shaw calls for woman's liberation through reversing the conventional patterns and flipping social norms upside down. The dramatist's thesis is that woman in a society either chooses to be dependent and she accepts degradation henceforth she agrees to live a servile life or to repudiate her husband, father or social conventions but herself and lives a happier life. The main focus of this paper is the idea which argues that if conventional patterns mean the irrational and what is out of the realistic thinking, the reversing of such conventional patterns can be accepted rationally. My thesis, however, is that in the Victorian era¹ woman was confined to Victorian norms and Shaw tried to reverse these conventional patterns through having called for repudiating the social conventions. But the question is that: how does Shaw manage to defy the patriarchal monopoly of proposing and Victorian norms which confine the daughter to her father and the wife to her husband? How he tries to kick the centre, challenges the norms and brings about a new logocentric thinking to make his argument convinced is the dramatist's major problem of his manuscript *Widowers' Houses*.

If we start with Derrida's concept of binary opposition which states that "for each centre, an opposing centre exists" (Bressler 121), we can imagine to what extent Shaw brings about an opposing centre like unwomanliness in his play. In his exploration of binary oppositions, Jacques Derrida assures that to deconstruct things we need to substitute the normal logocentric thinking with its binary opposition. In reference to the logocentrism which argues that "the establishing of one centre of unity automatically means that another is decentred" (Bressler 121), Shaw, in the *Widowers' Houses*, establishes substituting centres like woman's repudiating to her father, her husband but herself which automatically decentre the main like woman's being attached to her father, her husband but herself.

Phonocentrism points out the concept of privileged and unprivileged like repudiating and being attached in a sense that to be attached is to apply the social norms whereas to repudiate means to counter the conventional patterns. Moreover, if Derrida calls Phonocentrism as the privileging of speech over writing and man over woman etc, Shaw looks at the privileging of repudiation over being attached in the same way that looks at being independent over being dependent or earning her living over being parasite in a society.

Shaw's Feminist background

Seven years after having decided the plot, Shaw's *Widowers' Houses* completed and staged in 1892. The play was set in 1880²; during which Barbara Leigh Smith was leading a huge campaign to woman's liberation. Mary Ann Evans – George Eliot – who was influenced by Smith and became her close friend, in her novel *Middlemarch* (1871-2) assured that the woman's intelligence and talent might be ignored. Since the focus of this work is George Bernard Shaw, there is a need to pose a question delineating: What are the reasons those make Shaw turn into feminist? This question might find answer in Shaw's autobiographical existence in the context of his plays. In other words, Shaw suffers from hard circumstances in the earliest part of his life and such sufferings are reflected on the theme of his plays; most events of which are derived from real experience of his own life. Roll-Hansen states that:

Shaw has a specific frame of reference in contemporary social conditions that he knew thoroughly, partly because he had himself collected rents in the slums of Dublin, and had later been active in the East End of London both as a social worker and a soap-box orator, and partly because he had made an intensive study of the economic theories of Henry George and Karl Marx (1975, p. 8).

Regarding Shaw's feminist background there are two different opinions, the initially plausible suggestion by J. Ellen Gainor which underlines that "part of Shaw's thinking" about women "may have come from his close association" (qtd. in Peters 1993, p. 180) with Beatrice Webb. She supported her opinion with a single example that Webb's movement from advocating celibacy for professional women in 1887 to her position quoted in an 1894 diary entry: "the vastly more important question of the breeding" (ibid) of the next generation. Sally Peters's in her review "The New Woman Versus The Old Adam" disagrees with Gainor and her disagreement becomes clear when she argues that such an opinion cannot be supported by the single example Gainor gives since Gainor "never considers the possibility that the reverse process might have occurred - that is, Beatrice Webb might have been influenced by Shaw. Yet the then Beatrice Potter did not meet Shaw until 1890..." (1993, pp. 181). Most of Shaw's opinions in his book *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* find their way in his play *Widowers' Houses* and what assures Peter's opinion is the sequence of Shaw's feminist campaigns those appeared in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* and *Widowers' Houses*. In 1891 Shaw wrote *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* two years after Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. This period was Shaw's flourishing period in which he began four-year tenure as a music critic for *The World*. That what makes Gainor come to conclude that "After the publication of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), Shaw established himself as the champion of the domestic woman rather than the professional woman, who he thought could take care of herself without his help" (86). Second opinion is that Shaw's feminist views may come from his pathos of the woman's role in the Victorian era. The effect of the Victorian age on Shaw's writing takes many of the critics to judge that Shaw is "essentially Victorian writer" (Wisenthal 1988, p. vii). It is quite clear that "all [*Widowers' Houses*'] scenes belong in the 1880s and 1890s. So does the portrait of Blanche Sartorius, which is closely, relate to that of the female stage villain of many a Victorian melodrama..." (Roll-Hansen 1975, p. 9).

In the realm of Shaw's feminism, Gainor points out that "feminist criticism of Shaw has not progressed significantly over the past twenty years" (qtd. in Peters 1993, p. 179). By this statement, as identifying herself as a member of "the current generation of feminist critics," Gainor turns out to mean that Shaw's female critics do not subscribe to her critical formulas (Peters 1993, p. 179). This argument will take us to ask: Is Shaw serious in his calls for gender equality? In some cases, let me say, the equality between man and woman can hardly be achieved thoroughly. Bathsua Makin is quite realist in her assertion that "my intention is not to equalize women to men, much less to make them superior. They are the weaker sex" (qtd. in Walters 2005, p. 18). Thus Laski and et al, in their thesis on the social equality seems to be more realist when they think that "if we tried to pay the same income to a Prime Minister as to a milkman, we should be driven to juggling with systems of allowances which would make equality without any meaning" (Laski and et al 1991, p. 196). In more senses than one, Laski "doubted whether [Shaw] really cares very much about individual freedom" (ibid 197).

That is perhaps why Shaw was accused of having propagandized. It is clear in Jere Veilleux assumption when he begins his article he points out: Anyone who attempts to familiarize himself with the vast number of critical essays and appraisals of George Bernard Shaw's plays, or who finds himself involved in discussions of Shaw's works, is inevitably aware of a widespread and fundamental attack upon Shaw as a dramatist... Shaw's plays are attacked as being "talky," "rhetorical," "propagandistic," "undramatic," "didactic," etc (1958, p. 170).

Therefore, Shaw himself points out that the objectives he calls for are matters of social Reformation: "I am a moral revolutionary, interested, not in the class war, but in the struggle between human vitality and the artificial system of morality, and distinguishing, not between capitalist & proletarian, but between moralist and natural historian" (Laurence 1972, p. 163).

Reversing the conventional patterns

In the beginning of Shaw's career as a playwright, when he wrote *Widower's Houses* and particularly in his description of Blanche, the only child of the wealthy slum-owner Sartorius and the dramatist's first woman character, he said that woman was still attached to a family provider. She had a good looking of ladylike but still needed to have unwomanly features. The dramatist reversed the conventional patterns stating that woman was still her father's daughter. This is revealed in the statement mentioned by Blanche's father who assured her unwomanly features to Harry Trench, an aristocratic young doctor: "I will be plain with you. I know that Blanche has a quick temper. It is part of her strong character and her physical courage, which is greater than that of most men, I can assure you. You must be prepared for that" (Shaw 1965a, p. 16). Shaw clarifies that the daughter's decision of marriage is unsettled unless the father decides. Woman is unfortunately "still her father's daughter" (Shaw 1965b, p. 2). When Sartorius knows about the case between his daughter and Trench, he immediately interferes to show that he is the responsible of the girl as "the father of a motherless girl" (Shaw 1965a, p. 6).

A young girl is her mother's daughter and not her father's since a girl needs her mother in such affairs more than her needs to her father for her real accompanier is her mother. In case the mother is absent, the father is not fully responsible for his daughter's future and marriage. Shaw goes beyond the vows of the Victorian woman and assures that the woman's ability to decide her future can be achieved only through repudiating the social norms. When Blanche feels that Trench is not suitable for her future life, she frankly announces that she does not want to marry a fool. Her question makes her father in a test that either to be a democratic or to behave as oppressor. She exclaims: "May I do as I like about this marriage; or must I do as you like" (Shaw 1965a, p. 20)? Her speech can assure that the necessity of the woman's liberation will be achieved only by self-confidence. There must be an end to the patriarchal monopoly of proposing and showing inner feelings to the woman which only reserved for man. Shaw flips these rules upside down and makes woman show her deep and inner feelings freely. Sartorius, by abandoning his self-control and giving way recklessly to his affection for her, he went beyond the conventional patterns of Victorian father and says: "you shall do as you like now and always, my beloved child. I only wish to do as my own darling pleases" (ibid.). In an unwomanly expression, she defies the rules and she defends herself and her life. She makes a surprise in her reaction:

Then I will not marry him. He has played fast and loose with me. He thinks us beneath him: He is ashamed of us: He dared to object to being benefited by you as if it were not natural for him to owe you everything; and yet the money tempted him after all. [She throws her arms hysterically about his neck] Papa: I don't want to marry: I only want to stay with you and be happy as we have always been. I hate the thought of being married: I don't care for him: I don't want to leave you (ibid.). Shaw's description reflects his skills of being influenced by Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in his assumption that "...it is not surprising that our society, being directly dominated by men, comes to regard woman, not as an end in herself like man, but solely as a means of ministering to his appetite" (Shaw 1913, p. 36). Shaw concludes that: "to treat a person as a means instead of an end is to deny that person's right to live" (ibid.). In broader terms, from the early period of his career until he finished writing *The Devil's Disciple* in 1897, Shaw defended the married woman and matrimonial life. But after his marriage in 1898 his tone was changed and most of his plays focused on the single woman. This is not to say that he is against the married woman insofar as feeling that there is a need to defend the single one. As an example, Shaw enlists woman to choose her husband when he gives Blanche the right to reject Trench's proposal. As it is clear that the play is about the woman's social renunciation, Shaw himself confessed in his preface to the play that "I told [Archer] that I had finished up the renunciation...as I was only in the middle of the second act. He said that according to his calculation the renunciation ought to have landed me at the end of the play" (Shaw 1965b, p. 700).

Shaw establishes his feminist thesis in his assertion that the woman needs to "repudiate her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself" (Shaw 1913, p. 41) for "in that repudiation lies her freedom" (Ibid.) otherwise "she cannot emancipate herself" (Ibid.). Blanche refused completely the idea of being dependent by discussing the matter with Trench to make things clear in advance about her desire for her independence as a free woman. Shaw's thesis in *Widowers' Houses* is assured in his assertion that woman should not be dependent on her father or husband and she needs to find her way of independence through reversing the conventional patterns of being attached to any of them. It is in the dramatist's words when he asserts: "woman has to repudiate duty altogether. In that repudiation lays her freedom; for it is false to say that Woman is now directly the slave of Man" (Shaw 1913, p. 41).

It has been recognized throughout the play that the woman suffers in her life because of the faults of her parents. In this play, as in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, both of Vivie and Blanche suffered from their parents' faults. What Shaw projects in *Widowers' Houses* is modified in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* later on and he forwards his criticism through Blanche when she says: "It was not my fault; so I don't see why I should be made to suffer for it" (Shaw 1965a, p. 24). Blanche is the best example of economic woman in *Widowers' Houses*. She faces a special economic case in which she has to be taken by the fault of her father as a renter of slums in London. The contradicting is that Trench, as a mortgagee, does not prefer to marry Blanche because he does not agree with her father's source of income. Moreover, he abstains from touching her father's so-called 'dirty' dowry but the very fact is that his money is not less 'dirty' than hers. When Trench becomes convinced that his income is mingled with Blanche's father's source of income, Blanche's respect to him is destroyed completely that she rebels against his false idealism and utopian claims. Blanche challenged these economic problems intellectually and proved to be sufficient enough to take her role in the society. Woman character in such scene repudiated her womanliness to society and to her father but herself to achieve her independence.

After reversing these conventional patterns the playwright questions if a woman is the 'Angel in the house', then who is the angel in Sartorius house? Blanche or her maid? or the 'Angel' is reserved for the wealthy woman? The poor is repressed in the house and her mistress is the angel of her father's house. Thus woman is liberated only when she has self abnegation and decides to enfranchise the woman herself. If the maid is respected as a woman of her mistress's species and she treats her in a respectful way, both of them will be more confident and the mistress can freely call for her liberation since she liberates her maid before. The contradicting in the Victorian woman's conduct is that she rejects the self renunciation but at the same time degrades her maid as a woman. She achieves her inclinations to defend her rights and passions but her maid is still controlled by her mistress. If the bourgeois woman deconstructs the norms and gives her maid the right to behave freely, or even treats her in the same way she treats her sister or friend at least, this can pave the way for her to defy the obstacles she suffers in her ordinary life. That is may be why in *Widowers' Houses* the woman's "role shifts from angelic to erotic" (Russell 2012, p. 94). Or let me say she shifts from angelic to tiger woman; tiger woman in a sense that she wants to achieve her identity and defend her right as a woman exactly like man. Blanche's behavior with Trench is quite liberated, especially at the moment when she meets him at home again after he comes to make a deal with her father, she erotically addresses him "so you have come back here. You have had the meanness to come into this house again. What a poor-spirited creature you must be! Why don't you go? I don't want you to stay" (Shaw 1965a, p. 27).

In short, Blanche is a victim of her father's lie about the source of his income. She accidentally knows why Trench will not touch her father's money. Shaw gives us an example of the liberated passionate woman who behaves in a courageous way with both of her father and fiancé. She does her best to help changing her father's mind regarding the way of exploiting the widowers in the slums. She makes him change the idea of exploiting the poorest people for getting the money and flip the matters upside down on her fiancé, Harry Trench who abstains from her dowry. She also proves that she is right in her decision of refusing the man as he will not touch her father's money. She assures that her matrimonial life is not based on the type of money she gets from her father regardless of the source of income – when she is unaware of it – but rather the good life they will live together after sharing their own source of income after their marriage. Thus she proves her seriousness of leaving Trench since his income is derived from interest on mortgage and he will not touch her father's money as a dowry. Blanche seems to be liberal since before knowing about the matter that makes Trench would not touch her father's money, she gives him many solutions to make him content with her income.

But he abstained from understanding her and indifferently walks over her feelings. She tries more than once to explain her readiness to live with him in case his income is enough for them after compromising both incomes. But when he shows his rejection to her father's income as he is not satisfied with it, she shifts into an unwomanly woman who treats him in the same way he behaves with her thus she flips everything upside down. At the time when Trench becomes aware of the source of his income which is not at all better than Blanche's father's money, Sartorius convinced Trench that he needed no more object to Blanche sharing her father's fortune, than her father needed object to her sharing Trench's (Shaw 1965a, p. 18). In such a decision which is taken by both of her father and her before, Shaw reverses the Victorian patterns which give the right to the father to decide his daughter's marriage. The dramatist describes those who are protected by the conventional patterns and obey them blindly despite they seem to be irrational, like those who live in glass houses where their lives are threatened and a small stone of a person who defies these patterns may destroy them. Shaw assures that "people who live in glass houses have no right to throw stones" (ibid.).

Notes:

¹ Woman in the Victorian era was well-known as 'The Angel in the House'. Unfortunately, she was cornered in her house. Her role was to deal only with the house affairs. The married woman in this era had to follow strict vows. Her proper role was to obey her husband blindly.

² These events are synchronized with Shaw's joining the Fabian Society in 1884, a socialist organization from which the Labour Party eventually is born, and meets William Archer a drama critic who provided the initial plot for Shaw's first play *Widowers' Houses*.

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