



Widowers' Houses

by George Bernard Shaw
directed by Kevin Fox

STUDY GUIDE

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GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Brief Biography

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856, the son of an alcoholic civil servant and a professional singer. By all accounts, his childhood was not a happy one; he was tended to by an ever-rotating roster of disinterested servants, and attention from either parent came in small, irregular doses.

Shaw’s mother, Bessie, moved to London in 1873 with his two sisters in tow, but left him behind to live with his father, George — a man who made such a negative impression on Shaw that he became a lifelong teetotaler and repudiated his first name.

Shaw followed his mother to London in 1876. Six years later, he experienced an awakening upon hearing a lecture given by Henry George, an American economist who argued that governmental land ownership was the first step to economic freedom for laborers.

Stirred to action, Shaw flirted with a number of socialist organizations and immersed himself in the writings of Karl Marx. Eventually, he found his mind and heart won over by the newly established Fabian Society, an organization of middle-class socialists that — like its namesake, Roman general Quintus Fabius — favored gradual change over the revolutionary bent of its contemporary fellow travelers.

At the time, Shaw was eking out a living as a writer, contributing articles of music, art and theater criticism to various publications. He wrote five novels — the last, *The Unsocial Socialist*, was serialized in 1884 — and began writing his first play.

Eventually christened *Widowers' Houses*, it finally was finished and produced in 1892. The combination of sparkling language and unflinching representation of societal ills made Shaw a sensation.

His first three plays, published together under the rubric of *Plays Unpleasant*, tackled the subjects of housing for the poor (*Widowers' Houses*), the power plays at work in sexual relationships (*The Philanderer*) and prostitution (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*). The last was censored until 1925.

None of the plays enjoyed the level of success Shaw hoped for, so he began coupling his social commentary with more accepted theatrical formulae and devices. Indeed, his next four plays — *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *The Man of Destiny* and *You Never Can Tell* — were published under the collective title *Plays Pleasant*.

Shaw continued to write extensively, completing the plays *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *Pygmalion* and a slew of others.

His revulsion at the horrors of World War I — and England's participation therein — led to his pamphlet *Common Sense About the War* (1914), published in the *New Statesman*.

His views made him immensely unpopular in Britain; he was blacklisted from many newspapers, and many bookstores removed his works from their shelves. Disheartened, he only wrote one full-length play during the war: *Heartbreak House*. Completed in 1917, it was steeped in his anger and depression over the fighting and Britain's role in the war.

After the war, Shaw's reputation grew again. His plays were widely produced at home and abroad, and his output returned to its normal, prolific, level.

In 1925, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, "for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty."

In between penning his many plays, he continued to write socialist and feminist essays. He also accepted invitations to visit the Soviet Union and lecture in the United States.

On a rainy afternoon in September 1950, Shaw fell off a ladder while pruning a tree. After more than a month in the hospital, he slipped into a coma and died early in the morning of November 2, leaving behind a body of work that includes more than 50 plays.

Timeline of life and works

- 1856** George Bernard Shaw is born in Dublin on July 26.
- 1871** At age 15, he leaves school to work as a clerk in a Dublin real-estate office.
- 1873** Shaw's mother emigrates to London, taking his two sisters; he remains in Ireland with his father.
- 1876** Leaves Ireland for London.
- 1879** Begins writing novels, completing five in four years; none find publishers.
- 1881** Contracts smallpox. That same year, he becomes a vegetarian.
- 1882** Meets the American economist Henry George, who draws his attention to economic and social-policy issues.
- 1884** Joins the Fabian Society, a socialist organization from which the Labour Party eventually is born.
- Meets William Archer, a drama critic who will provide the initial plot for Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses*. Shaw begins, but doesn't finish, the play.
- His novel *The Unsocial Socialist* is serialized.
- 1885** Shaw's father dies; he does not attend the funeral.
- Begins writing book reviews for the *Pall Mall Gazette*.
- 1886** Writes art criticism for *The World*.
- 1888** Writes music criticism for *The Star*.
- 1889** Edits and contributes two pieces to *Fabian Essays*, an anthology.
- 1890** Begins a four-year tenure as music critic for *The World*.

- 1891** Writes *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, after seeing Ibsen's *A Doll's House* two years before.
- 1892** Eight years after starting *Widowers' Houses*, he completes the play, and it is produced.
- 1893** Writes *The Philanderer* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Shaw categorizes these first three plays as *Plays Unpleasant*.
- 1894** Writes *Arms and the Man*.
- 1895** Writes *Candida* and *The Man of Destiny*.
Begins writing theater criticism for *The Saturday Review*; maintains this position until 1898.
- 1896** Writes *You Never Can Tell*; together with *Arms and the Man*, *Candida* and *The Man of Destiny*, it will be published as *Plays Pleasant* alongside *Plays Unpleasant* in 1898.
Meets Charlotte Payne-Townshend; they will marry in 1898.
- 1897** Writes *The Devil's Disciple*.
- 1898** Writes *Caesar and Cleopatra*.
- 1899** Writes *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*.
- 1901** Writes *The Admirable Bashville*.
- 1903** Completes *Man and Superman*.
- 1904** Writes *John Bull's Other Island* and *How He Lied to Her Husband*.
Defeated in his bid for a seat on the London County Council.
- 1905** Writes *Major Barbara*.
- 1906** Writes *The Doctor's Dilemma*.
Shaw and his wife move to Ayot St. Lawrence in Hertfordshire, where they live until their deaths.
- 1908** Writes *Getting Married*.
- 1909** Shaw's plays *Press Cuttings* and *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* are banned by censors. He will later testify before Parliament on the subject of dramatic censorship.
Writes *Misalliance*.
- 1910** Writes *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*.

- 1911** Writes *Fanny's First Play*.
- 1912** Writes *Androcles and the Lion* and *Overruled*.
- 1913** Completes *Pygmalion*.
Shaw's mother dies.
- 1914** Writes his controversial anti-war pamphlet *Common Sense About the War*.
- 1917** Completes *Heartbreak House*.
- 1920** Writes *Back to Methuselah*.
- 1923** Writes *Saint Joan*.
- 1925** Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- 1928** Writes the book *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*.
- 1929** Addresses the International Congress of the World League for Sexual Reform.
- 1931** Visits the Soviet Union, meeting with Josef Stalin, Maxim Gorki and Konstantin Stanislavski.
Meets Mahatma Gandhi in England.
- 1932** Makes his only trip to the United States, lecturing briefly in New York.
- 1939** Receives an Academy Award for his screenplay for *Pygmalion*.
- 1941** The Shaw Society is founded in London.
- 1943** Charlotte Shaw dies.
- 1950** Writes his final play, *Why She Would Not*.
On November 2, Shaw dies from complications he suffered after falling from a ladder in September.

“Plays Unpleasant”

“In *Widowers' Houses* I have shewn middle class respectability and younger son gentility fattening on the poverty of the slum as flies fatten on filth. That is not a pleasant theme.”

— George Bernard Shaw, in the preface to “Plays Unpleasant”

“Ever since I have read *Widowers’ Houses* I have felt hopeless about investments. It seemed impossible for a small private investor like myself to know where his money had actually gone or whether it was doing harm or good. ... I have got to feel that the world of finance is so complicated that — ethically speaking — it doesn’t matter what I buy. In a sense this is true. It is impossible for anyone to have clean hands. ... No individual, however humble, can be guiltless.”
— E.M. Forster, “Notes on the Way,” from *Time and Tide* (1934)

Shaw classified his first three plays as “Plays Unpleasant” because they “force the spectator to face unpleasant facts.” Indeed, the purpose of the plays was to “attack” its audiences — and readers, for it was through published editions that Shaw reached more people — implicating them in the very social ills the plays illuminated: slums in *Widowers’ Houses*, the “grotesque relations between men and women” engendered by strict marriage laws in *The Philanderer* and prostitution in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*.

“No doubt all plays which deal sincerely with humanity must wound the monstrous conceit which it is the business of romance to flatter,” Shaw wrote. “But here we are confronted, not only with the comedy and tragedy of individual character and destiny, but with those social horrors which arise from the fact that the average homebred Englishman, no matter however honorable and goodnatured he may be in his private capacity, is, as a citizen, a wretched creature who, whilst clamoring for a gratuitous millennium, will shut his eyes to the most villainous abuses if the remedy threatens to add another penny in the pound to the rates and taxes which he has to be half cheated, half coerced into paying.”

The original production of *Widowers’ Houses* ran only two performances, but the resulting sensation played out across the front pages of newspapers for two weeks. Critics scrambled to properly enumerate the ways in which the play offended them: The characters were unrealistic and unlikable. The play’s socialist leanings were too apparent. The character of Blanche, the hot-headed romantic interest of Dr. Trench, flew in the face of how proper women should behave. The endeavor as a whole was simply distasteful.

Shaw’s attacks had worked: Confronted with his world, in which even the protagonist was far from heroic and the antagonist was given sympathetic shadings, the critics blinked.

Shaw, an established critic in his own right, took issue with the notices he received, and answered them in letters to various newspapers and in appendices to the original published edition of the play. “I do not hesitate to say that many of my critics have been completely beaten by the play simply because they are ignorant of society,” Shaw wrote.

Having worked in an estate office in Dublin as a young man, where he “made collections of weekly rents from very poor tenants,” he was familiar with the conditions and attitudes towards slum housing. His portrayals of Sartorius, the slum landlord, and Trench, the protagonist who finds his money is tainted by the exploitation of the poor, suggested less that they were at fault due to their actions (deplorable as they might be) and more that they failed as citizens because, once conscious of their unwitting participation in a society that exploited the poor to their benefit, they did not seek to change anything.

“I will not ask those critics who are so indignant with my ‘distorted and myopic outlook on society’ what they will do with the little money their profession may enable them to save,” Shaw wrote. “Even in spending the interest they will have no alternative but to get the best value they can for their money without regard to the conditions under which the articles they buy are produced. They will take domestic pride in their comfortable homes ... and go to church on Sunday in shirts sewn by women who can only bring their wages up to subsistence point by prostitution.

“The notion that the people in *Widowers’ Houses* are abnormally vicious or callous could only prevail in a community in which Sartorius is absolutely typical in his unconscious villainy.”

VICTORIAN LONDON

Currency

Prior to decimalization, which occurred on February 15, 1971, currency in the United Kingdom was broken up into pounds (£), shillings (s) and pence (d), known collectively as “£sd” (or LSD), from the Latin “*librae, solidi, denarii*.”

There were 12 pence to a shilling and 20 shillings to a pound (and, therefore, 240 pence to £1). The penny (1 pence) was further divided into 4 farthings.

Listed below are some monetary figures from *Widowers’ Houses* (is set in 1892) along with that amount’s value in today’s purchasing power (using the Retail Price Index):

- Trench’s annual income as mortgagee to one of Sartorius’s properties is £700 per year. Today, that would be worth approximately £52,302, or \$104,105.
- When Trench’s income is threatened to be reduced to £250 per year, his new income would be worth approximately £18,679, or \$37,172, in today’s value.
- Lickcheese’s repairs to the staircase in one of the tenement houses costs Sartorius £1 / 4s (24 shillings), equivalent to nearly £90, or \$178 today.

- Sartorius mentions that his mother made 15 shillings a week as a washerwoman. Assuming this is roughly 30 years before *Widowers' Houses* is set, that would be roughly £48, or less than \$100/week today — less than 1/20 of what Trench earns from interest on the mortgage.
- Lickcheese speaks of new construction that would “knock down Robbins’s Row and turn Burke’s Walk into a frontage worth thirty pounds a foot” — today’s value: £2,241, or \$4,461.

Victorian Slums

“It was one dense mass of houses, through which curved narrow tortuous lanes, from which again diverged close courts — one great mass, as if the houses had originally been one block of stone, eaten by slugs into numberless small chambers and connecting passages.”

— John Timbs, “Curiosities of London,” 1867

“In the early part of the present year I spent some two months in visiting the worst slums of London. ... In that two months I saw a vision of hell more terrible than the immortal Florentine's, and this was no poet's dream — it was a terrible truth, ghastly in its reality, heartbreaking in its intensity, and the doom of the imprisoned bodies in this modern Inferno was as horrible as any that Dante depicted for his tortured souls.”

— George R. Sims, “Horrible London,” 1889

In 1851, more than 6 million people visited the Great Exhibition of All the Nations in London’s Hyde Park, a gathering of more than 100,000 exhibits designed to show off the newest inventions and most innovative industrial designs. A 24-ton hunk of coal stood at the exhibit’s entrance, signifying the importance and ubiquity of this raw material in the everyday life of England.

But the progress brought by these technological advancements came with a corresponding human cost. Cities were growing bigger than ever — London’s population had exploded to more than 2.3 million by 1851 from just less than a million in 1801 — and the poor and working classes, dependent on relocating to areas where work was available, were coalescing into some of the most notorious slums in history. In addition, the number of potential laborers greatly outweighed the number of available jobs, keeping wages low.

In the Victorian Era, the British attitude towards the poorest classes was shaped by two seemingly paradoxical beliefs. As God-fearing Protestants, they were obliged to provide help as their Christian duty. Yet the ideas of Charles Darwin and Samuel

Smiles (whose best-seller *Self-Help* was published in 1859) suggested that God helped those who helped themselves.

Thus, there were occasional attempts at legislation aimed at providing relief to the poor, though they often were mitigated by other acts or general malaise. For every royal commission convened to explore the problems of unsanitary living conditions for the poor, there was legislation like the Poor Law (1834), which was designed to make the poor self-reliant by forcing them to enter brutal, equally unsanitary workhouses in order to receive any additional charity from the government.

The continuing influx of poverty-stricken laborers to London and other industrial centers throughout England resulted in bigger slums, greater overcrowding and less sanitary conditions.

These were problems that existed outside the consciousness of most Londoners. Friedrich Engels, co-author with Karl Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*, had declared that the slums of Bethnal Green were as little known by the rest of London “as the wilds of Australia or the islands of the South Seas.”

So it was all the more astounding when, in 1883, Rev. Andrew Mearns published a pamphlet entitled “The Bitter Cry of Outcast London,” a front-line reportage of the most ghastly details afflicting the lives of the poor.

“There has been absolutely no exaggeration,” Mearns wrote, before detailing the courtyards (“With poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet”), the shoddy construction (“You have to ascend rotten staircases, which threaten to give way beneath each step ... leaving gaps that imperil the limbs and lives of the unwary”) and the living conditions (“Here are seven people living in one underground kitchen, and a little dead child lying in the same room”) present in the slums. Those who couldn’t afford a room slept on the staircases, half a dozen to a landing, while barely any light seeped through the windows.

Mearns’ cause was taken up by William Stead, a controversial newspaper editor with a penchant for causing sensations.

Stead’s stories — as often exaggerated as not — led to a Royal Commission’s recommendation that the government clear the slums in favor of low-cost housing. In 1890, the government passed the Housing of the Working Classes Act, which laid out standards for acceptable housing and encouraged the demolition and re-building of the slums.

This, though, failed to solve many of the problems: Those who could not afford the new housing found themselves homeless or forced to move into the already overcrowded rooms of neighbors.

TimeLine of slums in Victorian London, 1834 – 1890

- 1834** The Poor Law abolishes “outdoor relief” (cash supplements to low wages) and forces the poor to enter dangerous, unsanitary workhouses if they want to continue receiving relief.
- 1842** Edwin Chadwick publishes *The Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, which links unsanitary conditions to disease.
- 1847** The Poor Law Act is passed in response to what is seen as the failure of the workhouses, which are now seen as inhumane and ineffective. This new act, though, does little to reform the Poor Law.
- 1867** John Timbs publishes “Curiosities of London,” which includes descriptions of the conditions of slum housing.
- 1869** James Greenwood publishes “The Seven Curses of London,” which provides graphic descriptions of London’s slums.
- 1873** The Great Depression begins: The economy has faltered due to foreign competition and suffers more when the domestic harvest fails in 1875. Within six years, unemployment has zoomed to 10 percent from 1 percent.
- 1875** The Public Health Act ushers in compulsory health measures, including the appointment of sanitary inspectors, requirements for pure water and trash collection.
- 1875** The Artisans’ Dwellings Act is passed, empowering local authorities to clear slums in favor of housing of higher standards. However, no federal funding is provided, and few opt to act. Only eleven local councils demolish slum housing, and most of these do not provide replacement housing, thereby worsening the overcrowding.
- 1878** William Booth co-founds the Salvation Army, offering Christian-based relief to the poor.
- 1883** Rev. Andrew Mearns publishes “The Bitter Cry of Outcast London.” By the end of the year, sensationalist newspaperman William Stead has published a series of editorials on the subject.
- 1889** George R. Sims publishes a series of articles titled “Horrible London,” providing more graphic accounts of the slums.

- 1889** Charles Booth, a businessman and philanthropist, publishes his “Descriptive Map of London Poverty.” Among its shocking claims: More than a third of the inhabitants of the East End were at or below the poverty line.
- 1890** The Housing of the Working Classes Act picks up where the Artisans’ Dwelling Act left off, establishing required standards of housing and further empowering the clearance of slum properties. As with previous acts, no direct federal funding is offered, yet public reaction to housing conditions for the poor is loud enough to spur local authorities to action.

CHICAGO, 2007

The Chicago Housing Authority’s Plan for Transformation

“In June of 1999, Mayor Richard M. Daley accepted full responsibility for public housing, signing a historic agreement with the federal government to replace isolated high-rises with healthy mixed-income communities and to rehab thousands of other units for families and seniors. By weaving public housing residents into the fabric of Chicago, Mayor Daley is creating new opportunities for CHA [Chicago Housing Authority] families.”

— The CHA’s “We Are CHAnge” brochure, Introducing the Plan for Transformation

“Depending on who’s talking, Chicago’s \$1.6 billion overhaul of public housing is either lifting the city to new heights or sweeping some of its worst problems from one neighborhood to another.”

— “CHA Reshaping Its Legacy in Chicago” by Antonio Olivo, *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 19, 2007

Public housing in America has long been a tumultuous and divisive issue, and for many years, Chicago has been a national symbol of the system’s failure: a highly-segregated, infamous mess of ill-repaired high rises, gang violence and drugs.

In 1995, thoroughly overwhelmed and admitting defeat, the entire CHA board resigned, passing stewardship of Chicago’s public housing to the federal government — an act acknowledged as the largest federal takeover of a housing agency.

Mayor Richard M. Daley won back control of the CHA in 1999, promising to overhaul the system.

The Plan for Transformation called for the destruction of 25,000 high-rise apartments. In their place, the city would develop mixed-income housing throughout the city, reserving a percentage of each new development for former CHA residents.

But critics argue that the plan has done little for CHA residents. Demolition has far outpaced new construction, they claim, leaving former residents fighting for a limited number of units. Some reports indicate the CHA's ability to track former residents is limited, leaving the agency unable to communicate with them about public services for which they might qualify. A 2003 study showed that 24 percent of families displaced from the Robert Taylor Homes were simply finding housing in other public-housing developments.

A number of residents — many of them single mothers and their children — are moving to neighborhoods that lack the support system they had forged in their previous community. Strangers to the local gangs, their children are targets of violence, and their new neighbors, suspicious of their pedigree, are less than welcoming.

For those who wish to apply for the new mixed-income housing being built in their old communities, there are several rigorous — and perhaps unrealistic — requirements. One mandates that eligible residents maintain a 30-hour-a-week job, which can be difficult for single parents unable to secure outside childcare.

Meanwhile, allegations rage that certain development companies received advance knowledge of what areas were to be demolished first, which allowed them to snatch under-priced parcels of land in soon-to-be valuable neighborhoods.

In 2006, the CHA announced it would be extending the end date of the plan to 2015 from 2010, a move made necessary in part, it explains, by reduced federal funding and an increase in construction costs.

Timeline of the CHA

- 1934** President Franklin D. Roosevelt passes a law creating the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration.
- 1942** The Francis Cabrini Rowhouses are completed. Three extensions to the renamed Cabrini-Green development are completed by 1962.
- 1963** The Robert Taylor Homes are completed. With 4,321 units, it is the largest public-housing development in the world.

- 1969** Tenants file a lawsuit against the Chicago Housing Authority, accusing it of placing public housing in a manner that promotes segregation.
- 1981** In a move met with cynicism, Mayor Jane Byrne announces she will move into a Cabrini-Green apartment. She arrives with a brigade of bodyguards and stays only a few weeks.
- 1988** Vincent Lane is appointed to lead the CHA.
- 1995** Lane and the entire board of the CHA resign; the federal government takes control of the agency.
- 1999** Mayor Richard M. Daley re-takes control of the CHA.
- 2000** The CHA begins its Plan for Transformation, an ambitious, 10-year, \$1.6 billion program designed to demolish the high-rise public-housing developments and integrate the residents into other neighborhoods.
- 2006** The CHA announces an extension to the Plan for Transformation: Partially due to a lack of funding, the agency announces the plan now will be completed by 2015.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think Trench changes his mind at the end of the play? How do you think Shaw intends us to react to his decision? If you were in Trench's position, what decision would you have made?
- How does the character of Lickcheese change over the course of the play? What precipitates this change? Is there any difference between Lickcheese and Sartorius by the end of the play?
- What are Sartorius' opinions about the poor? What are Blanche's opinions? Why are they different?
- How are the tenement houses of London similar to today's public-housing developments in Chicago? What are your thoughts about public housing in Chicago? Your opinions of people who live in it? How do the changes in London tenement housing discussed in Act III reflect the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation? How are they different?

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- <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/national/public-housing-timeline.html> provides a timeline of public housing in the United States.
- <http://www.housingisahumanright.com> is the home page of the Coalition to Protect Public Housing.
- <http://www.voicesofcabrini.com/> is the home page for a documentary film about residents of the Cabrini-Green public-housing development.