Mrs. Warren's Profession Study Guide

Mrs. Warren's Profession by George Bernard Shaw

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Introduction

When Shaw completed *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in 1893, it was censored for eight years. When it was finally produced on the London stage in 1902, the public was outraged by its controversial content. Reviewers overwhelmingly condemned the play as immoral, citing its focus on prostitution and incest. Today, however, the play is applauded for its astute view of the corruption at the heart of Victorian society. The play centers on Mrs. Warren, who, forced by the economic realities of nineteenth-century London, becomes a prostitute and later runs several successful brothels. Through her characterization, Shaw exposes the corruption and hypocrisy of the "genteel" class. He also explores the personal consequences of such a profession as Mrs. Warren struggles to gain the respect and love of her daughter after she discovers the truth about her mother. Modern audiences admire the play's artistry as well as its subject since, as Shaw notes in his "Apology," "Mrs. Warren's defence of herself and indictment of society is the thing that most needs saying."

Author Biography

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin, Ireland on July 26, 1856, the youngest child of George Carr, a civil servant and merchant, and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw. He briefly attended Protestant and Catholic day schools but received most of his schooling at home, tutored by his clerical uncle who focused heavily on music and painting. At sixteen, he began work in a land agent's office, where he kept the books and collected rents from the poor. It was in this capacity that Shaw observed firsthand the injustices of poverty. He spent free time at the Dublin theatre, viewing French melodrama, Shakespeare, and local Irish playwrights.

Shaw followed his mother to London in 1876 when he was twenty and moved in with her and his sister, along with his mother's music teacher. For the next nine years, he experienced a genteel poverty, living on his mother's pound a week bequest, along with her earnings as a music teacher, and working briefly for the Edison Telephone Company of London. During this period, Shaw experimented with short stories, poetry, and drama and supplemented his education in the British Museum Reading Room. Unable to find a publisher, Shaw turned to his socialist friends, who included some of his writings in their propagandist magazines. He became increasingly involved in the political atmosphere of the city, helping to found the Fabian Society, an organization devoted to transforming London into a socialist society, and later the Labour party in 1893.

During the next decade, Shaw wrote political tracts and reviews of art, literature, music, and drama for newspapers and magazines. He married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress who had nursed him through an illness. In 1892, the Independent Theatre Society produced Shaw's *Widowers' Houses*, a dark comedy concerning slumlords, which was not well received. He could not get his next play, *The Philanderer*, produced until 1905 but began his third, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, which he completed in 1893. Initially, Lord Chamberlain, the Censor of Plays, refused to grant it a license, but it was finally produced in 1902.

The years 1893—1939, when he wrote forty-seven plays, were the most active in Shaw's career. By 1915, he had become internationally famous, as *Candida*, *Man and Superman*, *Arms and the Man*, and *The Devil's Disciple* were being produced all over the world. In 1925, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. When he died at ninety-four, in Ayot St. Lawrence, England, on November 2, 1950, he had become known as one of the world's finest and most celebrated playwrights. After his death, his work would reach an even wider audience as his play *Pygmalion* became the basis for the Hollywood musical *My Fair Lady*.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The play opens on a summer afternoon in the garden of Hindhead View, a cottage south of Surrey, England. Twenty-two-year-old Vivie Warren lies in a hammock, reading and making notes, until she is interrupted by Mr. Praed, a middle-aged gentleman who is her mother's friend. During their opening conversation, Vivie reveals her negative attitude toward traditional women's roles. Praed appreciates her unconventionality until she admits that she has no interest in romance and beauty, which shocks his strong aesthetic sensibility. When Vivie asks Praed whether he thinks she will get along with her mother, with whom she has spent little time, he suggests that Mrs. Warren may be disappointed in her unconventionality. Vivie admits that she knows little about her mother's life, which clearly embarrasses Praed as he struggles to find an appropriate description of her. Vivie begins to grow suspicious about her mother as she notes Praed's unease.

Mrs. Warren arrives with Sir George Crofts. As Vivie prepares for tea inside, Praed advises her mother to "treat her with every respect," noting that Vivie is a grown woman and most likely "older" than the rest of them. Mrs. Warren dismisses this notion and goes into the cottage to help Vivie. While chatting with Praed in the garden, Crofts asks him whether Mrs. Warren has ever revealed to him the identity of Vivie's father. Praed admits he does not know and insists that the matter should be of no concern, for they must "take [Vivie] on her own merits." Crofts admits that he is attracted to Vivie and wonders whether he could be her father.

After Crofts enters the cottage, Praed is hailed by Frank Gardner, the son of the local rector, who admits that he is staying with his father after running up considerable debts. He tells Praed that he has been spending time with Vivie, whom he considers a "jolly girl." Before Frank can tell Praed how serious his affection is for Vivie, his father appears and Praed goes in to tea. When the two are left alone, Frank reveals his feelings toward Vivie to his father, who subsequently criticizes her social position. After the reverend notes Frank's extravagant lifestyle, his son reminds him of an incident in his father's past when he offered a woman money to retrieve letters he had written to her. Alarmed that someone might hear, the reverend begs Frank to drop the matter. When the two join the others for tea, Mrs. Warren exclaims in front of them all that she still has the letters the reverend has written to her, which leaves him "miserably confused."

Act 2

That evening Frank flirts with Mrs. Warren, insisting that she come to Vienna with him. She gently rebuffs him but then gives him a kiss. Angry with herself, she tells him to turn his attentions to Vivie. However, when Frank admits that he has, she is outraged until

he insists that his intentions are honorable. Later, when Mrs. Warren considers the possibility of Vivie and Frank's union, the reverend deems it "impossible." His avoidance of any explanation suggests that he thinks that he might be Vivie's father. Before the matter is settled, Crofts declares that Vivie cannot marry Frank, because he is penniless. Mrs. Warren overrides Frank's protests that Vivie will marry for love, not money, by declaring, "if you have no means of keeping a wife . . . you can't have [her]." Undeterred, Frank determines to ask Vivie to marry him immediately.

At that moment, Vivie and Praed enter the cottage, and the discussion is dropped. After the others go in to dinner, Frank and Vivie stay behind, yet Frank does not bring up the subject of marriage. Vivie condemns "wasters" like Crofts, "shifting along from one meal to another with no purpose, and no character, and no grit," and determines that she will never end up like him. When Frank admits that Croft's ability to get by without employment is appealing, Vivie cuts him short, exclaiming that he is getting "tiresome."

Later, when Crofts reveals his interest in Vivie, Mrs. Warren adopts a protective, motherly tone and insists that he is not good enough for her. Crofts ignores her insult and presses her, arguing that the three of them could live together "quite comfortably." He then attempts to buy her approval, but she angrily refuses. Enraged, Crofts runs out when he hears the others come in.

Praed, Crofts, and Frank depart for the Gardner home to retire for the evening, leaving Mrs. Warren alone with her daughter. The two soon get into an argument about how Vivie will now live. When Mrs. Warren insists that she has the right to determine her daughter's future, Vivie admits that she knows nothing about her mother and begins to quiz her. Mrs. Warren becomes quite flustered, especially when Vivie demands to know who her father is. Suspecting that her father might be Crofts, Vivie declares that she will leave the next day unless her mother tells her the truth. Mrs. Warren explains that Crofts is not her father and reveals that she is not sure who is.

Vivie handles the news of her mother's promiscuity dispassionately. Unable to gain sympathy from her daughter, Mrs. Warren becomes increasingly agitated until she reverts to her natural, colloquial tongue and berates Vivie for her lack of understanding. She insists that she had no choice but to live as she had, for she did not have the advantages that she has provided for Vivie. When Vivie argues that her mother must have had some choice concerning her future, Mrs. Warren tells her the details of her difficult life growing up in poverty, arguing that prostitution was the only way she and her sister could survive. She explains that the "high-class," profitable brothel in Brussels, which she and her sister ran, afforded them a measure of independence in a world where women's lives were controlled by men.

After listening to her mother's story, Vivie becomes visibly moved, telling Mrs. Warren that she is "a wonderful woman . . . stronger than all England." Her mother admits to feeling a combination of shame and pride in her ability to raise her daughter as a "lady." As Vivie insists that they will be "good friends now," the two women end the evening in a loving, familial embrace.

Act 3

In the reverend's garden the next morning, Frank chides his father for the inebriated stories of "his fiery youth" that he told long into the previous evening. Praed cautions Frank to treat his father with more respect. Frank's true feelings about Mrs. Warren's social standing then surface as he admits that his mother most likely went to town that morning to avoid her visit to their home. He warns his father to hide the truth about his relationship with Mrs. Warren and declares his disgust when he thinks about the time Vivie must spend with her.

Later, when Vivie and Mrs. Warren arrive, Vivie warns Frank about making fun of her mother and demands that he show her respect. Frank refuses and scolds her for her newfound "sentimentality" in her attitude toward her mother. Vivie angrily declares that her previous attitude marked her as a "prig" and that she has now come to understand and appreciate her mother's hardships. They continue to argue about Mrs. Warren's character and Vivie's continuing relationship with her until Frank turns romantic, calming Vivie with silly baby talk. Vivie succumbs to his lovemaking for a moment, admitting that she wants to forget about her mother but then abruptly snaps out of her romantic revelry, insisting they are being childish.

When Crofts arrives, Frank leaves. After criticizing Frank's lack of a profession, Crofts proposes an offer of marriage to Vivie, which includes considerable money and position. Vivie refuses, but Crofts continues to press his case, insisting that she would become a wealthy young widow, due to his advanced age. He then informs her that he has been and still is her mother's business partner, which shocks Vivie who had mistakenly thought that her mother had given up her life in prostitution. Crofts explains that Mrs. Warren has been quite successful running "businesses" in several European locations and that Vivie would benefit from the family's profits. When Vivie admits that she knows that these businesses are brothels, Crofts becomes enraged.

Vivie dismisses Crofts's offer of marriage with "contemptuous self-possession," as she determines him to be "a pretty common sort of scoundrel" for exploiting her mother for profit. Crofts laughs at her superior air and notes that many in the upper class have been engaged in similarly dubious transactions in order to maintain their wealth. Vivie then recognizes that her education has been paid for by her mother's gains from her businesses and ashamedly admits that she is "as bad as" Crofts. After Crofts tries to reassure her that no one cares how one gets money as long as one gets it, Vivie angrily rebukes a society that would support the actions of men like him who exploit young women for profit.

As an enraged Crofts threatens her, Frank suddenly appears with a gun, warning Crofts that he can be "careless" with firearms. Before Crofts storms off, he tells Frank that Vivie is his half sister and that the reverend is her father. As Frank takes aim at the departing figure, Vivie seizes the gun and pulls it to her chest, insisting that Frank now fire. Frank immediately drops the gun and holds his arms out to her in a romantic gesture. Disgusted, Vivie turns away and leaves.

Act 4

Frank and Vivie meet in her office in London. He tries to convince her to enjoy the Saturday afternoon at leisure with him, but Vivie tells him that she has to work. When Frank insists that he does not believe she is his sister and even if she were, it would not alter his romantic feelings for her, she tells him that a sisterly relationship is the only type she wants with him. Frank mistakenly assumes that she has fallen in love with someone else.

Praed soon arrives to say goodbye before he leaves for Italy. He tries again to spark in Vivie an aesthetic sensibility, but Vivie insists that there is "no beauty and no romance in life" for her. When Praed mentions the beauty of Brussels, Vivie's temper flares, remembering that the city houses one of her mother's brothels. She warns them both that if they are to remain friends, they must drop the subjects of love and beauty and treat her "as a woman of business, permanently single and permanently unromantic." Vivie, however, cannot contain her distress over her mother's continued involvement in her profession and eventually blurts out the truth to Frank and Praed. The two men insist that they will remain her devoted friends, and Praed commends her for her courage. After Vivie retreats to another room, Frank admits to Praed that he could not marry Vivie now, because of the way her family's money was earned, and he could not allow her to support him.

Mrs. Warren soon arrives, and Frank and Praed leave in order to give mother and daughter some privacy. After Vivie tells her mother that she will in the future support herself and that each of them should live separate lives, Mrs. Warren tries to deter her, insisting that no one will blame Vivie for her mother's actions. She pleads with her daughter not to turn her back on a comfortable life and "break [her] heart." Vivie, however, refuses to be swayed, arguing that she would be "worthless" if she took her mother's money.

When Vivie then demands to know why her mother continued in business after she became financially independent, Mrs. Warren tells her that she is not suited for any other work and that it really does no "harm." Vivie refuses to give into what she calls her mother's "cheap tears and entreaties" to stay with her, which throws Mrs. Warren into a rage. The two part with Mrs. Warren refusing to shake Vivie's hand, and Vivie returns to her work.

Characters

Sir George Crofts

Sir George Crofts, a tall, powerfully built man of about fifty, fashionably dressed, is a "gentlemanly combination of the most brutal types of city man, sporting man, and man about town." He appears to lack any strength of character, as Mrs. Warren orders him about. Crofts becomes more assertive, though, with Vivie, as he pleads for her hand in marriage. His viciousness emerges after she rejects him when he informs her that she and Frank may be brother and sister. He represents all the social hypocrisy that Vivie deplores.

Frank Gardner

Frank is Vivie's love interest in the play and possibly her half brother. He is a charming, well-dressed, "good-for-nothing" man of twenty with an "agreeably disrespectful manner," especially toward his father. He has no profession and must turn to his father to clear his debts. His interest in Vivie is sparked by her mother's money, but when he discovers how that money was earned, he becomes moralistic, refusing to share it. His good nature emerges, though, when he decides not to pursue Vivie, noting that she would have a difficult time trying to support him.

Reverend Samuel Gardner

Reverend Gardner is a pretentious, booming, but essentially harmless man, "hopelessly asserting himself as a father and a clergyman without being able to command respect in either capacity." Frank admits that he means well but continually embarrasses himself as he tries to gain others' regard.

Mr. Praed

Middle-aged, gentlemanly Praed has an "eager, susceptible face and very amiable and considerate manners." He is gentle and kind and self-deprecating, as when he first meets Vivie and exclaims, "I hope I've not mistaken the day. That would be just like me, you know." He often "seems not certain of his way," especially in the presence of the strong-minded Vivie. Although he insists that he appreciates Vivie's unconventionality, he continually tries to avoid conflict and embarrasses easily. Vivie judges "his anxiety to please" as a weakness in his character. Praed is devoted to what he calls "the Gospel of Art" and continually tries to interest Vivie, to no avail, in the contemplation and appreciation of beauty.

The Reverend

See Reverend Samuel Gardner

Mrs. Kitty Warren

In his "Apology," Shaw praises Mrs. Warren's vitality and outspokenness, her thrift and good care of her daughter, and her business sense, all indicative of the strength of her character. Her story of her difficult childhood and struggle to gain a comfortable life for herself and her daughter illustrates her endurance, and her lack of regard for social restraints reveals her courage. She is often domineering, however, expecting to control every situation she finds herself in. The reverend alludes to this quality when he admits that when he asked her to return his letters, she refused, insisting "knowledge is power and I never sell power."

Mrs. Warren can sometimes play the actress when she does not get what she wants. Her best role is that of a devoted mother, which she trots out in front of Crofts when he expresses his intentions to marry Vivie and in front of Vivie when she shows no sympathetic understanding of her mother's choice of profession. Her love for her daughter becomes evident, though, in the pain she feels when Vivie rejects her.

Ultimately, she appears to have been weakened by the lifestyle she has lead. She convinces herself that prostitution is not a bad life for a woman and that she is truly helping the women she employs to better themselves. Vivie, however, forces her to face reality, and Mrs. Warren must admit that she has grown too comfortable in the life her profession has afforded her, which Vivie determines makes her quite conventional after all.

Vivie Warren

Frank's description of Vivie as "hard as nails" proves an apt one in most of her dealings with the other characters. Vivie is an attractive, sensible, highly educated young woman whose intense self-confidence can sometimes be overwhelming. She refuses to act in a traditional feminine manner, always speaking her mind and demanding that others treat her as an individual.

Her strength of character emerges in her hard work at university as well as in her relationships with others. She is obviously attracted to Frank, but she sees the shallowness under his charm and so refuses to take him seriously. Her relationship with her mother is more complex. At first, she appears a moralistic prig in her disapproval of her mother's profession, but she shows real sympathy when her mother explains the difficult circumstances that led her into prostitution. Vivie's ultimate decision to turn her back on her mother after she discovers that she has not given up her profession appears cold, especially when she dismisses her mother's real suffering and quickly and happily returns to her work at the end of the play.

Themes

Poverty and Wealth

Shaw knew well the consequences of poverty in Victorian England, the hypocrisy of the wealthy, and the interdependence of the rich and poor. He writes in his "Apology," "as long as poverty makes virtue hideous and the spare pocket-money of rich bachelordom makes vice dazzling, their daily hand-to-hand fight against prostitution . . . will be a losing one." Mrs. Warren's poverty forces her into prostitution, which wealthy men pay for. "Good" society rejects her but overlooks, as Crofts points out, the corruption involved in the upper class's acquisition of its own wealth.

Oppression and Freedom

The play presents an ironic interplay of oppression and freedom. Mrs. Warren gains financial freedom and a measure of independence as she moves away from the oppression of her poverty by the exploitation of her sex, which reinforces society's oppression of women. Shaw presents further irony in the fact that Vivie's education has been bought by this oppression, which, when discovered, prompts her to leave her mother and so gain absolute independence.

Mother/Daughter Relationship

The complexity of the two main characters creates a difficult mother/daughter relationship. Throughout most of the play, Vivie refuses to play the dutiful daughter along with any other conventional feminine role. Initially, she appears cold to a mother who spent little time with her when she was growing up, sending her off to boarding schools and the care of nannies. She refuses to allow her mother to dictate her life, which frustrates Mrs. Warren's motherly instincts. Yet, when her mother explains the circumstances that led her to her profession, Vivie becomes the loving, supportive daughter, at least until she discovers that her mother does not have the strength to give up her comfortable life. Yet, Mrs. Warren did meet her responsibilities as a parent: she provided a fine education and stable environment for her daughter and kept Vivie away from the sordid world of her profession.

Style

Dramatic Structure

The "well-made" play was the typical form employed by playwrights in the second half of the nineteenth century. These plays adopted the Aristotelian primacy of plot, which often overshadowed characterization. Well-made comedies depended on accident rather than character development to achieve the inevitable happy ending. Shaw refused to follow what he considered to be the artificial form of the well-made play, insisting that they bore little resemblance to real-life situations. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, the action is character driven with little plot development, unfolding through conversations that shift back and forth among the players. The conclusion of the play also breaks with tradition. Shaw frustrated the audience's expectation that comedies end with all conflicts resolved. Vivie, his main character, does appear happy at the end of the play as she turns "buoyantly" to her work, which soon gains her full attention. Her conflict with her mother, however, has not been resolved. Mrs. Warren leaves Vivie's office after refusing to shake hands with her. While Vivie appears momentarily relieved, Shaw suggests through his characterization of her that she may later regret her treatment of her mother.

Characterization

Shaw's characters were much more complex, and thus more realistic, than those in well-made plays, which prevented his plays from arriving at a neat closure at the play's end. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, the complexity of the two main characters, Vivie and Mrs. Warren, causes the audience to shift its sympathies, first to Mrs. Warren, who appears to be treated harshly by her daughter, then to Vivie when she discovers her mother's true profession, then to Mrs. Warren when she tells the story of her difficult life, and finally back to Vivie when she discovers that her mother is incapable of giving up her profession. By the conclusion, however, sympathy is split between the rejected mother and the independent daughter.

Historical Context

Realism

In the late nineteenth century, playwrights turned away from what they considered the artificiality of melodrama and the contrived structure of "the well-made play," with its slavish devotion to plot and lack of character development, to a focus on the commonplace in the context of everyday contemporary life. They rejected the flat characterizations and unmotivated actions typical of these earlier forms. Their work, along with much of the experimental fiction written during that period, adopts the tenets of realism, a new literary movement that took a serious look at believable characters and their sometimes-problematic interactions with society. In order to accomplish this goal, realistic drama focuses on the commonplace and eliminates the unlikely coincidences and excessive emotionalism of melodrama. Dramatists like Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw discard traditional sentimental theatrical forms as they chronicle the strengths and weaknesses of ordinary people confronting difficult social problems, like the restrictive conventions under which nineteenth-century women suffered. Writers who embrace realism use settings and props that reflect their characters' daily lives and realistic dialogue that replicates natural speech patterns.

Eric Bentley, in his foreword to Signet Classics's collection of Shaw's plays, argues that Shaw throws "the monkey wrench of character" into the structure of the well-made play. Characters in traditional dramas acted according to audience's expectations rather than from any internal motivation. Shaw's characters were innovative because, as Bentley notes, "they made decisions which affected the course of events, and they made them on the basis of their own nature, not of the spectator's."

The Fabian Society

In 1884, the Fabian Society, an outgrowth of the Fellowship of the New Life, founded by Thomas Davidson, was established in England by Frank Podmore and Edward Pease. George Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb soon joined this British socialist organization and became its most active proponents. The society gained recognition with the publication of its *Fabian Essays* in 1889, to which Shaw had contributed. Their manifesto, outlined in these essays, rejected Marxism in favor of a natural, progressive development of socialism based on social and political reforms. They insisted that violent protest was detrimental to their goals, and so initially they did not become involved in labor movements. Later, however, when Beatrice Potter joined the group, the society became more focused on workers' rights. As a result, the Fabians helped form, in 1900, the unified Labour Representation committee, later evolving into Britain's Labour Party, which adopted the main tenets of the Fabian Society.

Critical Overview

Shaw completed *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in 1893, but Lord Chamberlain, the Censor of Plays, would not license it, due to its subject matter. When it was finally produced in 1902, the Victorian public was shocked, at least those who understood what Mrs. Warren's profession actually was. Censors would not allow him to include the word prostitution in the production.

Audiences in New York, where the members of the cast were arrested, were just as outraged by the play's content. George E. Wellwarth notes in his article on the play that early reviewers overwhelming condemned it, deeming it "illuminated gangrene," "gross sensation," and "wholly immoral and degenerate." Shaw notes in his "The Author's Apology" that the play sent the press "into an hysterical tumult of protest, of moral panic, of involuntary and frantic confession of sin" and insisted that they could not distinguish between art and real life.

As the Victorian age ended, however, critics gained a different perspective on the play's themes, arguing that they in fact promote moral behavior and condemn a corrupt and hypocritical society. Many modern scholars now echo Charles A. Berst, writing in his article "Propaganda and Art in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, who considers the play to reflect "the scope and depth of Shaw's artistic achievement."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the concept of the "New Woman" in Shaw's play.

At the close of the nineteenth century, feminist thinkers began to engage in a rigorous investigation of female identity as it related to all aspects of a woman's life. Any woman who questioned traditional female roles was tagged a "New Woman," a term attributed to novelist Sarah Grand, whose 1894 article in the *North American Review* identified an emergent group of women, influenced by J. S. Mill and other champions of individualism who supported and campaigned for women's rights. A dialogue resulted among these women that incorporated radical as well as conservative points of view.

The most radical thinkers in this group declared the institution of marriage to be a form of slavery and thus recommended its abolition. They rejected the notion that motherhood should be the ultimate goal of all women. The more conservative feminists of this age considered marriage and motherhood acceptable roles only if guidelines were set in order to prevent a woman from assuming an inferior position to her husband in any area of their life together. This group felt that a woman granted equality in marriage would serve as an exemplary role model for her children by encouraging the development of an independent spirit. *Mrs. Warren's Profession* enters into this dialogue, as it examines a woman's place in traditional and nontraditional roles. Both Mrs. Warren and Vivie explore the possibilities and the impediments for the New Woman at the end of the nineteenth century, which was at the heart of the debates among many of Shaw's contemporaries.

Young Kitty Warren found herself in a traditional position for a woman in Victorian England. She and her three sisters struggled to break out of the stranglehold of poverty, but there were few options afforded to them. One sister died of lead poisoning as a result of her work in a factory, and another married an alcoholic. After her sister Liz disappeared, Kitty took on a series of jobs that wore out her health and her looks "for other people's profit." When Liz reappeared, dressed in fur with money in her pocket, she convinced her sister to help her run a brothel, a business that would place Kitty in both a traditional and nontraditional role.

Prostitution was seen by many young British women as their only option for survival. As Shaw explains in his "Author's Apology" to the play, many women during this time "remain so poor, so dependent, so well aware that the drudgeries of such honest work . . . are likely enough to lead them eventually to lung disease, premature death, and domestic desertion or brutality" that they would often choose the life of a prostitute over a more virtuous path, since both "lead to the same end, in poverty and overwork."

The traditional role that Mrs. Warren felt compelled to adopt ironically affords her the opportunity to gain independence in her patriarchal world. Mrs. Warren notes this irony when she advises Vivie, "The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her." As she became a

successful businesswoman by exploiting the image of female as sexual object, she gained a position in society typically held exclusively by men. She also had the ability to raise her daughter by herself and provide her with an education, thereby granting Vivie opportunities that she herself never enjoyed.

After Mrs. Warren explains the circumstances involved in her decision to enter into prostitution, Vivie celebrates her mother as a role model, insisting that she is "a wonderful woman . . . stronger than all England." Mrs. Warren's continued involvement in her profession, however, ultimately destroys her relationship with Vivie, who claims that her mother's inability to give up her comfortable life proves that she, after all, is only "a conventional woman at heart."

Shaw presents Vivie as a model of the New Woman who refuses to adopt any conventionality. Her rejection of traditional notions of femininity emerges immediately at the beginning of the play when she meets Praed and addresses him "sharply," which "daunts" him. He is also surprised by her firm handshake and her physical ease at rearranging furniture. When Mrs. Warren suggests Crofts help Vivie with the chairs, she "almost pitch[es] two into his arms." Her independent spirit surfaces in her displeasure over her mother's making arrangements that concern Vivie without her permission. She is clearly a woman in control of her own life and destiny.

In his characterization of Vivie, Shaw illustrates the fact that women who strive for success in a patriarchal system must adopt a more masculine sensibility. Vivie's assumption of this sensibility becomes most apparent in her declaration to Praed that she does not care for beauty and romance, which bore her, and instead focuses on "working and getting paid for it." She enjoys "a comfortable chair, a cigar, a little whisky, and a . . . good detective story."

Shaw, however, suggests that the pursuit of success in this system can inspire destructive behaviors. The New Woman could not allow herself to be swayed by emotion in romantic or familial relationships if it threatened to rob her of control. She also must acknowledge the power of money if she is to gain true independence. Vivie understands and faithfully follows these rules to the point where she sometimes appears quite heartless. Stanley Weintraub, in his article on Shaw in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* insists that Vivie is a "cold-blooded creature unlikely to look sentimentally for very long at daughterly duty or economic rationalizations."

Vivie displays a rather mercenary sentiment when she admits that she would not have put so much effort into winning prizes at school if she had known how so much work would gain her so little money. She also judges harshly any weaknesses she detects in others, as she does in Praed, who expresses an "anxiety to please her" when they first meet. Her severest judgment, however, is leveled against her mother. She mistrusts her motives, insisting that her mother "has rather a trick of taking me by surprise□to see how I behave myself when she's away." She will employ any means necessary to ensure that her mother gains no power over her, as she illustrates when she assumes that her mother has secrets and admits that she will "use that advantage over her if necessary."

As Vivie demands the truth from her mother, however, she displays a complex mixture of toughness and sensitivity, suggesting the difficulty a woman faces as she struggles to maintain her independence. Initially, she rejects any daughterly duty to her mother as she coldly assesses Mrs. Warren's chosen profession, insisting that her mother has no right to determine Vivie's future. Her lack of sympathy prompts her mother to declare, "my God, what sort of woman are you?" to which Vivie replies, "the sort the world is mostly made of, I should hope. Otherwise I don't understand how it gets its business done."

As her mother describes the difficulties that drove her into prostitution, however, Vivie admits, "you were certainly quite justified□from the business point of view." As Mrs. Warren pleads her case, Vivie cannot help but be deeply moved by the suffering she has endured, which causes Vivie to express a true daughterly devotion for her "dear old mother." That devotion is short-lived, though, when Vivie discovers that her mother is still actively involved in her profession.

In their final scene together, Vivie displays a difficult combination of sympathy and steeliness as she determines that she will never see her mother again. She initially displays a cool indifference to Mrs. Warren's affectionate intentions toward her, recognizing the ironic situation she finds herself in. Vivie insists that even though her mother's money would afford her a measure of independence, she acknowledges that if she took it "and devoted the rest of [her] life to spending it fashionably," she "might be as worthless and vicious as the silliest woman could possibly want to be." Yet when her mother entreats her to do her "duty as a daughter," she becomes "jarred and antagonized by the echo of the slums in her mother's voice." In an act of stoic self-preservation, Vivie ultimately determines that she must leave her mother because of Mrs. Warren's "conventional" devotion to her comfortable life and live alone as an independent woman.

In his article on the play in *ELH*, Charles A. Berst argues that Vivie struggles "to make her intellectual talents and instinct for independence meaningful and remunerative in a man's world." As a result, "she is set upon by forces that seek to push her back into the more conventional role of womanhood." One of those forces is her mother, who has had to endure harsher constraints as she fought for survival in the staunchly patriarchal system of Victorian England. In his penetrating study of these two complex women in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw illuminates the difficulties inherent in a woman's pursuit of selfhood.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, in *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Guyette, a longtime journalist, received a bachelor's degree in English writing from the University of Pittsburgh. In this essay, Guyette discusses how Shaw, in writing about what he believes to be the underlying causes of prostitution in Britain during the latter part of the nineteenth century, also skewers a society built upon a foundation of hypocrisy.

A committed socialist, Shaw held the firm but controversial belief that prostitution is not the result of moral laxity on the part of women who sell their bodies. He maintained instead that the problem resulted from a political and economic system that allowed much of Britain's population to live in abject poverty. To win others over to his position, Shaw penned this play, which served as a sort of four-act argument. He explains his purpose in an essay appearing in *Bernard Shaw Complete Plays with Prefaces*.

Mrs Warren's Profession was written in 1894 to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together.

In writing this play, Shaw is not defending prostitution as a moral profession. Rather, the play's thrust is based on the notion that a society that allows masses of people to endure miserable lives filled with poverty is every bit as immoral as any particular vice.

In his preface to this play, Shaw notes that "starvation, overwork, dirt, and disease are as anti-social as prostitution□that they are the vices and crimes of a nation, and not merely its misfortunes." In the play, this point of view is poignantly expressed by Mrs. Warren when she tries explaining to her daughter, Vivie, how she became a prostitute. She describes the fate of a half-sister who, in an attempt to follow the path of respectability, found the type of brutal factory job available to poor women. The sister, says Mrs. Warren, died of lead poisoning as a result. Instead of working herself to death only to have someone else enjoy the profits of her labor, Mrs. Warren chooses instead to become part of what was known at that time as the White Slave Trade. She asks Vivie: "Do you think I did what I did because I like it, or thought it right, or wouldn't have rather gone to college and been a lady if I'd had the chance?" Shaw strengthens his argument by portraying Mrs. Warren as an essentially decent person with many admirable qualities. She has a strong character and worked hard to ensure her daughter could enjoy opportunities that were never within her reach. Because of Mrs Warren's prostitution, Vivie is able to attend university and pursue a legitimate career.

When Vivie accuses her mother of trying to escape responsibility for her actions by blaming "circumstances," Mrs. Warren quickly sets her straight. "It's not work that any woman would do for pleasure," she explains. The work, however, allowed Mrs. Warren not only to survive, but also to thrive and pass on the benefits to Vivie. Vivie was offered a future much brighter than any that was ever available to her mother. It would have been easy for Shaw to demonize Mrs. Warren□something that undoubtedly would have

made this play more popular among the masses□but portraying her as evil would have undermined the point he wants the play to make. As Shaw writes in the preface, "Nothing would please the sanctimonious British public more than to throw the whole guilt of Mrs Warren's profession on Mrs Warren herself." Presenting her as he does makes it more difficult for the audience to condemn Mrs. Warren as an abjectly immoral person while exposing them to the idea that society truly is at fault.

Shaw uses the character of Mrs. Warren to make another significant point as she defends herself against Vivie's castigation. It concerns the choices women in general are often forced to make and the hypocrisy of society in deeming one virtuous and the other immoral. Mrs. Warren contends that there is no real difference between a woman who prostitutes herself and one who marries not for love but to secure a safe financial future for herself. Mrs. Warren rails at the injustice, saying "as if a marriage ceremony could make any difference in the right or wrong of the thing!" Then, she utters what is a crucial line: "Oh, the hypocrisy of the world makes me sick!" The line is important because it highlights what seems to be an underlying theme. This is a play populated by hypocrites, and Shaw seems to take great glee in skewering them.

The Reverend Samuel Gardner is among several characters who reveal themselves to be a hypocrite, meaning someone who puts on a pious or upstanding face in public and then acts much differently in private. This is demonstrated when the clergyman is asked to put up Mr. Praed for the night and hesitates, saying his role as reverend requires him to make certain that anyone staying at his house must have the requisite social standing. The truth is that the reverend is anything but a pillar of morality. He gets drunk. Instead of writing the sermons he gives on Sundays, as he pretends to, he buys them. In addition, it is disclosed that he made use of Mrs. Warren's professional services when both were younger. In fact, Reverend Gardner might even be Vivie's father. His son is hardly better. Though charming, Frank seeks to secure his place in the world by marrying a wealthy woman. He ridicules his father, but continues to depend upon him for an allowance, which is another kind of hypocrisy. Toward the end of the play, having learned the truth about Mrs. Warren, Frank states that he "cant bring myself to touch the old woman's money now." The hypocrisy in that, only a few pages before, he had proudly displayed to Vivie the gold coins he obtained, not through honest work but by gambling, which itself is a vice.

Even more unlikable is the character Sir George Crofts, a man who, despite his lofty title, is anything but noble. In a sense, Shaw uses Crofts to represent society at its most hypocritical. By all appearances, Crofts is completely respectable, carrying a title bestowed upon knights of the realm. In reality, he is little more than a pimp. He bankrolled Mrs. Warren's business and shares in its considerable profits, all the while moving among the upper crust of society, his white gloves never sullied by the dirty business he keeps at arm's length. In fact, Crofts is so morally bereft that he woos Vivie without, apparently, knowing for certain whether she is his daughter. When finally confronted by Vivie about the way he earns his money, Crofts defends himself by offering up an indictment of society as a whole. "If you are going to pick and choose your acquaintances on moral principles," he advises her, "Youd better clear out of this country, unless you want to cut yourself out of all decent society." In other words, Crofts

is saying that he is really no worse than the rest of his peers. He tells Vivie how even the church has bar owners and other sinners among its tenants, happily collecting part of their ill-gotten gain each month as rent. Then there are those who enjoy a fat return on investments in factories where girls labor for starvation wages. What makes all this possible, explains Crofts, is a culture that accepts this kind of despicable behavior as long as it is kept hidden. Speaking through Crofts, Shaw expresses his belief this way: "As long as you dont fly openly in the face of society, society doesnt ask any inconvenient questions; and it makes precious short work of the cads who do." It is interesting to note that Shaw is just such a "cad" who asks extremely inconvenient questions in a manner that is anything but subtle. This play's focus on the true nature of morality proved so inconvenient that government censors prohibited its production for many years.

Just as official Britain shunned this play, Vivie drives her mother away, saying she cannot tolerate associating with someone who earns her living from prostitution. She does so knowing this rebuke will break Mrs. Warren's heart. In the end, Vivie's failure is not that she is a hypocrite but is small-minded and unforgiving. It would not be surprising to hear Shaw apply that same description to much of his audience. Rather than admiring Vivie for taking what would conventionally be considered an upright and moral posture, the playwright intends for this young woman to be perceived as priggish and cold hearted. "Mrs Warren is not a whit a worse woman than the reputable daughter who cannot endure her," Shaw writes in his preface to the play. The message is clear: instead of railing against the social and economic system that forced her mother into a life of prostitution, Vivie is content to go to work at an office job, showing no sign whatsoever that her social conscience has been awakened by the lessons inherent in her mothers plight. Like the mass of people Shaw attempted to reach through his play, Vivie makes what he considers to be the narrow-minded mistake of blaming and punishing the individual.

Source: Curt Guyette, Critical Essay on *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, in *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Adaptations

Mrs. Warren's Profession (1972) was produced for television by the BBC. It was directed by Herbert Wise and starred Coral Browne as Mrs. Warren and Penelope Wilton as Vivie.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast the strong-willed heroines in Shaw's *Major Barbara* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

Investigate the status of women in Victorian England. What were their employment opportunities and working conditions?

Research the rise of the New Woman in Britain and America. What obstacles did they face in their push for equality for women?

Write a plot outline of the play, placing it in modern-day America. What elements would you keep the same and what would you need to alter?

Compare and Contrast

Late Nineteenth Century: The Married Woman's Property Act passes in England, granting women several important rights.

Today: In England, women are guaranteed equal rights under the law.

Late Nineteenth Century: In the latter part of the nineteenth century, realism becomes the dominant literary movement in the Western world. In the last decade of the century, symbolism and naturalism emerge as important new movements.

Today: Musicals, like *The Producers*, and reality-based plays, like *Rent*, dominate Broadway.

Late Nineteenth Century: A new term, the "New Woman," comes to describe women who challenge traditional notions of a woman's place, especially the privileged role of wife and mother. These challenges are seen as a threat to the fabric of the American family.

Today: Women have the opportunity to work inside or outside of the home or both. However, those who choose to have children and a career face difficult time-management choices due to inflexible work and promotion schedules.

Late Nineteenth Century: Feminist Victoria Woodhull embarks on a lecture tour in 1871, espousing a free-love philosophy, which reflects the women's movement's growing willingness to discuss sexual issues.

Today: Women have the freedom to engage in premarital sex and to have children out of wedlock. The issue of single parenting caused a furor in the early 1990s when then Vice President Quayle criticized the television character Murphy Brown for deciding not to marry her baby's father. Today, however, single parenting has become more widely accepted.

What Do I Read Next?

The Awakening (1899) is Kate Chopin's masterful novel of a young woman who struggles to find self-knowledge and inevitably suffers the consequences of trying to establish herself as an independent spirit.

In the play *A Doll's House* (1879), Henrik Ibsen examines a woman's restricted role in the nineteenth century and the disastrous effects those limitations have on her marriage.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) studies the history and dynamics of feminism.

Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905) focuses on political and social themes similar to those of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

Further Study

Berst, Charles A., *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama*, University of Illinois Press, 1973.

Berst studies Shaw's dramatic method and argues that he reworks traditional forms in his plays.

Carpenter, Charles A., *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Destroying Ideals: The Early Plays*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.

Carpenter examines Shaw's political themes in his early plays, including *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

Meisel, Martin, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater*, Princeton University Press, 1963.

This study places Shaw's plays, including *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, in their social and literary contexts.

Rao, Valli, "Vivie Warren in the Blakean World of Experience," in *Shaw Review*, Vol. 22, 1979, pp. 123—34.

Rao traces Vivie's evolution from innocence to experience, using a Blakean model.

Turco, Alfred, *Shaw's Moral Vision: The Self and Salvation*, Cornell University Press, 1976.

This study examines moral themes in Shaw's plays, including *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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