Dear Educators,

This spring I have been inundated with media focusing on feminism. At the Oscars, for the first year, reporters were encouraged to “Ask Her More,” focusing on what women think and care about, instead of just what they are wearing. In political debates, female politicians face different types of criticism than males and are held to different standards. In the business world, economists are picking apart the various causes for the gender wage gap. All over I see evidence that although this play is over a hundred years old, its message can still speak to us today.

As you talk with your students about this play, and about the sticky main topic of prostitution, there are many issues that are sure to come up. Not only are we still wrestling with what it means to be a feminist and what it means to demand “equality,” but we are also struggling to figure out how we, as a society, should treat sex workers. As I write this, Seattle is gearing up for the Second Annual Sex Worker Symposium, a conference attempting to elevate the voices and concerns of those in the so-called “oldest profession.”

Though this may not be an easy topic to address in schools, by seeing this play students will get an opportunity to see Shaw’s depiction of what drives people to make their decisions, and get a human and sympathetic character in the form of Mrs. Warren herself. Though it is an old play from the Victorian era, its issues are still unresolved. We can see in Shaw’s writing how far we have come in a hundred and twenty odd years, but we can also catch a glimpse of how much further we have to go.

We hope you enjoy the show.

Best,
Michelle Burce
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SYNOPSIS

Act I: In the town of Haslemere, Vivie Warren has been living in a cottage after graduating from Cambridge University with honors. She is joined by Mr. Praed, a friend of her mother’s. Through their conversation, it’s revealed that Vivie has not had the closest relationship with her mother. She also shares that she has no interest in romance, which surprises Praed. Vivie questions him about her estranged mother and becomes suspicious when Praed struggles to talk about her.

Mrs. Warren soon arrives with Sir George Crofts, another friend. While Vivie and her mother make tea, Crofts asks Praed if Mrs. Warren has ever shared with him the identity of Vivie’s father. Praed says he doesn’t know and waves the question aside, saying Vivie must be respected as her own person. Frank Gardner, the son of the local rector, arrives along with his father. Frank admits his attraction to Vivie to his father, and Reverend Gardner begins to criticize her social standing as well as Frank’s extravagant lifestyle which has put him in debt. Frank reminds his father of an incident when he offered money to a woman to retrieve letters he had written to her. Mrs. Warren enters to invite them in for tea and, as they enter, remarks she still has letters Rev. Gardner wrote to her.

Act II: After spending the day in the countryside, Mrs. Warren returns to the cottage with Frank, Rev. Gardner, and Crofts to get ready for dinner. Before Vivie and Praed join them, Frank reveals that he wishes to marry Vivie. This is shut down by the others, namely because Frank doesn’t have a penny to his name. After dinner, Mrs. Warren and Crofts talk. Crofts reveals that he too wants to marry Vivie, but Mrs. Warren forbids it, saying he is not good enough for her.

After the others leave, mother and daughter talk and an argument soon arises over how Vivie will make a living. Mrs. Warren insists she has a right to determine Vivie’s future, but Vivie counters that by questioning her about her own career and the identity of her father. Mrs. Warren finally reveals that she has no real idea who Vivie’s father is and, in fact, made her living in the past as a prostitute. Vivie treats this news dispassionately. Mrs. Warren tells Vivie about life growing up in poverty and the lack of choices she had, arguing that the brothel she ran in Brussels along with her sister was the only way she could have independence in a world dominated by men. Vivie is moved by her mother’s words and the two women reconcile.

Act III: Praed, Frank and Rev. Gardner are waiting at home for the arrival of Mrs. Warren and Vivie, whom Rev. Gardner invited over the night before while he was drinking with Crofts. Frank makes plain his feelings about Mrs. Warren and declares his disgust that Vivie spends time with her. Vivie soon arrives with her mother. While Mrs. Warren is taken on a tour of the rectory, Vivie and Frank argue about Mrs. Warren. Frank attempts to flirt with Vivie but they are interrupted by Crofts.

Crofts asks for a moment alone with Vivie, and Frank leaves. Crofts now tries to ask Vivie to marry him, which she flat out refuses. He then reveals that Mrs. Warren still runs brothels across Europe and that he, in fact, is her business partner. Vivie realizes exactly how much her mother’s work paid for her education and rebukes Crofts. Angered, he threatens Vivie. Frank appears to defend Vivie with a gun and Crofts leaves. However, before he does, he reveals that Vivie and Frank are, in fact, half-siblings.

Act IV: Frank meets Vivie at her office in London. He tries to invite her out, saying he does not believe she is his half-sister. She refuses, saying she will always view him as a friend. Mr. Praed comes to visit and the two talk, which leads to a more heated argument over Vivie’s decision to lead an unromantic life. She soon reveals the truth about her mother to them and they both insist they will remain her friends.

Mrs. Warren arrives and the two men leave mother and daughter alone. Vivie tells her mother that she wants to live an independent life and wants nothing to do with her. Mrs. Warren pleads with her to understand why she has continued to work in prostitution, but Vivie refuses to bend. Angered, Mrs. Warren leaves and Vivie returns to her work.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MRS. KITTY WARREN: Vivie’s mother. A businesswoman and former prostitute, made wealthy by running a string of brothels.

VIVIE WARREN: Mrs. Warren’s daughter, recently graduated from University with honours.

MR. PRAED: A friend of Mrs. Warren.

SIR GEORGE CROFTS: Mrs. Warren’s business partner.

REVEREND SAMUEL GARDNER: A local minister. Frank’s father.

FRANK GARDNER: Reverend Gardner’s son.
George Bernard Shaw was an Irish playwright, novelist, journalist, and co-founder of the London School of Economics. His early career was focused on journalism and political activism, but he gained most of his fame as a playwright. Many people consider Shaw the second-greatest playwright in the English language, ranked after only William Shakespeare.

Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856 to a lower-middle class family of Scottish-Protestant ancestry. His father, George Carr Shaw, was an unsuccessful grain merchant and his mother, Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw, was a professional singer and vocal music teacher. His mother and sisters moved to London when Shaw was a teen, leaving him and his father behind. Shaw remained in Dublin to complete his schooling, which he hated, and to work as a clerk in an estate office, which he also hated.

At age twenty, Shaw moved to London to live with his mother and pursue work as a journalist and novelist. He read voraciously, spending his afternoons at the British Museum and his evenings attending lectures and debates. He became involved in progressive politics and distinguished himself as an effective public speaker. He developed an aggressive and energetic style in both his speaking and writing. Shaw co-founded the Fabian Society, a political organization dedicated to transforming Britain into a socialist state through progressive legislation and mass education. The Fabian Society would later be instrumental in founding the London School of Economics and the Labour Party.

Shaw also became a music, art, and drama critic, writing for London’s Saturday Review. As a critic, he grew weary of the intellectually barren melodramas fashionable at the time. He had an interest in the progressive arts and an admiration for Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and German composer Richard Wagner. Ibsen encouraged Shaw to reshape the English stage with more sophisticated plays about important social issues.

Shaw’s first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, was produced at a private theatre club in 1882. For the next several years, he wrote close to a dozen plays. Among these was *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, which was initially banned from being performed in London due the subject matter. Despite these professional setbacks, he had enough success abroad that he could quit his job as a drama critic and make a living solely as a playwright.

In 1898, after a serious illness, Shaw moved out of his mother’s house and married Charlotte Payne-Townshend. She was an Irish heiress whom Shaw had met through his work with the Fabian Society. Their marriage lasted until Charlotte’s death in 1943.

Although Shaw’s plays were not initially popular, in 1904 Harley Granville Barker took an interest in Shaw and also took over management of the Court Theatre in Chelsea. Over the next three seasons, Barker produced ten of Shaw’s plays. His plays became known for their brilliant arguments, wit, and the challenges posed to the morality of his time. His best-known play, *Pygmalion*, was first performed in 1913 at His Majesty’s Theatre of London.

The outbreak of World War I changed Shaw’s life. His anti-war speeches and controversial writings made him an unpopular figure in London. His single wartime play, *Heartbreak House*, exposed his dwindling faith in humanity. After the war, he wrote two more plays about “creative evolution,” *Back to Methuselah* and *Saint Joan*, expressing his despair that mankind needed a much longer life in order to achieve the wisdom necessary for self-government.

In 1925, Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He wanted to reject the honor entirely, but accepted because his wife considered it a tribute to Ireland. He put the prize money toward creating an English edition of August Strindberg’s plays. Shaw’s plays were produced regularly, and in the late 1920s a Shaw festival was established in England. His success continued as he worked on a movie based on *Pygmalion* and, in 1938, was awarded an Oscar for it. He is the only person to be awarded both a Nobel Prize for Literature and an Academy Award (Oscar) for film.

Shaw lived the rest of his life as an international celebrity. He traveled the world and was continually involved in politics. Shaw continued to write plays and essays until his death in 1950 at the age of 94.
Mrs. Warren’s Profession is one of Shaw’s earlier plays. Through this play, he raises the topic of prostitution — a controversial one at the time — and treats it very differently than his contemporaries.

While other Victorian writers would showcase “fallen” women who regretted their choices and whose lives ended poorly, Mrs. Warren is portrayed as a businesswoman who did what she had to do. Shaw is more critical of the society that forced Mrs. Warren into this role than concerned with passing judgment on Mrs. Warren herself. This attitude inevitably made his audiences uncomfortable.

In Shaw’s day, English copyright law required a performance and publication of the play in order for the work to be 100% legally owned by the writer. When Shaw wrote Mrs. Warren’s Profession in 1893, he had doubts that the play would be licensed due to the subject matter, so he tried to procure a license for a staged reading of the play. The Lord Chamberlin’s Examiner of Plays declared the play “immoral and improper” and banned it from being staged. Shaw published the play five years later in a collection of plays and its publication went unnoticed.

In 1902, a members-only theatre club called the Stage Society produced the first production of Mrs. Warren’s Profession. This club enjoyed both exemption from the Lord Chamberlin’s jurisdiction as well as a reputation for scandalous work, and they performed a single matinee and evening performance of the play. The press erupted, some calling sections of the play “wholly evil.” This feedback did not discourage Shaw, but rather encouraged him, as he enjoyed the “shock to the foundation of morality which sends a pallid crowd of critics into the street shrieking that the pillars of society are cracking and the ruin of the State is at hand.” Shaw pointed out in his play that the real immorality of the situation was not the sex trade itself, but the poverty that made it one of the only secure financial options for an independent woman.

In the next few years, productions of Mrs. Warren’s Profession were attempted in Connecticut and New York. Though audiences enjoyed it, critics continued to call the play immoral. The New York police commissioner even arrested the entire company! Ultimately, the actors were acquitted and the production went on to tour the United States.

Finally, after years of fighting, the ban on Mrs. Warren’s Profession was lifted and the first licensed production of the play was performed in Britain in 1925. As the play had been written over 30 years before, critics were quick to dismiss the play as dated, but Shaw pointed out that the labor conditions for women still had not changed significantly enough to change the play’s relevance.

Source:
THE NEW WOMAN

“Although individual women from pre-historic times have accomplished much, as a class they have been set aside to minister to men's comfort.” — Winnifred Harper Cooley, The New Womanhood

Vivie's character exemplifies the “New Woman,” a heroine that emerged in popular culture toward the end of the Victorian era and navigated the radical expansion of rights and opportunities available to women.

Prior to 1870, when an English woman married, her property, inheritance, and future earned wages transferred to her husband. Under “coverture” law the married couple became one person and that person was the husband — the wife legally ceased to exist. Married women could not sign legal documents or enter contracts, and they could not pursue education without their husband's permission. Unmarried women were legally classified as “feme sole” and retained their legal identity and rights, but had few career opportunities outside working-class positions.

This lack of rights for half the adult population was justified by a convenient portrait of women’s “nature.” The ideal Victorian woman was sympathetic to the needs of others, fulfilled completely and only by the duties of a wife and mother, obedient, and chaste to the point of asexuality. Female biology was considered unsuited for intellectual pursuits, and physicians discouraged women from engaging in academic study as it could put their health in peril. The fragile nature of women dictated that they be sheltered from the harsh reality of the newly industrialized world and sequestered to their natural realm — the home.

While this “angel in the house” was a prescriptive ideal which many in the middle and upper classes aspired to emulate, organized feminism was simultaneously gathering momentum in England. Mary Wollstonecraft and other feminist writers in the late 1700s had articulated the exploitative function of traditional gender roles, and their influence extended into the Victorian era. By the 1850s, England’s first women’s rights organizations were established and went on to impact property laws and access to higher education for women, as well as to criticize gendered double standards in sexual morality.

A flurry of new laws passed toward the end of the 1800s granting women rights to retain their inheritance and earned wages (1870), earn degrees in higher education (1878), own and control property (1882), and legally refuse sex with their husbands (1891).

It was in the wake of these monumental changes that the “New Woman” arrived. A pendulum swing from the popular Victorian feminine ideal, the New Woman was educated, career-focused, civically active, and determined not to be trapped in domestic servitude as a wife and mother. The reception of the New Woman was mixed and extreme. Iconically depicted in trousers, bicycling, and smoking, for some she represented a brave progression in human civilization and for others an unnatural perversion of womanhood that threatened to erode society’s foundations.

Critics of the New Woman were mortified at the idea that, if traditionally male recreation was enjoyed by women, traditionally female domestic work might expected of men.
Mrs. Warren’s Profession was written in 1893, and is set in the same time period. Our production keeps this setting. While written in the same year as The Importance of Being Earnest — a play focused on the fussy little details that were so important in that time — this production focuses on simplicity and aims to be as un-fussy as possible. The set will be relatively clean, having only what the actors need in terms of furniture. There will be a backdrop to indicate the location in the Surrey countryside, and the Act 4 city office will burst through this backdrop. Costumes will also be set in the correct period. The younger characters of Vivie and Frank will be in forward-looking fashion, as they are “modern” young people of that time. Mrs. Warren, by contrast, will be wearing a long red dress — the look of a financially secure madam.

Even though the play is set over a hundred years ago, director Victor Pappas is focusing on the themes that are still applicable today. Vivie is the “new woman” of her time, trying to make her own life that is not dependent on marriage. She strives for personal empowerment to create her own future. In Shaw’s time, a woman could go to the same college as a man, but not receive a degree in the same way. Today’s women face different but related problems with being acknowledged as whole people and as equals. To draw parallels with today, sound designer Rob Witmer is creating soundscapes to go in between each of the four acts. These soundscapes will have environmental music to push ahead the emotional mood of the show, but also will contain snippets of modern feminist speeches. These will speak to Shaw’s story as it progresses, but will also connect the themes to our own era.
PLACING THE PRODUCTION

Set renderings by Martin Christoffel
**PRE-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

Before watching the show, have students reflect on the following questions, either in a large group, small group, or individually in a journal.

In this play, Mrs. Warren keeps her profession secret from her daughter. What types of jobs might people keep secret from others, either in the past or today? Why?

What types of careers do you think your parents would approve of for you? Does their approval matter to you? Do you think your parents want you to approve of their careers?

In the Victorian era, women had a more limited selection of careers than men. Is that still true today? Can you think of ways that women are kept out of some jobs or pushed into others, either overtly or subtly?

In this play, a broad social issue is explored through the lens of a single family’s experience. Can you think of other plays or movies where a major social trend or issue is explored through the lens of personal relationships?

In this play, Mrs. Warren keeps her profession secret from her daughter. What types of jobs might people keep secret from others, either in the past or today? Why?

Shaw wrote this play in the late 19th century. What was the political and social situation like during this time in history? How is the world of *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* similar to today? How is it different? Use specific examples from the show to back up your points.

What, in your opinion, are the themes or messages of this story? Can you think of any other works of art or literature that have similar messages?

Would you consider this story to have a happy ending? Is the main conflict resolved? Are the characters able to continue with their own lives? Why or why not?

Consider the concepts of “respectability” and “virtue.” Which characters in this play would you say are virtuous or moral? Are they the same ones that society would consider to be respectable? How are those two concepts related?

Why do you think this play was banned when it was first produced? Consider not only its subject matter, but also its portrayal of women, clergy, and upending of social conventions.

**POST-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

Here are some questions to discuss with students after the play. Answers may vary and students are encouraged to come up with their own interpretations of the play. There are many correct answers, as long as they are backed up by events from the play.

Shaw wrote this play in the late 19th century. What was the political and social situation like during this time in history? How is the world of *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* similar to today? How is it different? Use specific examples from the show to back up your points.

What, in your opinion, are the themes or messages of this story? Can you think of any other works of art or literature that have similar messages?

How do Mrs. Warren and her daughter Vivie each embody feminism? How are they different?

In what ways do women today need to balance doing the right thing for their children versus doing the right thing for themselves or for society?

Consider the concepts of “respectability” and “virtue.” Which characters in this play would you say are virtuous or moral? Are they the same ones that society would consider to be respectable? How are those two concepts related?

Why do you think this play was banned when it was first produced? Consider not only its subject matter, but also its portrayal of women, clergy, and upending of social conventions.

In what ways did Mrs. Warren’s choices about Vivie’s upbringing contribute to her personality? Did Mrs. Warren “make” Vivie less of a romantic?
At the end of this play, Mrs. Warren is rejected by her daughter for continuing to run brothels, Vivie vows she will never marry, and they part ways. Vivie considers herself a modern woman, and has different ideals of what it means to be feminist than her mother does.

INSTRUCTIONS

Imagine that a sequel is written that takes place 25 years later. Vivie is now an older woman talking with a younger woman about her life. Write a synopsis of how that play would happen. Consider the following questions as you write your synopsis:

1. Who is the younger woman? Did Vivie have a daughter, or does she know Vivie in another way?

2. What is Vivie’s profession? Would she consider it to be a respectable profession? Would the younger woman consider it to be a good profession?

3. In what ways might Vivie and the younger woman have different views on feminism? Think about current feminism versus feminism in the past. What issues are the same? Does your generation address issues the same way as your parents’ generation? Think about women in the workplace, sexual harassment, and general issues of equality.

4. How would your play end? Does the younger woman approve of Vivie? Does she think she did her best, or does she think she didn’t go far enough?
Mission Statement

With the plays of William Shakespeare at our core, Seattle Shakespeare Company engages our audiences, our artists and our community in the universal human experience inherent in classic drama through the vitality, immediacy and intimacy of live performance and dynamic outreach programs.

ABOUT US

Seattle Shakespeare Company is the Puget Sound region’s year-round, professional, classical theatre. The company’s growing success stems from a deep belief in the power and vibrancy of the time-tested words and ideas of Shakespeare and other classical playwrights along with a commitment to artistic excellence on stage. The results have been provocative performances that both challenge and delight audiences while fostering an appreciation for great stage works.

Our combined programs — which include indoor performances, free outdoor productions, regional tours, educator and youth programs — reach across barriers of income, geography, and education to bring classical theatre to Washington State.

EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In-School Residencies, Matinees, and Workshops

• In-School Residencies bring active, customized curriculum into schools across Washington State. Professional teaching artists plan with teachers to tailor each residency to fit the needs and objectives of the classroom. Seattle Shakespeare Company residencies inject vibrant, active exercises into lessons that unlock the text, themes, and actions of a Shakespeare play.

• Student Matinees bring over 3,000 students annually to our mainstage productions in the Seattle Center. Teachers are provided free study guides, and student groups are invited to stay after the show for a free Q&A session with the cast.

• Pre-show and post-show workshops can be booked to accompany mainstage matinees. These workshops include an introduction to the play itself, student activities, and insights into direction and design choices of our specific production.

Touring Productions

• Fresh and accessible 90-minute productions tour across Washington State each Spring, reaching more than 14,000 students and adults. These nimble productions perform as easily in school gymnasiums as professional theatre facilities. Teachers are provided free study guides and students enjoy free post-show Q&A sessions with the cast.

• Schools have the opportunity to book accompanying in-school residencies with touring productions, led by members of the touring cast and additional teaching artists.

Camps and Classes

• Our summer “Camp Bill” series in Seattle and Edmonds offers young actors a variety of camps to choose from or combine. Camps range from a One-Week Introduction to a Three-Week Production Intensive, with many options in between.

• In our Fall and Spring after-school “Short Shakes” programs, young actors develop their skills and gain hands-on performance and production experience.

• Seattle Shakespeare Company occasionally offers adult classes and workshops to our community featuring guest artists who work on our stage.

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