

Partners in a Moral Crime

A Social study in George Bernard Shaw's Play *Widowers' Houses*

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Abstract

The madly rush upon money may derive a person to sell the values and ethics that he is supposed to enjoy having. The human emotions could be affected by the exaggeration of the greed for money and also magnifies its negative impact on a noble feeling like love, but is love a parcel to be bought and sold by money and for the sake of money? Is it not a supreme value upon which there isn't any compromise? If the case became that business becomes the justification for the rich to profit from the sweat and misery of the poor and disadvantaged, is there any sense of love and compassion left in them? George Bernard Shaw in his play *Widowers' Houses* gives answers to these questions outweighing money on morality and love in the time when feelings become of little value, and the collected money becomes the measure of manhood and success. In such time, there is no place for true love in the world of business. Bernard Shaw grants his pen the freedom to portrait money in the figure of a contagious disease which attacks the rich to make themselves richer, and the poor get the disease from the rich so that they might exceed the poverty situation even if it is at the expense of their feelings, sympathy and morals.

Key words :

Widowers' Houses , Business , Misery , manhood , Moral Crime

Introduction :

For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

(Bible-1 Timothy 6:10King James Version (KJV))

Money is twofold weapon .On one hand it can be a person's friend ensuring him/her wealth that enhances his /her ability to achieve things that are achievable via money , and happiness which would include him/her and the people around , or it can be , on the other hand , the worst enemy when it corrupts the person's morals . Sophocles wrote :

Money is the worst currency that ever grew among mankind. This sacks cities, this drives men from their homes, this teaches and corrupts the worthiest minds to turn base deeds. ¹

this message is universal in its meaning and became an unavoidable truth that most of us get affected by. It touches our daily life to the extent that we became obsessed with it. It became a truth which assures us that it is so hard for any of us to make his calculations for present and future plans without thinking of this truth . However, some people think the opposite : they believe that life can be happy and joyful without having money in their pockets, and they lean to the opinion saying that love, respect, and self-sacrifice can be vivid sources of happiness and dignity . This opinion goes hand in hand with Immanuel Kant's opinion about morality. He assures that " Morality is not the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness." ²

Evil to Come

In his play *Widower's Houses* (1892) G.B. Shaw presents a young doctor, Harry Trentch ,who meets a rich young lady, Blanche Sartorius, with whom he has a love relationship and plans to marry. He demands that he and Balnche would live on the modest income that he gets .However, he finds out that he was raised by the money that comes from the mortgage that his family holds on Sartorius's properties , the widowers' houses (the name was given to these houses and was mentioned in one of the reports of the English Parliament.) These houses are resided by poor people who became widowers and used to live alone in separate or shared rooms .The land on which these houses are erected belongs to a rich family, The doctor's family . Shaw puts these two characters and the other ones : Sartorius , Blanche's father , Cokane and Lickcheese, before the audience and gives the latter a chance to comprehend the playwright's philosophy, which will be further discussed in the present study .

No doubt that the doctor and other rich people in the play are happy having a lot of money at hand .Money became their loyal servant which protests not to any of their wishes and desires . Money even made Mr. Sartorius seems to be a real gentleman who cleverly hides his crime .Cokane and Harry are deceived by Sartorius' appearance. Cokane says to Harry :

Her father seems to be a perfect gentleman. I obtained the privilege of his acquaintance : I introduced you : I allowed him to believe that he might leave his daughter in your charge with absolute confidence .³

Harry did not wonder about the source of Sartorius' wealth .He enjoyed his days and spent the money the way he liked and that was a source of his easy going life. He preferred his love to Blanche over his doing his duty which obliges him to ask if this father's money was clean . He even agrees to use Sartorius' money when the latter promised him to give him enough money to make him happy living with Sartorius ' daughter after they get married :

There shall be no difficulty about money : you shall entertain as much as you please : I will guarantee all that. But I must have a guarantee on my side that she will be received on equal terms by your family.

TRENCH. Guarantee !

SARTORIUS. Yes, a reasonable guarantee. I shall expect you to write to your relatives explaining your intention, and adding what you think proper as to my daughter's fitness for the best society. When you can shew me a few letters from the principal members of your family, congratulating you in a fairly cordial way, I shall be satisfied. Can I say more ?⁴

Sartorius uses the money even to buy his daughter the respect of Harry's family . He expects that his daughter will not be accepted easily in Harry's family when she marries ! In this way money is even used to buy respect for certain people . Money also grants people a good looking and appearance. Cokane advices Harry to care for appearance :

Ah, you are young, dear boy : you don't know the importance of these things apparently idle ceremonial trifles, really the springs and wheels of a great aristocratic system.⁵

Cokane knows how to deal with money and appearances, unlike Harry .In his opinion about money and power and their connection to trust , Ardent Praveen wrote :

When using money , it is important to keep in mind that you are using power and influence over the trust of people you are dealing with .Actual money may or may not be an accurate representation of that trust ⁶ .

However , this young doctor does not hesitate to show his consciousness towards those who suffer to pay for renting miserable rooms that are owned by Mr. Sartorius .

Problem Started

The problem starts when Harry discovers that he was raised by the money that was collected from renting the land on which the widowers' houses are erected .The dirty ,unhealthy and miserable rooms are rented to poor people in a mean way :they are rented as separate , half shared , quarter shared rooms in a dirty neighborhood in London .The standard of living of these people and the level of commodity and furniture are all low and miserably inhabited and endured with elaborated suffering . Harry who has just graduated from the college of medicine , is presented as a living conscious person who refuses to build his castle of happiness on the skulls of the poor people who struggle to work to get the money to pay for the rent of the rooms which suit not the humans .Yet, the contradiction in this young man's situation with the passage of time is that despite his knowing about the source of the money on which he himself was raised ,yet he does not object using that money and the money that came from Mr. Sartorius .

This ideal picture of Harry ,the honest doctor , is destroyed in no time. The courage and idealism of this young man have vanished when he realizes that he is a partner to Mr. Sartorius in his crime because Harry uses Mr. Sartorius 's money that is collected from those poor people and thus

Bernard Shaw shows how money corrupts people's consciousness and destroys their pride and self respect. At the beginning of the play, Harry did not bother to ask Sartorius about the source of the money he gets and prefers to marry Blanche .He prefers following his desires over following the traditions . Cokane wanted to remind the young man about the traditions:

I am not moral, Trench. At least I am not a moralist : that is the expression I should have used moral, but not a moralist. If you are going to get money with your wife, doesn't it concern your family to know how that money was made ? Doesn't it concern you, Harry ? [Trench looks at him helplessly, twisting his fingers nervously. Cokane throws down the pencil and leans back with ostentatious indifference]. Of course it is no business of mine : I only throw out the suggestion. Sartorius may be a retired burglar for all I know .⁷

Mr. Sartorius knows very well how to win people's hearts with his money . He suggests to Cokane to add some words to the letter which Cokane wrote instead of Harry .It was addressing Harry's family . Those words start with mentioning money to be the cake that makes others chase to bite :

The young lady will inherit the bulk of her father's fortune, and will be liberally treated on her marriage. Her education has been of the most expensive and complete kind obtainable ; and her surroundings have been characterized by the strictest refinement. She is in every essential particular .⁸

He mentions money before mentioning Blanche's education and beauty ! This man knows that the message will reach Lady Roxdale's hands (Harry's aunt) which in her turn is another corrupted lady who invested her

properties on Mr. Sartorius' land . Mr. Sartorius feels proud to have her as an investor .He says

[very deliberately'] My income, sir, is derived from the rental of a very extensive real estate in London. Lady Roxdale is one of the head landlords ; and Dr. Trench holds a mortgage from which, if I mistake not, his entire income is derived. The truth is, Mr Cokane, I am quite well acquainted with Dr Trench's position and affairs ; and I have long desired to know him personally.⁹

Deliberately,Sartorius talks about the source of his income and the income of Lady Roxdale which happens to be the same source of the young doctor's income from which he spends for his living and learning tuition . He wants to say that corrupted money is the common thing among the characters of the play . It is also a reminder to Harry's family to treat Balnche in the best way and accepts her as one of the new family because she is just like them and they all deal with money that is raised from the widowers' agony .

Mr.Sartorius is arrogant and fearless of the law. Lickcheese warns him that Speakman , the sanitary Inspector, has been complaining again about one of the houses which is No. 13 Robbins's Row and that he will suit a law case before the vestry in which Mr. Sartorius is a member ! The latter promises that he will teach Speakman how to respect the members of the vestry :

SARTORIUS. I will teach Mr Speakman his duty to members of the vestry.

LICKCHEESE \doubtfully\ The vestry cant hurt him, sir. He's under the Local Government Board.

SARTORIUS. I did not ask you that. Let me see the

books. [Lickcheese produces the rent book, and hands it to Sartorius ; then makes the desired entry in the diary on the table, watching Sartorius with misgiving as the rent book is examined. Sartorius rises, frowning\ l 14.5. for repairs to No. 13. What does this mean ?¹⁰

He is even so angry that one pound twenty four shillings are spent to repair the broken step in the stairs in the third floor that endangered the lives of the resident in the building . He fires Lickcheese because he spent that little sum of money in those buildings and because he treated people in those building as if they are as excellent as the residents in the buildings in the West End square . Mr. Sartorius is totally selfish and merciless . Emmanuel Seide , in his book *Feed Them yourself* expresses his opinion about the merciless rich people :

...I believe that when God blesses someone with wealth , he does this so that this person can help his or her fellow brothers and sisters overcome poverty . These days , the greed is so strong that within the body of believers that the rich and wealthy become merciless . Some people say that they are not responsible for the misery and poverty of their neighbors .Therefore , helping is really none of their business .¹¹

Mr. Sartorius' selfishness is practiced with Lickcheese who served him loyally and Mr. Sartorius is supposed to take care of this loyal employee, like any shepherded responsible for his sheep. instead, he makes Lickcheese suffer and complain , just like those people whose money he collected to submit to his master :

Well, Mr. Sartorius, it is hard, so it is.

No man alive could have screwed more out of them poor

*destitute devils for you than I have, or spent less in doing it. I have dirtied my hands at it until they're not fit for clean work hardly ; and now you turn me .*¹²

Despite the obvious pain in Lickcheese' life , Harry insists that Sartorius is *very fair and generous*. Harry even interrupted Lickcheese who was complaining of his master's harshness and about the poor man's miserable situation , and refused to listen and said :

*I had rather not. Excuse my saying plainly that I think Mr. Sartorius is not a man to act hastily or harshly. I have always found him very fair and generous ; and I believe he is a better judge of the circumstances than I am.*¹³

But with some insistence from Cokane , Harry listened to Lickcheeke revealing a shocking truth :

*Dr. Trench, if you or your children come into the property. Ive took money there when no other collector alive would have wrung it out. And this is the thanks I get for it ! Why, see here, gentlemen ! Look at that bag of money on the table. Hardly a penny of that but there was a hungry child crying for the bread it would have bought. But I got it for him screwed and worried and bullied it out of them.*¹⁴

He confesses his brutality in collecting the rent money from the residents of the widowers' houses . Everyone seems to be a lion in his dealing with the helpless people of the widowers' houses . Lickcheese is so mean because he wishes to satisfy his master just to get his salary and to feed his own hungry children back at home .

Again money is the motive behind what goes on in the events of the play. However, there is still some mercy left in Lickcheese's heart towards those poor people when he felt sorry to bully them to do it. Harry insists on his own opinion that Sartorius was so fair with Lickcheese and promised Lickcheese that if he was in Sartorius' shoes he would punish Lickcheese instead of letting him keep his work:

Trench : (aghast) You took money that ought to have fed starving children ! Serve you right ! If I had been the father of one of those children, I'd have given you something worse than the sack. I wouldnt say a word to save your soul, if you have such a thing. Mr. Sartorius was quite right .¹⁵

To defend himself , Lickcheese tries to show Harry Trench the brutal Sartorius whom Trench refuses to accept anything wrong against . Lickcheese wants to open the young man's eye to the truth :

*You are an innocent young gentleman. Do you suppose he sacked me because I was too hard ? Not a bit on it : it was because I wasnt hard enough. I never heard him say he was satisfied yet : no, nor he wouldnt, not if I skinned em alive, I dont say he's the worst land- lord in London : he couldnt be worse than some ; but he's no better than the worst I ever had to do with.
And, though I say it, I'm better than the best collector he ever done business with. Ive screwed more and spent less on his properties than anyone would believe that knows what such properties are .¹⁶*

This is mere severity and cruelty practiced by Mr. Sartorius against poor people including Lickcheese . What other evidence does Harry Trench want

to get to believe that Sartorius is a cruel selfish man? Lickcheese describes the smell of the houses to Harry hoping that the latter will be

convinced and then will change his opinion about Mr. Sartorius :

Every few hundred pounds he could scrape together he bought old houses with houses that you wouldnt hardly look at without holding your nose .¹⁷

Cokane could smell the rotten smell and that led him to look compassionately at him and accused money to be the biggest evil:

Ah, my dear fellow, the love of money is the root of all evil¹⁸

And a sudden fury came to Harry :

It's a damnable business from beginning to end ; and you deserve no better luck for helping in it. Ive seen it all among the out-patients at the hospital ; and it used to make my blood boil to think that such things couldnt be prevented .¹⁹

He saw miserable patients suffering and that was outrageous and moving enough for him . The question remains, Is it enough to be angry at wrong situation and practices without taking any action to correct it? Someone should do something to correct something. Which character is eligible to be the hero in this play in such a situation? Is it Harry Trench?

Harry Trench cares not to Lickcheese' critical situation and begging that Harry speaks to his future father –in –law to let Lickcheese keep his job. Lickcheese told Trench about the future fortune the latter will get when marrying Blanche and that will make him another copy of Mr. Sartorius, therefore, if that happens who will be more mean ? is it Lickcheese in his meanness in collecting the rent amounts or Mr. Sartorius and Trench who spend that money ? Lickcheese furiously said :

*Which of us is the worse, I should like to know me that wrings the money out to keep a home over my children, or you that spend it and try to shove the blame on to me?*²⁰

Trench answered coldly showing his carelessness :

*I'm afraid you have shewn very little, by your own confession.*²¹

In an attempt to think of living without Blanche's father's money , Trench asks her if she is ready to live without her father's money and she answers him that she refuses to do so because her father promised her that she will live rich when she gets married and her life will be as happy as he could provide her. Trench tries to convince her to be satisfied with the seven hundred pounds he gets but she does not go along with that suggestion giving him a justification that the money she will get from her father will enable her and her husband to live luxuriously. He refuses Blanche's attempt to make him accept her father's money and things went wrong that she curses and asks him not to try to see her again . When her father talked to him to know the reason behind the fight between the two young people , Trench tells him that he wants Blanche only , not her father's money because of the source of that money which is the widowers' houses. Mr.Sartorius tries to convince Harry Trench that Lickcheese is a liar and that it is a matter of business to rent the houses .Harry objects to the type of houses and the living conditions in them and that people there do suffer. Mr. Sartorius explains that those people are too poor and they steal the wood and glass in the houses to sell them and live and that the best income they could get is four shillings and that is the rent of the house. Mr. Sartorius dares to ask Trench about the source of his income and the latter defiantly answers :

*From interest not from houses. My hands are clean as far as that goes. Interest on a mortgage.*²²

But these "clean hands" cannot deceive the professional business man ,

Mr. Sartorius who tells Trench about the source of his income which is "a mortgage on [Sartorius'] Properties. This made Harry Trench to wander with a shocking surprise :

*Do you mean to say that I am just as bad as you are*²³

However, Trench realizes that he is as bad as the man whose money he refuses and thus he apologizes for Mr.Sartorius:

*Well, people who live in glass houses have no right to throw stones. But, on my honor, I never knew that my house was a glass one until you pointed it out. I beg your pardon.*²⁴

Instead of taking any corrective action , Harry Trench surrenders to the circumstances and admits that he has a hand with Mr. Sartorius in the suffering of the dwellers of the widowers' houses . Mr. Sartorius tries to make his daughter change her mind and accept Harry Trench as a husband but she refuses accusing him to be proud and arrogant thinking himself to be better than her family and father .

Money charm doesn't spare Lickcheese who is fired by Mr. Sartorius but this was so beneficial for the former. Lickcheese returns

to tell Mr. Sartorius that he learned from him a way of being rich which is to buy widowers' house and rent them to poor people . It seems that chasing money is contagious. He tells his old master about the compensation that the government will pay for the houses that will be demolished to make a

road ,so he suggests that they buy those houses before being demolished just to get the compensation amount after demolishing them; the dwellers, once more, are the victims of those

plans . Blanche learns that her father's income is from the widowers' house and feels ashamed of herself and wishes that she had no such a father and feels sorry for accusing Harry Trench of being proud to refuse her father's money . Her conscious refuses that she lives on people's agony and believes that to live in poverty with honor is better thousand times than to live rich with disgrace.

The men's greed does not stop. Mr. Sartorius and Lickcheese meet again and Cokane and Trench come to Mr. Sartorius' house for another attempt to win Blanche's heart once more . Mr. Sartorius and Lickcheese try to make Trench accept the project of the compensation because he represents his aunt ,the land owner . Mr. Sartorius refuses to be part of the deal and therefore Lickcheese suggests that Trench marries Blanche so that the houses and the land will establish a company. This marriage is for

the sake of money, not for love. Blanche's destiny is discussed as a financial case .When he is left alone , Trench goes to Balnche's photo

and kisses it and farewells her despite his love to her . She comes to him and kisses him . This sudden change in the girl's stand makes him agree to join Mr.Sartorius in the compensation project regardless of the profit or loss that the project might risk facing. Mr. Sartorius shakes Trench's hand , Cokane applauds, and Lickcheese hugs Trench. Every one of these men has his own benefit ,and Money is still the motive. They all step on their morals for the sake of money ,and that is the worst thing that a person may do. They incarnate the meaning of dissatisfaction in greed. Greed is so mean

that it affects a person's morality in a negative way .It provokes the person's dissatisfaction . Rabbi Benjamin Blech explains that

*Greed will always leave you dissatisfied because you'll never be able to get everything you desire. Greed never allows you to think you have enough; it always destroys you by making you strive ever harder for more.*²⁵

As a father , Mr. Sartorius does not play the role of a loving father who loves his daughter , instead he thinks of Trenches' family's fortune to be added to the fortune he himself has . As a lover , Trench forgets about his feelings and passions and prefers to be a businessman who conducts

business with his future father-in –law . As a rent collector , Lickcheese is ready to lick other people's shoes to reach his goal :money. With his devilish plans in mind , he will always be busy looking for a tender to submit of a project to share.

Conclusion

Money has the power of magic in which some people , on one side , are convinced that this power is believable and can guarantee them happy life without any pain of consciousness . Other people , on the opposite side, disagree to that belief and they believe that it is no more than illusion . For them ,following the illusion is misleading and the result is unhappy . Mr. Sartorius and Lickcheese belong to the first group and they practice their meanness and greed on the poor dwellers of the widowers' houses .Harry Trench , Knowing the real source of Mr. Sartorius's future , refuses to take the money and makes us believe that he is a man of morals ,but he disappoints us when he accepts the money and participate in the project suggested by Lickchesse , and thus he becomes a partner in the moral crime

Blanche's has no real opinion about refusing or accepting the marriage between herself and Trench ,and thus she becomes a helpless young girl who cannot fight the strong stream of greed generated by the three men .

The bad characters' lust for money is the moral crime that needs to be punished and the good one's patience and nobility need to be rewarded.

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شركاء في جريمة أخلاقية

دراسة اجتماعية في مسرحية جورج برنارد شو (بيوت الأرامل)

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المخلص:

قد يؤدي التكالب على المال بالمرء أن يبيع القيم التي يفترض به أن يمتلكها والأخلاق التي يجب عليه أن يتحلى بها وربما تتأثر المشاعر الإنسانية بهذا التكالب وتصل بمبالغتها حد التأثير السلبي على عاطفة نبيلة كالحب، ولكن هل الحب بضاعة تباع وتشتري بالمال ومن اجل المال؟ أليس من المفترض أن يكون الحب قيمة عليا لا تقوم عليها أي مساومة؟ وإذا وصل الحال بان يصبح العمل والتجارة مسوغا للأغنياء كي يتربحوا من عرق وشقاء الفقراء والمحرومين، فهل تبقى فيهم أي شيء من حس وتعاطف وحب؟ لقد أجاب جورج برناردشو في مسرحيته ((بيوت الأرامل)) عن هذه التساؤلات مرجحا كفة المال على الأخلاق والحب في زمن صارت فيه مشاعر الناس بلا قيمة تذكر، بل إن ما يتم جمعه من مال صار هو مقياس الرجولة والنجاح، ولا محل للحب الحقيقي في عالم العمل، وحتى انه قد صور البحث عن المال كالمرض المعدي الذي يصيب الأغنياء ليزدادوا غنى، ويصاب الفقراء بعدوى من الأغنياء فيبذلون جهودا مضنية لعلهم يتجاوزون حالة الفقر التي يعانون منها ، حتى لو كان ذلك على حساب مشاعرهم وتعاطفهم وأخلاقهم .