
Women Liberation Achieved in 'New Woman'

The notion of the “New Woman” arose in the late nineteenth century mainly defining middle class women who reproached the then current societal expectations for women. As stated by Susan Crucea, a professor of English and Women’s Studies at Bowling Green University, “the most important trait of the New Woman was her assertion of her right, not just to an education or a job outside the home, but to a career, which met her personal needs and fulfilled her interests. Rejecting marriage and motherhood, she turned to a career for emotional and intellectual fulfillment” (200). In Bernard Shaw’s 1894 play, “Mrs. Warren’s Profession”, Vivie Warren is typically regarded and the representation of the New Woman; however, both Mrs. Warren and Vivie encompass the ideals of the New Woman through a career-centered life and rejection of marriage.

Career-driven women are an integral part of the ideals of the New Woman. Both Mrs. Kitty Warren and Miss Vivie Warren are working women of the upper-middle class; their career paths differ greatly which can be highly attributed to the circumstances of their youths. Mrs. Kitty Warren, for example, was born into a working class, single-mother home. This prompted her to get a job as a waitress, working fourteen hours a day for only four shillings a week and her board in the bar at Waterloo station. She did not consider a life of prostitution until Liz visited her at work and convinced her to leave. Up until the point of her choosing a life of prostitution, Mrs. Warren was making career-driven decisions based on chances of survival rather than being driven by economic success, those doors did not open for her until her partnership with Sir Crofts. Her decision to open brothels across Europe separates her need for economic survival from the true career-driven quality of the New Woman. Mrs. Warren’s success as a madam and owner of several brothels across Europe is what separated her from the overwhelming majority of women who became prostitutes, making her a New Woman. According to Barbara Meil Hobson’s research, which she presented in her 1987 essay, “Successful Madams”, “the image of the prostitute as someone who accumulates savings from her trade, wisely invests her capital, and obtains a small fortune was not very realistic either” (Jacobus 889). She continues on to suggest that the mandatory medical fees, percentage taken by their madams, and the cost of clothes and makeup left these prostitutes with very little income by the end of the night. Mrs. Warren’s financial success was founded in her business partnership with Sir Crofts. He takes credit by attributing her success to his advice and the money he advanced her. When revealing to Vivie the truth of the business partnership, he claims that he has put more than ?40,000 into the business and without that funding it would not have been possible. While Sir Crofts’ money may have been pertinent to the foundation of their corporation, Mrs. Warren’s decision to continue the business years after she is financially stable attributes to her identity in the New Woman. With a life void of romance, she finds fulfillment in her business prospects. She knows

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no other life and is in wish to start a more moral life.

Vivie more strongly represents the notion of the New Woman in regards to career because though it was typically considered untraditional for a woman to have a job, her profession as an accountant was more socially acceptable than her mother's profession as a madam. The circumstances of her youth are quite the opposite of her mother's. Though similarly she had little to no relationship with her mother, her mother's financial success granted her many opportunities most women did not have such as a college education. Vivie's educational opportunity differs greatly from that of other women of the time considering, "when Oxford and Cambridge opened their doors to women, many families refused to let their clever daughters attend for fear that they would make themselves unmarriageable" (Hughes). As a New Woman herself, Mrs. Warren would not be too quick to consider marriage the greatest accomplishment Vivie could obtain. She values Vivie's education and opportunities as much as Vivie herself does. The outcome of Mrs. Warren's ideals regarding Vivie's education allowed her to attend Cambridge University as an honors student in mathematics and scored high in the mathematical tripos exam – an achievement many women would not have had the chance to try for success at, let alone actually succeed. To further perpetuate Vivie as an ideal of the New Woman, she took the tripos exam for the simple fact that her mother would pay her £50 for doing so. Her academic success awarded her the opportunity to pursue a career in mathematics as an accountant on Chancery Lane.

Vivie breaks away from the expectations of femininity not only by having a male-dominated career but also in the finer details of play, typically found in the stage directions, such as the way she has chosen to decorate her office with masculine touches. It is noted that her office contains a writing table with a cigar box and a slew of papers strewn across it, untidy. She prides herself on her independent success, which she proves by mailing her monthly allowance back to her mother upon finding out where the money came from. She rejects Sir Croft's proposal, an offer that was presented to her as more of a business proposal than a marriage proposal. She would prefer to make her own money and have the ability to sustain herself off of her own income than marry rich and keep the money when her husband passes.

Rejection of marriage and romantic relationships is a staple in the lifestyle of the New Woman. The expected role of the woman during this period was as a housewife, staying home to watch the children and keep the house in order. Mrs. Kitty Warren defied this expectation by never marrying or keeping a romantic relationship. Even her nonromantic relationships were free of emotion. Her friendship with Praed is the closest to a typical friendship but she still seems to be emotionally removed from him. Her relationship with Sir Crofts is slightly more complicated in that they are business partners and he was potentially one of her clients. Though she regards him highly as a business partner, she does not regard him highly in his manner or morality. She is dead set against his wishes to marry Vivie because she believes her daughter deserves

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better. It is never made clear whether or not she has wishes for Vivie to marry or if she understands it is not likely to happen.

Vivie, also encompassing the ideals of the New Woman through rejection of marriage beginning with her persistence in rejecting Frank's affections. Though some of his love for Vivie stems from her fortune, he also appears to genuinely love her. The only time she indulges in his affection is when she is exceptionally angry with her mother. After Mrs. Warren tells her daughter the truth about her career, Vivie is unsure how to handle her emotions and goes back and forth between acceptance and anger. In a time of her anger, she is with Frank and they revert back to their childish ways of talking about affection. They talk about running away from their problems and their parents as "The dear little boy with dowdy little girl" (Jacobus 859). Sir Crofts interrupts their moment and takes Vivie aside to present his marriage proposal to her. It is presented as more of a business deal than a marriage proposal – he leaves the romance out of the offer and tells her the business opportunity within. When he dies, which will presumably be much sooner than her own death, she will be left with his fortune and the high title of Lady Crofts. She politely declines, even when he is persistent. As a woman generally unconcerned with love and romantics, her declination is likely founded more strongly in a want for economic independence than anything. Several accounts throughout the play warrant both Mrs. Warren and Vivie as representations of the nineteenth century notion of the New Woman. With both Mrs. Warren and Vivie acting as representations, the themes of career and financial success as well as rejection of marriage and relationships are elevated in the play.

Work Cited

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