Synopsis and Study Questions

Act 1

Setting
Note the precise description, typical of Victorian ‘box sets’: this allows the audience to appreciate the milieu of independence (represented by the bicycle) and intellect (books, notes) in a typically English country setting – this suggests middle rather than upper class. (Compare with Act 2 of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde.)

(Follow link to: [http://www.peopleplayuk.org.uk/guided_tours/drama_tour/19th_century/cup.php](http://www.peopleplayuk.org.uk/guided_tours/drama_tour/19th_century/cup.php) ‘They constructed rooms on stage which they dressed with the care of any interior decorator, with sofas, curtains, chairs, carpets on their stage floors. Instead of painted flats they had real doors with real door handles and the actors wore well-made fashionable dress not the trappings of a dusty theatre wardrobe.’)

Action
The first meeting of Vivie and Praed shows her in command, vigorous and surprising. News that her mother is coming is badly received – the audience is aware of tension. Praed’s gentlemanly efforts with the chair are confronted by Vivie’s self-sufficiency, putting him on the wrong footing. Praed’s comments about anarchy and authority lead to Vivie’s disappointment with his intellectual qualities. Her feminist views are developed, her intelligence established through discussion of her Cambridge success. Her pragmatism is shown through the ‘£50 bet’. Conflicting views are aired on study and ‘what makes womanhood beautiful’ – Vivie’s view seems ‘mannish’ and shocks Praed with her lack of interest in art. Relationship of Vivie and mother is distant – ‘we hardly know each other’. Praed’s discomfort is clear but he will not talk about her. Vivie forecasts trouble with her plan to become an actuary. Praed hints at mystery surrounding her mother.

Mrs Warren and Sir George Crofts enter – note the detailed and specific character descriptions. Mrs Warren’s opening speech is domineering, dismissive and patronising, though Vivie shows who is in command through the strength of her handshake.

The three visitors clearly know each other well, but are uneasy. Why has Crofts wanted to meet Vivie? Conflict of views about how she should be treated.

Praed and Crofts discuss the mystery of Vivie’s father and Crofts’ attraction to her. Praed talks of his footing with Kitty Warren in delicate terms: clearly not sexual. He suggests both men should regard Vivie in a paternal, protective manner.

The arrival of Frank Gardner establishes he already knows Praed. Gives details about financial and sexual scrapes and confesses his love for Vivie.
The arrival of Rev Samuel Gardner – disrespectful manner in which Frank speaks to him – revelation Frank is using his looks to find a woman to support him. Frank chatters about the Rev’s rather dissolute past. On meeting Vivie then Mrs Warren, it becomes clear Rev and Mrs W have known each other in the past (she is the woman of the letters, by implication) – Mrs W embarrassed by being greeted as ‘Miss Vavasour’.

Key points for consideration – Act 1

1. **What effects are created by the stage setting and stage directions?**

2. **How will the audience benefit, in dramatic terms, from Shaw’s use of novelistic technique in describing the characters?**

3. **How are tensions established and developed for the audience and between characters?**

4. **What past connections can you establish between the characters? Try to establish these in diagram form.**

5. **How do Vivie’s actions establish her as one of the ‘New Women’?**

6. **How do Frank’s views establish him as being untypical of the expectations of 19th century men?**

7. **A key question concerns the identity of Vivie’s father – how could this be typical of the ‘well-made play’?** (A style of play with clear-cut protagonists and antagonists, artificially logical plots, often involving some ‘skeleton in the family cupboard’, and usually happy endings. These plays often used stock characters and lines of business. Like Ibsen in *A Doll’s House*, Shaw often used the basic form of the well-made plot, but used more realistic and problematic characters.)

8. **What are your preliminary views of, and responses to, the characters?**

9. **What are your expectations of how the plot will develop?**
Synopsis and Study Questions

Act 2

Setting
Inside the cottage – symbolic of increased intimacy of the characters? It could also suggest the claustrophobic feel of ‘genteel’ middle class society and its mores.

Action
Mrs Warren is clearly bored with the country, wanting a drink, but certain Vivie would not have any. Frank is flirtatious and Mrs W obliges by kissing him. There is conflict over the relationship with Vivie – ‘no tampering’.

Mrs W insists Crofts and Praed stay elsewhere – partly because of size of cottage, but mainly for form’s sake. Rev’s concern over his ‘social position’ is made to look foolish by Frank. Conflict over Vivie and Praed being out walking together reveals Victorian sensitivity to appearance. Details of Frank/ Vivie relationship and the Rev’s protests alert the audience: is this just snobbery, or is there more to it? Crofts’ views on the financial constraints of marriage – Frank’s view that Vivie would not marry for money.

The arrival of Vivie and Praed changes the atmosphere – Mrs W is querulous, which is misplaced behaviour for an absentee mother. Vivie takes charge in arrangements for supper, dismissing others’ concerns about the propriety of two young people being left alone. The tightness of characters fitting into small kitchen may symbolise restricted moral vision, or the limitations of hypocrisy.

Frank is childish in his address to Vivie – her serious approach dismisses thoughts of a connection between their families. She shows contempt for ‘wasters’ like the older characters, rejects Frank’s advances, and they go to eat.

Crofts and Mrs Warren enter and argue over his attitude to Vivie; her concern may raise questions for the audience again, concerning Vivie’s father. His proposal to marry Vivie and give Mrs Warren a cheque seems little more than prostitution. As others enter, Crofts leaves.

Mrs Warren’s attempts to show maternal concern fail. Frank shows contempt for his father; all the men leave. Vivie is much annoyed with Frank. Mrs W tries to warn her daughter about him, but she is clear-sighted, intending to get rid of him. She has an equally clear view of Crofts. Mrs W sees no alternative to marriage for a girl like Vivie and tries to impose her view. Vivie poses key question about her mother’s way of life; she stops her studies to talk seriously and challenge Mrs W’s right to make demands. She wants clear proof of their connection. Ultimatum over the revelation of her father’s name leads to Vivie’s disgust that Crofts could possibly be the man.
Her cold response to her mother’s emotion forces Mrs W to revert to her natural dialect, revealing herself as she really is.

Mrs W’s discussion with Vivie about circumstances and choice, lead to more dramatic and lengthy revelations of her past – doubts over her own paternity – straightened circumstances – horror of working conditions for poor women – these were choices Vivie knows nothing about. Poverty as a barmaid for her mother, money as kept-woman for her sister Lizzie – the irony of her skills as a business woman (like Vivie, and as we later discover, her mother – seemingly a family trait) – euphemistic reference to ‘house in Brussels’ suggest a brothel.

Vivie agrees with her mother’s argument despite herself, from a purely business point of view. Mrs W makes a comparison with marriage as hypocrisy: a form of legal prostitution. There is a clear exposition of the unpleasant aspects of the trade from a woman’s point of view – Mrs W passionately champions self-respect rather than starvation and slavery. Women can only provide for themselves through a man, according to Mrs W. ‘Good manners to be ashamed’ is attitude expected of women – the hypocrisy of the world.

The two women reach an understanding and some closeness. Note use of the stage effect of a darkened room with bright moonlight to symbolise the intimacy and clarity between them. The scene closes with a satirical view of the stereotype ‘good mother’ of sentimental drama.

**Key points for consideration – Act 2**

1. **How have the characters been developed in this scene?**

2. **What are your views of the relationship between Vivie and Frank? How does each regard the other? What outcome do you foresee?**

3. **How is the relationship between Vivie and her mother changed in the second part of this act?**

4. **What do you feel was Shaw’s view of conventional marriage? What evidence do you find in this scene to support this?**

5. **What does the Act tell us about the lot of poor women? Why does Shaw bring this to our attention so vividly? Why do you think this was one of the sections that led to the play being censored originally?**

6. **Why does he leave us with an ironic stereotype of a ‘loving mother’ at the end of this act?**

7. **What is the dual meaning of the term ‘Profession’ at this point?**
Mrs Warren’s Profession

Synopsis and Study Questions

Act 3

Setting
The scene moves to the Rectory garden, the epitome of respectable middle-class Englishness (compare with The Importance of Being Earnest). In a dramatic echo of the first Act, Frank is seen reading, but this time papers, as opposed to Vivie’s more intellectual books and notes.

Action
Rev S arrives suffering a hangover, to receive news that his wife has gone up to London. Frank comments on the scandalous tales from his father’s past with Crofts. We learn the real reason for Mrs S’s absence is the invitation to the Warrens. Praed enters and Rev S leaves. Frank is forthright in his views on his father – he shows strong objection to the Warrens being invited, understanding his mother’s reaction. Frank seems to know about Mrs W’s ‘trouble’.

Rev S re-enters having seen the Warrens and Crofts approaching – he is packed off to meet them. Frank shows strong revulsion at seeing Vivie with affectionate arm round mother’s waist. Forced jolliness and compliments. He sends Mrs W, Crofts, Praed and Rev S to see the church.

Frank and Vivie argue over her mother and Vivie’s changed attitude – she argues understanding the circumstances is important; he argues character is all and Mrs W is an ‘old wretch’. Frank lulls Vivie with the babes in the wood fantasy, which is broken up by the arrival of Crofts, who sends Frank away.

Crofts makes disparaging remarks about Frank’s financial position, but is rebuffed by Vivie. He tries to present himself as bluff, honest, straightforward, in a good financial position. He proposes and despite Vivie’s firm refusal, he continues to press his financial case; he reveals he is Mrs W’s financial backer – huge sum by the standards of the day – and shocks Vivie that the business is still running. Crofts implies it is just ‘private hotels’ but audience and Vivie realise the truth: her education has been bought through this ‘trade’. Vivie confronts him as a ‘rich gentleman’ who had a choice, unlike her mother. He points out the reality of capitalists and the church making money from dubious businesses – a commonplace of society rather than ‘moral principles’ – society keeps its secrets. Vivie reacts with strong disgust to ‘the unmentionable woman and her capitalist bully’. Crofts threatens her with violence, but she rings the bell and Frank appears with a rifle.
Crofts’ final revelation: Frank and Vivie are half-brother and sister from father’s clandestine affair (Is this true? In Act 2 Mrs W refutes the possibility of Vivie’s father being anyone she knows …). Vivie seizes the muzzle of the rifle and points it at her breast in despair. Frank tries to soothe her with the babes in the wood story but Vivie is revolted. She leaves for London and her friend’s chambers in the City.

Key points for consideration – Act 3

1. Consider this scene as a counterpoint to the first – how are our feelings about the characters changed through action or revelations?

2. Elements of the ‘well-made play’ are appearing here; the mystery of Vivie’s parentage, and how Mrs Warren makes her living. Discuss the way these revelations are made and the dramatic effects created. How is the treatment different to a play such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

3. What is Shaw saying in this Act about the hypocrisy of capitalism and ‘good society’?

4. How is the ‘babes in the wood’ story used to dramatic effect? Consider the relationship of Vivie and Frank, but also the sense of innocence (Vivie) in the dark wood of immorality.

5. Comment on the use of emotive language by various characters in this Act.

6. Although Mrs Warren is only on stage for moments, speaking only twice in the whole Act, how is her presence felt throughout?

7. Why does Vivie have to leave for London, in terms of the drama and her emotions?
Synopsis and Study Questions

Act 4

Setting
(Two days after Act 3?) The London Chambers of Miss Honoria Fraser present a contrast to the other sets: modern, functional, a break with the past, business-like and clear.

Action
Frank is waiting for Vivie, in clearly flippant mood. Vivie refuses to go out with him as she can’t afford it and will not use the money he has won through gambling. Vivie explains her friend has taken her into partnership. Frank reveals the others said little about her abrupt departure; when he explains his feelings for her, they are countered by Vivie bitterly reminding him of Rev S and Mrs W. The twist in the plot is that Vivie is not bothered by the change in their relationship, though Frank thinks she must have fallen in love with someone else.

Praed arrives, en route to Italy; he wants Vivie to join him, but she denies the existence of beauty or romance. Praed tries to persuade her, through talk of various cities, till the mention of Brussels causes loathing. Vivie refuses to listen to talk of love or romance, wanting to be treated only as ‘a woman of business’. (Irony of her mother and aunt’s business should not be lost on the audience – Vivie is more like them then she would care to think). Praed pronounces the Gospel of Art and the Gospel of Getting On – Vivie sees the same ‘taint’ in both. It seems clear Praed does not know the full truth about Mrs Warren, only that she is an unmarried mother (itself a great scandal in Victorian society – compare with Miss Prism’s response to being called ‘mother’ by Jack in The Importance of Being Earnest). Vivie is forced to reveal the truth but writes it, then tears up the paper. Frank however writes the words on a card for Praed – both men are supportive and concerned, but Vivie makes the decision to part from her mother for good.

Vivie leaves and the men discuss the situation – Frank says he cannot marry her, not because of the moral aspect of their possible consanguinity, but because they will have no money. His only way of making money is ‘highly speculative’, i.e. gambling. He must withdraw from Vivie and see her only as a brother.

Mrs Warren enters trying to look ‘matronly and dignified’ – she is afraid of Vivie’s response. Frank advises her to leave and never see Vivie again. Contrast in manner as the two women meet. Praed and Frank leave.

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Mrs Warren attempts to be conciliatory then produces a letter from her bank; Vivie has returned the monthly allowance, refuses to accept more money and is determined to make her own way in life. Mrs Warren has not appreciated the effect on Vivie, that the business continues. Mrs Warren outlines her wealth compared to Vivie’s drudgery, but Vivie sees these persuasive tactics as simply part of her mother’s skills in prostitution.
Mrs Warren makes an impassioned speech on society, and how respectable people know nothing of her life; she wants to use her influence to improve Vivie’s life.

Vivie counters that she has a certain admiration for Crofts’ energy, rather than being content with the typical worthless upper-class life. She understands fashionable morality is pretence, and no one would condemn her if she was rich, but Vivie wants to be worth something. She asks her mother why she remains in the business; Mrs W sees the contrast with sister Liz who has the ‘air of being a lady’, while she must have work or go mad – this is what she and Vivie have in common. Vivie insists they must part. Mrs Warren lapses into sentimentality about ‘right and duty’ in an ‘echo of the slums’ – she can never escape what she is. Vivie stresses she wants neither mother nor husband. Mrs W swears she should have kept Vivie with her and brought her up as her ‘real daughter’, not a ‘pious, canting, hard, selfish woman’. Speaking like a character from cheap, sentimental melodrama, she puts on a ‘mother’s curse’ and she swears to do wrong till her last hour. Vivie accuses her of being a ‘conventional woman’ at heart. There is no kind farewell.

Final stage directions show Vivie’s relief at being rid of both mother and Frank – left absorbed in her work.

Key points for consideration – Act 4

1. What is the effect of the setting in giving Vivie strength?

2. How are conventional dramatic characters and events given a new twist in this Act?

3. What view does Shaw present of upper/ middle class morality?

4. Consider Mrs Warren’s set speeches about her ‘profession’ or declaration of ideas – how convincing are they?


6. Is Vivie’s chosen profession more moral than her mother’s? Why?

7. Is anyone worse off at the end of the play?

8. What use does Shaw make of conflict and resolution in the structure of this final Act?

9. Why do you think the play was originally refused a licence for performance?