Even though *Widowers’ Houses* is Shaw’s first play, it has an artistic completeness of conception and a surprising sophistication in style, technique, and content. Some critics, ignoring the artistic issue, have chosen to focus on the satiric and propagandistic elements in the play, labeling it Shaw’s “darkest and bleakest” comedy, noting that it is concerned more with “human depravity” rather than the traditional comedic subject of “human folly,” and calling it an “insistent piece of economic propaganda.” But others have argued for its artistic qualities, qualities, as McDowell says, that “compensate for the flaws that its detractors . . . have overemphasized.” McDowell continues by pointing out that for a beginning playwright, Shaw exhibits an expertise in “directness of approach, subtlety of implication, mastery of the tensely drawn scene, and remarkable terseness and economy of line.” Indeed, Shaw himself insisted that *Widowers’ Houses* is not a “pamphlet in dialogue” but a “work of art as much as any comedy by Moliere.” Shaw was justifiably proud of its artistic worth and was cognizant of the fullness of its conception, of its “viability in the theater,” and the “subtlety and the range of implication present in it.” This is not to say that the propagandistic element does not make a strong presence in Shaw’s play, as it does in all of his plays, and the play is indeed a virulent attack on greed, exploitation, tainted money, hypocrisy, and the class system. But the artistry, while not perfect, also deserves recognition. By examining Shaw’s use of the garden and the library in *Widowers’ Houses* in meticulous detail, one gains an appreciation of the complexity, subtlety, and mastery that Shaw therein reveals, as well as an insight into the play’s deeper textual implications.
As with any viable piece of dramatic literature, critics have noted a number of different themes in *Widowers’ Houses*. Some have focused on Shaw’s attack on society, on the exploitation of the poor, on slum-landlordism, on greed, and on indifference toward the destitute. Charles Carpenter, for example, notes that the “broad target is the prevalent assumption that capitalism is the best of all possible economic systems,” that “poverty and its consequences are inevitable,” and that “the slum mortgagee and landlord are ‘powerless to alter the state of society.’” As Marker puts it, “its theme is ruthless exploitation of the destitute and homeless by the mercantile and the upper classes alike,” and its intent is “to implicate every member of the audience in that social crime.” Carpenter adds that Shaw “puts the blame squarely on society as a whole.”

But, on the level of the individual characters, Shaw inculcates an entirely different theme. While the statements that the play makes about society in general, as noted by the critics, are true, a far more stinging indictment arises from the fact that these evils exist because they are supported by a system of hypocrisy and pretense as practiced by those who are trying to gain respect and acceptance into a class that they yearn to be a part of. Thus Shaw uses the settings of gardens and libraries as a means to develop and dramatize in a subtle and powerful way a major theme involving hypocrisy and pretense.

Although the garden and library are merely stage settings, much of Shaw’s intent is contained in his stage directions, and his descriptions support and eventually merge with the action and characters. It has long been recognized that Shaw’s stage directions contain vital insights, and that, as noted in the introduction to this study, his “stage directions are more revelatory than the characters’ speeches.” Even as a beginner, Shaw exhibits his determination “from the outset to direct his plays on paper, down to the smallest movement or inflection.” In a study of the influence of Shaw’s stage directions on a playwright such as Oscar Wilde, Morrison points out that Shaw “continued to develop stage directions into a combination of psychological analysis, political documentary, and philosophical discourse, shaping flesh and blood characters and their whole moral universe, with a vigour and artistry unmatched by any other playwright.” The same may be said of his physical descriptions as well. A major working assumption of the present study is that nothing in Shaw is unimportant, and everything down to the smallest detail has significance, such as his use of gardens and libraries, a study of which is rewarded with
an understanding of his intent and an awareness of the interrelatedness of all the parts in his plays.

In Widowers’ Houses, the very first words that Shaw wrote for the dramatic form, preceding the rest of his canon, was “the garden.” This particular garden happens to be “the garden restaurant of a hotel at Remagen on the Rhine.” The significance of this garden serves as a prelude to the other gardens he would introduce in later plays. He continues by saying that it is “a fine afternoon in August.” Again, as will be seen in play after play, the action of Shaw’s comedies takes place in splendid weather, a point Shaw always emphasizes. There are rarely storms, clouds, darkness, and oppressive conditions, the one notable exception being the opening scene of Pygmalion, which takes place in the rain outside Covent Garden. This is not coincidental but rather an essential part of Shaw’s satiric statement. Shaw takes pains to present a surface, in a lovely garden, with delightful weather, pleasant, tranquil, and, almost, an “idyllic” world (Cokane’s description), which ironically belies the ugliness underneath, the foulness composed of greed, pretense, falsity, hypocrisy, and selfishness. Widowers’ Houses initiates the precedent for this. Underneath the pleasant August afternoon in the garden restaurant, the powerful unwritten laws of upper-class British society are at work, here and in any number of gardens later on, and controlling some of the characters in this particular situation.

The nature of a garden (in this case in a foreign country), the inhabitants of the garden, and the attitudes exhibited in the garden are clues to the meaning generated from such a setting. The fact that this particular garden is located in a foreign country with Englishmen there immediately establishes the fact that the people present are tourists and therefore, likely, persons of some means. Present at the beginning are Trench, the nephew of Lady Roxdale, and Cokane, a gentleman who is obsessed with propriety and all the inviolable rules of upper-class England, and the subject of their opening conversation is “appearance,” a not uncommon garden topic in Shaw’s plays. Cokane, in point of fact, encapsulates the very essence of many of Shaw’s gardens where appearances, acceptability, and proper conduct prevail (Mrs. Warren’s Profession being such an example). Cokane serves as the voice of conventional society in this particular garden. When Trench, who cares little for form and appearances, begins to sing a rousing drinking song, Cokane is scandalized and delivers a scalding reprimand to Trench: “In the name of common decency, Harry, will you remember that you are a Gentleman, and not a coster on Hampstead Heath on Bank
Holiday”; “either you travel as a gentleman, or you travel alone”; “I have been uneasy all the afternoon about what they [the other English couple] must think of us. Look at our appearance.” After Trench’s casual rejoinder, “what’s wrong with our appearance?” Cokane stresses, “how are they to know that you are well connected [emphasis added] if you do not shew it by your costume?” Trench concedes, “I suppose I ought to have brought a change.” With Cokane’s emphasis on social class, appearances, respectability, and proper conduct (“tact” is Cokane’s motto), the theme of the garden, as well as the play itself, is established. As shall be seen, through so many of Shaw’s plays, the garden is the place where the rules of respectable British society are most powerfully enforced and dramatized, a place where some people already fit in, where some are trying to fit in, where some, while trying to fit in, obviously do not belong, and a place from which some, for example, Vivie Warren, try to escape. It is a place of the ultimate socially acceptable test, as exemplified by Eliza Doolittle in Pygmalion when she passes as a duchess at the ambassador’s garden party.

Cokane presents the very epitome of British garden behavior: formal, proper, prudish, and rule-bound. When Trench, who ironically is the one with the upper-class connections, calls Cokane “Billy,” Cokane recoils: “Do drop calling me Billy in public, Trench. My name is Cokane. I am sure they were persons of consequence: you were struck with the distinguished appearance of the father yourself.” Later, Cokane, exposing his true values, asks, “how am I to preserve the respect of fellow travelers of position and wealth, if I am to be Billied at every turn?” Also, Cokane, ever the invoker of the aristocracy, turns to Trench, with no seeming motivation, and asks him, within hearing distance of the Sartoriuses, “I have often meant to ask you: is Lady Roxdale”—whose name also connotes a garden, or at least the idea of a pleasant place in nature—“your mother’s sister or your father’s,” and when Cokane, always knowledgeable about upper-class behavior, suggests that Lady Roxdale “looks forward to floating your wife in society in London” while Trench scoffs at the idea, Cokane tries to instruct him with, “you dont know the importance of these things; apparently idle ceremonial trifles, really the springs and wheels of a great aristocratic system.” Cokane, always the picture of politeness, affability, and sometimes archness, as though he himself were a member of the aristocracy, stresses “good manners,” “morals,” “tact,” and “delicacy! good taste! Savoir faire!” In the middle of the act, Sartorius and Cokane depart to visit a church,
during which time the audience discovers that Trench and Blanche have already conversed and are in the process of establishing a relationship and sealing it with a kiss, which Cokane witnesses. Alone with him, he to be rates Trench “with the severity of a judge”:

No, my dear boy. No, no. Never. I blush for you. I was never so ashamed in my life [. . .]. No, my dear fellow, no, no. Bad taste, Harry, bad form! [. . .] She a perfect lady, a person of the highest breeding, actually in your arms [. . .]. Have you no principles, Trench? Have you no religious convictions? Have you no acquaintance with the usages of society?24

After Sartorius has requested that Trench receive letters from his family to the effect that Blanche would be acceptable to them, Cokane’s sense of etiquette and good breeding shows once again. He knows, for example, that Lady Roxdale will want to know what Sartorius’s wealth is derived from. When Trench tries to shrug off such issues, Cokane admonishes him once again: “When will you begin to get a little sense?” Trench asks him not to be “moral,” but Cokane reminds him of the rules, asking, “if you are going to get money with your wife, doesn’t it concern your family to know how that money was made?”25 Toward the end of the act, Shaw creates a tableau of Cokane composing a letter to Lady Roxdale on behalf of Trench, trying to put into the most diplomatic and polite language Trench’s situation with Blanche. The letter is completed in a meaningful scene of Sartorius dictating some of the words, symbolic of Sartorius’s powers of control and the dominance of his voice.

Scholars have of course been intrigued with the implications of Cokane’s name. McDowell offers that Cokane’s name suggests “a mindless hedonism deriving from a drug-induced lethargy and also a man who is at home in a world of illusion and false appearances, a dweller in the land of Cockaigne,”26 while Woodfield asserts that his name suggests “Cockaigne, the fabulous land of luxury and idleness, signifying what he represents.”27 But in a garden of aristocratic behavior, what is required is a narcotic to keep ugliness, disturbances, impoliteness, indiscretion, abrasiveness, and real truth at bay, and the drugs that provide this are tact, good taste and manners, delicacy, politeness, diplomacy, and proper conduct, all of which Cokane is a master of. These drugs make social interaction function more gently, softening the harshness of the violations of their codes.
In this same garden of respectability where Cokane lounges, Sartorius dominates by his mere presence (as Blanche says, “everybody is afraid of papa: I’m sure I don’t know why”). Although Sartorius is not a member of the aristocracy, he is comfortable in a social setting and a garden because he has cultivated the manner of the upper class, the word gentleman being connected with him over a half-dozen times in the first act alone. It is pretense at its fullest, and the garden often is a place of great hypocritical practice. Shaw notes that Sartorius’s “incisive, domineering utterance and imposing style, with his strong aquiline nose and resolute clean-shaven mouth, give him an air of importance.” The impeccable details of his aristocratic dress, appropriate to his name and appearance, are significant: “He wears a light grey frock-coat with silk linings, a white hat, and a field-glass slung in a new leather case,” and, Shaw adds, is “formidable to servants, not easily accessible to anyone.” The message is clear: He is a man to whom appearance, and consequently acceptance, is tantamount, and the name “Sartorius” bespeaks the importance of clothing to him (this in ironic contrast to Trench, a member of the upper class, whose attitude toward dress is quite casual). In short, here and throughout the play, Sartorius behaves as though he is a member of the upper class, even though he is not. When Sartorius’s porter places the packages on a table and the waiter tells him that that table is already taken, Sartorius’s reaction is extreme and revelatory, speaking “severly” and “with fierce condescension.” When Cokane attempts to smooth things over, Sartorius arrogantly and “coldly turn[s] his back on him.” He mimics an attitude of privilege and haughtiness and is only too eager to display what titles he can, telling Cokane, “I am a vestryman.”

Through the rest of the garden scene, Sartorius displays his determination to gain acceptance through his powerful control, especially by means of Trench’s relationship with his daughter, Blanche. Shaw describes her as a “well-dressed, well-fed, good-looking, strong minded young woman, presentably ladylike,” a Pygmalion-like creation of Sartorius. Clearly, these two seek entrée into upper-class British gardens, even though their present search is in a foreign garden. In due time, it becomes clear that Trench and Blanche have an attraction to each other, but Sartorius will not let it advance until he has assurance that he will get what he wants. When Sartorius asks Trench if there will be any objections from his family, Trench demurs that his family has nothing to do with it. Sartorius’s response reveals his position, his determination, and the importance of upper-class acceptance to
him: “Excuse me sir: they have a great deal to do with it.” Trench assures him that she will be accepted, but Sartorius says, “that won’t do for me, sir,” and “I must have a guarantee on my side that she will be received on equal terms by your family.” He requires a guarantee that Trench’s relatives, belonging to a social class who, in Sartorius’s words, “turn their backs on newcomers whom they may not think quite good enough for them,” will not do the same to Blanche. Trench is uncertain how to guarantee such an attitude, but Sartorius knows: “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.” This is the crux of the play; it is Sartorius’s prime motivation, and the essence and symbolic meaning of the garden. Sartorius has pulled himself up from extreme poverty by making a fortune in slum dwellings, and now he craves nothing more in the world than for him and his daughter to be accepted by upper-class society, and it begins in and is defined by the garden.

On the subject of Sartorius’s control, several critics have complained that “the entire play is founded on the vast coincidence that on a continental vacation the youthful hero, Dr. Harry Trench, should meet and become desperately infatuated with the daughter of a great slum landlord,” who manages the very property from which his income derives. Woodfield calls it “stretching both coincidence and probability; that the father has a connection to the hero through his aunt stretches both even further.” This is looking through the wrong end of the lens. Sartorius is not the kind of man who leaves things to chance; it is just as possible, and more than likely, that Sartorius planned this trip with the full knowledge that Trench would be on the same trip, on the same boat, and staying in the same hotel, hoping that nature would take its course, and what appears to be a coincidence may well not be a chance encounter at all. As Sartorius himself tells Cokane, “the truth is, Mr Cokane, I am quite well acquainted with Dr Trench’s position and affairs [emphasis added]; and I have long desired to know him personally.” By his own admission, Sartorius keeps a close eye on Lady Roxdale’s family and its “affairs.” It is more believable and likely that he has created this situation, and, as would be typical of him, Sartorius may have carefully calculated and anticipated everything: the “chance” meeting of Blanche and Trench, Trench’s objection to Sartorius’s source of income (even though he could not have foreseen Lickcheese’s informing Trench about Sartorius’s business, he could have surmised that
with the ongoing parliamentary and clerical investigations and the publication of the “blue book,” sooner or later Trench would find out), Trench’s complicity in the business, and Blanche’s reaction.

In a performance of the play, one other graphic depiction of Sartorius’s almost puppetlike control, as mentioned previously, is created by the tableau of Sartorius dictating a letter to Cokane, who is writing the letter for Trench that will be sent under Trench’s name to Lady Roxdale, who will actually be hearing Sartorius’s words when she reads it. Such are the convolutions necessitated by the deceptions of garden behavior. The scene ends with Sartorius reading the letter, which he has just dictated, although Cokane finished it, “nodding gravely over it with complete approval.”42 The scene displays Shaw’s mastery of irony and performance values.

Aside from his desire to amass wealth, Sartorius’s most powerful longing is to have his daughter, Blanche, accepted into upper-class society, and his efforts have been designed to create a young lady who will be at home in the English garden environment, even though he appears, through his determined insistence (the old “reaction formation” principle), insecure about her acceptability. When Blanche is reluctant to visit yet another church, Sartorius convinces her by reminding her, “I would like you to see everything. It is part of your education,”43 a point on which she will not cross him: “Oh, my education! Very well, very well: I suppose I must go through with it.”44 He has gone to great pains and expense to make her well educated and well-bred. When Sartorius gives his reasons to Trench about his need for proof of acceptance by Trench’s family, he makes a revealing point when he says, “I am resolved that my daughter shall approach no circle in which she will not be received with the full consideration to which her education and her breeding—entitle her.”45 The depth of Sartorius’s feelings on the subject is clear. And again, a few lines later, Shaw’s directions establish the importance to Sartorius of Blanche’s status when Trench says, “Blanche is a lady: that’ll be good enough for them,” (meaning his family), and Sartorius, “moved,” says, “I am glad you think so.”46 Blanche reveals her knowledge of the rules of polite society when she scolds Trench for speaking “to me without any introduction,”47 and “you had no right to speak to me that day on board the steamer.”48 But her true self lurks just below the surface. Her hypocrisy is unintentionally revealed when Trench reminds her, “it was you who spoke to me,”49 and again later when Trench says, “here they [Sartorius