

Hobson's choice, by harold brighthouse

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Hobson's choice is an interesting and enjoyable play, which uses a fair amount of comedy to keep the audience engaged. The audience can really connect with the characters, as they are very realistic and are placed in real-life situations. The comic element comes in regularly, in the form of just one-off, funny lines, or even complete comic situations and themes.

Although the play is set in late 19th century, the themes are still relevant today, which shows that although some things may evolve over time, people and their opinions are still the same, and so the audience can relate to the play, which is another reason why Hobson's Choice is so enjoyable.

"Hobson's Choice" is proverbial, stemming from the 17th century; to have "Hobson's choice" is to have no choice at all. I think that understanding this is a key element in understanding the play, as all of the themes of the play arise from one of the main five characters having "Hobson's choice".

The play is set in late 19th century Salford, which although it does not tell you in the play, the audience can guess immediately, just from the setting. The play begins in Hobson's Boot Shop, which is a clue straight away, as boot shops are not very common today, and have been replaced by shoe shops and trainer shops. Another clue are "the cane chairs" in front of the counter, where "the ordinary people sit for fitting", because today benches would be placed randomly around the store for everyone to sit on. There is a separate room "for very important customers", but today they would use the benches, the same as everyone else, or go to a different store. Another clue would be the door leading to the house, implying that the Hobsons live there, which is not so commonly practiced today.

If these were not enough clues, the objects inside the shop all suggest late 19th century; for example, "the gas brackets in the windows and walls", and "the clogs on exhibit in the windows". Alice and Vickey's actions and dress also suggest a late 19th century setting, as Alice, only 23, is knitting - not an activity which is commonly pursued by the modern young woman - and the pair are wearing aprons for working in a shoe shop.

Although Hobson's Choice consists of four Acts, each of these is comprised of several little scenes. Although these are not official, Brighouse has made it obvious that they are there, and they are often marked by the entrance and exit of a character.

Brighouse teaches the audience a lot about his characters in the first Act, and he sets up their personalities and roles to make it easier to digest when their true functions are revealed, and right from the beginning of the play, Brighouse gives the audience an idea as to what the characters of Hobson and his three daughters - Maggie, Alice and Vickey - are like. Maggie is a bossy, moody character, and Brighouse uses the first scene to introduce this to the audience in a conversation between her and Alice; the audience can grasp these characteristics in Maggie from her sharp, snappy response to Alice. For example;

" Alice: I hoped it was father going out.

" Maggie: It isn't".

Maggie is very blunt and matter-of-fact when she is talking to her sisters, as she proves again when she says " He got up late", in response to another

statement from Alice about their father. Brighouse has chosen subtle, yet effective, methods in broadening the audience's knowledge of the characters in Hobson's Choice early in the play, and the characters of Maggie, Alice and Vickey are no exception to this. From the fact that Maggie is reading an account book, whilst Alice and Vickey are knitting and reading, the audience know instantly that Maggie is the one bothered about the business out of the three of them, and that Alice and Vickey would probably rather be out doing other things.

Maggie is blunt in every aspect of her life, and it is traits like this found in all of the characters in Hobson's Choice that adds to the play's honesty - none of the characters are perfect, but they do try their best to use their flaws and traits to their advantage. Brighouse uses a metaphor to show Maggie's bluntness in a conversation between Maggie and her two sisters. Maggie says " See that slipper with a fancy buckle on it to make it look pretty? Courting's like that my lass. All glitter and no use to nobody", and this sums up what Maggie thinks about marriage, love and life. In terms of marriage and love, Brighouse is telling the audience that Maggie doesn't want to date somebody first, she just wants to marry them.

Also, she is not interested in a fancy man, with expensive clothes, lots of money and good looks as it is " only glitter"; she would rather find somebody genuine, marry him, and then get to know him. Already, Brighouse is building reason for why Maggie would want to marry a man such as this, so the audience can look back on this, and it will help them to understand why Maggie and Willie, at first glance such an unlikely couple, are together. Again, the fact that Maggie is very honest in how she speaks <https://assignbuster.com/hobsons-choice-by-harold-brighouse/>

helps to convey the way that Brighouse has created such an honest view of family life.

As the audience have already learnt, Maggie is very bossy, and so Brighouse has used the next scene to confirm this. It also introduces Albert, so that the audience know that he likes Alice, and to introduce the shop, and show the audience that Vickey and Alice are not interested in it.

The scene shows Maggie confronting Alice's boyfriend, Albert Prosser. They all know why Albert has come into the shoe shop - to visit his 'girlfriend', Alice - but they all put on a front, and act like he is a normal customer coming in to buy some boots; it becomes clear that Albert really does not want to purchase anything. Maggie, however, keeping up the pretence that Albert has come in to actually shop, starts forcing Albert to buy something, so he pretends that he has come in for some shoe laces. To his surprise, Maggie asks Albert, "What size do you take in boots?", to which he innocently answers, "Does that matter to the laces?". Albert does not realise what Maggie is getting at, until Maggie replies, "It matters to the boots", and before he knows it, Albert is being pushed down into one of the seats and having his boots taken off and replaced with new ones.

Brighouse also impresses early that Alice and Vickey are very fashionable, which Hobson is not very keen on; he wants his daughters to look nice but smart and ladylike. For example, Vickey and Alice "had new dresses on last week", which shows that they want to look good, but Hobson says "I like to see my daughters look nice. That's why I pay Mr Tudsbury, the draper, 10 a year a head to dress you proper. It pleases the eye and it's good for the

trade". Clearly he doesn't like his daughters parading around making fools of themselves and him, which is exactly what he thinks they are doing by dressing like that. Brighouse shows this again, when Hobson euphemises "You were going down Chapel Street with a hump added to nature behind you", which shows that he is uncomfortable with the situation and the way his daughters are dressing, as he is playing around with what he wants to say, because he does not know quite how to say it.

Later in this conversation between Hobson and his two youngest daughters, Alice says "it is not immodest, father. It's the fashion to wear bustles", which shows that Alice and Vicky are fashionable, but their father is not concerned by this, only that they are dressing in this manner, which he describes as "uppishness" "the occupation of fools and such as have no brains". This conversation also shows the age gap between Hobson and his daughters, and the fact that Alice and Vicky are still being controlled by their father, despite the fact that they are 23 and 21, links with one of the themes of the play - the role of women in society. With reference to the title, this is a great example of the typical, honest situations that Brighouse has used throughout *Hobson's Choice*, which is why it is such an honest, realistic play. It is because the characters and the situations that they find themselves in are so realistic that the play comes across as so honest.

Straight away, Brighouse also lets the audience know that Hobson likes a drink, which is something that features throughout the play. Brighouse does this by introducing Hobson through his daughters, where they discuss that he has a hangover from a Mason's Meeting the previous evening. Again, this is another honest situation, and one which makes *Hobson's Choice* that bit

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easier for the audience to relate with and to connect to. If the play was not honest, the audience would not be able to relate with the characters or their situations.

The audience can also tell that the girls are scared of their father, as they don't seem to be able to do anything until he is gone, for fear that he will tell them off, despite the fact that they are 21, 23 and 30. One example of this is that Alice says she is expecting someone, which is clear to the audience is a man she is courting, but she does not want her father to know that she is courting.

One reason why the play is so honest and easy to believe is the way Brighouse has delicately crafted and evolved his characters, allowing the audience to feel a strong relationship between themselves and the characters. An excellent example of this is the character of Willie. At the start of Act One, Willie seems a very timid character - he knows he's neither clever nor important, and this comes across in both his attitude and his behaviour. For example, when talking to Mrs Hepworth, she says, "Take that", to which Willie "bends down rather expecting 'that' to be a blow", so rather than stand up to her when he is expecting to be hit, Willie cowers out of the way, but he "finds she is holding out a visiting card".

Willie is very quick to do as he is told, and Brighouse demonstrates this to the audience on the first occasion that we meet this character. In this scene, Mrs Hepworth wants to see Willie; Tubby just had to call Willie's name down the trap door and he appeared instantly. It is clear to the audience that Willie is a talented boot maker, as Mrs Hepworth is so pleased with her boots that

she asks specifically to see Willie, so that she can "praise him to his face". However, it seems at this point in the play that boot making may be his only talent, as when Mrs Hepworth instructs Willie to read the card she has given him, it is revealed that he can't even read properly. Willie is dominated by everyone, including not just Mrs Hepworth, but also Maggie, Hobson, Ada, Alice and Vickey.

Brighouse uses the dominant character of Maggie to help Willie come out of his shell, and helps him both socially and intellectually, and Brighouse turns Willie into a much stronger and more dominant character, not unlike Maggie herself. The transformation of Willie includes him becoming able to stand up for himself, speak his mind and Maggie even teaches him to read; he stands straighter, taller, holds his head high, looks people in the eye, speaks with a stronger, more confident voice, learns to speak his mind, is much more confident in his abilities and even dresses smarter. An example of him becoming a stronger character and standing up for himself is when he tells Hobson "Don't let us be too long about this."

"You've kept me waiting now a good while and my time's valuable. I'm busy at my shop". This sounds like something Maggie would say, and without pausing for breath Willie manages to put Hobson in his place, and let him know that Willie means business. Another example is where Willie tells Hobson "You've no right to expect I care whether you sink or swim", which actually makes Willie out to be quite a nasty character, but Maggie points out that he is going a bit too far. This "abuse of power" shows that Willie is new to being able to tell people what to do, and he is playing around trying to find his boundaries.

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Another reason why Hobson's Choice is so honest and easy to believe is because Brighouse has made the focus of the play the characters rather than any individual action or event, which means that the audience can really relate to and sympathise with the characters. It is for this reason that all of the characters in Hobson's Choice have a function; they are all there for a reason to support the roles of the central five - Hobson, Maggie, Willie, Alice and Vickey. Jim Heeler is there for Hobson to confide in, so the audience all know what he is really thinking and what he is going to do next. Mrs Hepworth - the only real customer in the play - is used to introduce the character of Willie, and also later finances Willie and Maggie's business.

Ada Figgins's brief appearance shows the contrast the Maggie represents to Willie. Tubby is used later on to show the deterioration of Hobson's business. Albert Prosser and Fred Beenstock are used to help Maggie in plotting against her father. Finally, Dr MacFarlane effectively sets up the final confrontation between Maggie, Willie and Hobson by prescribing Hobson with the necessary cure for his diagnosed weaknesses.

Brighouse has cleverly disguised these character's functions by giving them a more direct reason to appear when they do. Heeler appears as Hobson's friend, whilst Mrs Hepworth is first introduced as a customer. Ada, obviously, comes into the shop to bring Willie his lunch, and is then somewhat dumped by Willie in the process! Tubby is the other worker at Hobson's boot shop, and Albert and Fred are Alice and Vickey's boyfriends. Finally, Dr MacFarlane appears simply to diagnose Hobson. This multi-functioning allows Brighouse to create a realistic play, as the characters seem to be innocent at first glance, yet the play soon subtly reveals their true functions.

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Not only is Hobson's Choice such an honest and realistic play, but it also has a lot of comic elements. The play is often referred to as a " Lancashire comedy", as the language and dialect plays a big part in the play's comical elements and the tone of the play. The dialect is informal, and characters often speak using slang words and phrases, such as " our Maggie", 'em", " aye" and " eh?" The character's credibility stems from the realistic, naturalistic manner in which they speak. An example of this is Willie's final, defiant speech at the end of Act One. The sharpness of the dialogue itself would be a source of humour, but it forms a constituent part of the greater comedy arising from the interaction between Willie, Hobson and Maggie. This scene between these three characters is just an example of the humour that Brighouse has included within Hobson's Choice.

Another particularly entertaining element of Hobson's Choice is a conversation between Maggie and Willie. Maggie asks Willie, " When are you going to leave Hobson's?" to which Willie replies, " Leave Hobson's? I - I thought I gave satisfaction". This is comical as Willie is shocked because he thinks that Maggie is wanting rid of him. The comical element continues when Maggie, in the same conversation, tells Willie that she is going to marry him. The audience would find this entertaining for several reasons; first Maggie is not asking Willie to marry her, she is telling him that he is going to, and the fact that a woman is telling a man what to do, especially something as serious as this, is comic. Also, for Maggie, the daughter of Hobson, the shop owner, to want Willie, a mere worker at her father's shop, to marry her is comical in itself. It is also funny because Maggie is insulting

Willie and acting like she thinks that she is better than him, yet she is demanding to marry him!

Another way memorable comic event is when Maggie tells Ada that she is going to marry Willie. This allows Brighouse to entertain the audience by overturning the convention in drama of two men fighting over a woman by showing Maggie and Ada battling for Willie. This event is also comic as neither Willie nor Ada have any say or control over the situation, despite the fact that 10 minutes previous, Maggie had nothing to do with Willie's social life at all!

Another comic situation presented in Hobson's Choice is later on in the play, where Hobson's daughters - previously scared of Hobson - are dictating to him what he is going to do, and they, together with Maggie and their partners manage to trick Hobson into handing them over 500 for Alice and Albert's wedding! What makes this even more comical is that Maggie manages to convince Hobson that it is he who has won, because he only had to give the couple 500 and not 1000!

Overall, I think that Brighouse has created a very honest view of family life, and the audience will really appreciate this. He has created a naturalistic setting, which requires no interaction or imagination from the audience to enhance the play, so the audience are a fourth wall audience, which is the contemporary equivalent of a modern audience watching a television soap. Brighouse has enhanced the play with regular comic moments to keep the audience engaged and entertained. The comic episodes are more amusing to a contemporary audience as a lot of them are based around contemporary

views and beliefs, such as a woman of 30 being too old to marry, therefore it would be harder for a modern audience to appreciate all of the comedy as well as a contemporary audience, but it is these contemporary views that are conveyed in the play that makes it so honest and realistic.