

Hypocrisy in mrs warren's profession



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In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, one of Shaw's central concerns is the hypocrisy of Late Victorian Society and the impact of this hypocrisy on human relationships. Accordingly this essay will discuss Shaw's literary presentation of social hypocrisy by showing how Shaw depicts hypocrisy as being responsible for the perpetuation of exploitation in capitalism, how hypocrisy poisons ties of kinship and family as well as how hypocrisy is pervasive and difficult to escape. Hypocrisy in the play can be thought of as the inability, or refusal of characters to live up to their professed ideals or virtues, and their attempts to conceal this moral shortcoming.

Shaw presents hypocrisy as responsible for the perpetuation of exploitation in Victorian England, a capitalist society. This is because mass hypocrisy engenders a fear of ostracisation from respectable society, which in turn makes people unwilling to speak out against real social ills. This is seen when Crofts lists numerous examples of public figures who survive off exploitation such as the 'Ecclesiastical Commissioners' who rent to 'publicans and sinners' and Crofts' 'brother the M. P.' who earns rent from a factory with '600 girls ... not one of them getting wages enough to live on.' The consecutive juxtaposition of respectable titles such as 'M. P.' who control exploitative ventures such as the 'factory' serves to create shock in the audience by exposing the behaviour of many Victorian public figures in a society where this was rarely discussed, thereby making the inability of the audience to speak out against such behaviour plain.' This thus demonstrates how social hypocrisy beyond the fourth wall contributes to exploitation. Moreover, the tone of Croft's admonition 'Come' to Vivie in the same passage is one of condescension, suggesting that Vivie, and by extension the

audience, is naïve if they do not know about the façade of public virtue concealing social ills. This in turn convicts the audience in the theatre of complicity in the exploitation through their unwillingness to speak out, since by refusing to admit naïveté to himself the member of the audience comes to the realisation that social ills are perpetuated by the hypocrisy of his own inaction. Moreover, the power of hypocrisy to perpetuate social ills is seen in Shaw's expose of society through Crofts' dialogue that 'society doesn't ask any inconvenient questions, and it makes short work of the cads who do.' Shaw's exposure of society draws a clear link between the inability of society to 'question' private behaviour and its complicity in perpetuating exploitation by making 'short work of' or ostracising those who do. In addition, the euphemism 'inconvenient questions' is itself an indictment of Victorian hypocrisy, because it refers to the questions about ugly and exploitative practices that are never asked. If such questions are 'inconvenient' Shaw suggests that society considers exploitation a convenience or feature of daily life. This suggests that despite society's supposed moral virtue, it is the hypocritical unwillingness to live up to these virtuous ideals that allows exploitation to continue. Thus, social hypocrisy is clearly linked to exploitation in Mrs Warren's Profession.

In Shaw's view, hypocrisy is also responsible for poisoning familial relationships. This is especially clear in the relationship between Mrs Warren and Vivie, whose mutual hypocrisy towards each other tears their relationship apart. Vivie's (ostensible) rejection of hypocrisy causes her to reject Mrs Warren as her mother, because of Mrs Warren's hypocrisy. Mrs Warren herself clearly displays hypocrisy. She exclaims 'Oh, the hypocrisy of

the world makes me sick!' Here, she uses melodrama as shown by the exclamation of the stressed ' Oh' to emphasize Mrs. Warren's supposed rejection of society's unwillingness to admit that marrying for money is in principle the same as prostitution, and the hyperbole inherent in ' makes me sick' exaggerates her distaste for people who do not plainly admit to the ' wrong' they do by comparing this to disease. However, Mrs Warren herself is guilty of this kind of hypocrisy because she wilfully conceals the fact that she is continuing her business of prostitution from Vivie in the fear that it will make Vivie less of a ' respectable woman,' a use of euphemism to suggest that Vivie will not be respected or rejected by society as a pariah were Mrs Warren's profession to be discovered. This suggests that Mrs Warren is not as ready to openly admit to the realities of her society as she claims, and suggests that she only tells Vivie this as a means of currying her favour by playing on her distaste for hypocrisy. Vivie eventually sees through this when Mrs Warren's current profession is revealed and she rejects her mother's attitude by saying ' I should have not lived one life and believed in another.' This is a use of aphorism to indicate that she rejects Mrs Warren because of her hypocrisy, leading to the final trauma of rejection in the play. However, there is a large element of hypocrisy in Vivie's rejection, because she is not as ready to face up to the realities of her society as she purports. This is evident in her condemnation of Crofts with ' I hardly find you worth thinking about at all now,' despite her supposed admiration of those, such as Crofts, who are ready to admit that they embrace what society considers wrong. This suggests that Mrs Warren is rejected not because Vivie is truly a person of integrity but because she is afraid of Mrs Warren, the reminder of the darker and exploitative side of society, being near. She thus rejects Mrs

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Warren to preserve her sense of righteous detachment from society. Thus, Shaw presents hypocrisy as being responsible for the destruction of family relationships because hypocrisy is founded on the fear of social exclusion.

Hypocrisy in the play is also portrayed as pervading all levels of society, regardless of education or social status. As we have seen, Vivie's attitudes towards her mother are hypocritical. This hypocrisy is apparent despite Vivie having gone to 'Newnham,' the name of a prestigious Cambridge college, a sign of high education which was commonly held by Victorian society to make an individual more refined or 'respectable,' as Mrs Warren herself puts it. However, Shaw debunks the myth that education necessarily entails acceptance and concern for those of lower status by exposing Vivie's own hypocrisy towards her mother's upbringing. This is seen by Shaw's use of stage directions, where we are directly told that Vivie is 'jarred and antagonized' by the 'sound of the slums' in Mrs Warren's voice. Shaw thus creates an 'antagonized' or hostile tone when Vivie responds to her mother, showing her inherent discomfort with her mother's upbringing despite her level of education. Moreover, Vivie uses this tone to question her mother 'do you think I will spare you?.' Here, the word 'spare,' part of the semantic field of war and death, suggests a new harshness to Vivie's voice after being reminded of her mother's plebeian upbringing. It is thus strongly suggested that at least part of Vivie's decision to reject her mother stems from an inherent classist bias that she retains despite her high level of education. This supports Shaw's message in the play that hypocrisy is pervasive at all levels of society, and difficult to escape because it is unconscious.

In totality, Shaw forwards a few main ideas regarding hypocrisy: that hypocrisy sustains exploitation, that hypocrisy poisons familial relationships and that hypocrisy is socially pervasive and therefore difficult to escape. As has been shown, this is successfully achieved by Shaw's masterful portrayal of the duality of many of the play's characters and his exposure of their dark, subconscious motivations.