

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.703 Studies in Drama: Too Hot to Handle: Forbidden Plays in Modern America
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

The last bits of dialogue from Act 2 of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* reveal many intimacies about the play's two central women characters: Mrs. Kitty Warren and her daughter, Vivie. After a close reading of the selection, we are suddenly privy to insights into Mrs. Warren that she herself may not even be aware of. Readers also glimpse into the psyche of the younger Warren, one that, upon careful analysis, we see is rather tormented. This pivotal moment between mother and daughter takes on greater meaning when viewed in the context of the play as a whole, and simultaneously clarifies and enhances the play's ending.

At the bottom of page 31, Mrs. Warren shares with her daughter a lesson on the way in which women- legitimately proper or not- are expected to act in society, philosophizing that "Women have to pretend to feel a great deal that they don't feel." Even in this short excerpt, Mrs. Warren inadvertently gives readers a prime example of what she means. When Vivie asks if she is not ashamed of what she has done, Mrs. Warren replies, "Well, of course, dearie, it's only good manners to be ashamed of it". She goes on to mention Liz and how she was so ladylike. Then, as if the thought of her sister necessitated an involuntary comparison between the two of them, she realizes that she "never was a bit ashamed [of what she did], actually." So familiar with having to wear the guise of an acceptable woman, Mrs. Warren dons the costume automatically, even in her own home and when speaking to her own daughter. It is only when she compares herself to a true lady that she realizes that this particular front she is putting on for Vivie is also a façade.

This façade, however, is not a sign of insincerity, but rather is a sign of the times. Mrs. Warren does not deceive others because she enjoys pulling the wool over their eyes, but because the world demands that she do so in order to protect herself and, most importantly, protect her

daughter. For Mrs. Warren and Vivie to be able to function in society, they must first be *accepted* by society. Such acceptance, which in reality is no more than a tolerant “blind eye”, would never have been granted had Mrs. Warren been forthright about her profession. Rules are made to be broken, yes, but first those rules have to be acknowledged and, to some extent, followed. Mrs. Warren first had to learn how society works, then she could attempt to live her life as freely as possible within those constraints. What Mrs. Warren found was that society has surprisingly fewer hard and fast rules than one would think. There are ways one should behave in private, of course, but if one shows some sort of shame for behaving otherwise, many transgressions turn from being condemnable to merely reproachable. This leeway applies only to one's private affairs; there is no such forgiveness for public debauchery.

If Mrs. Warren had been completely honest and up front about her private life, effectively bringing what was inside out, she would have been immediately ostracized. No decent person wants to associate with or even know of the existence of a prostitute procurer because that means there are people who want a prostitute procured. Since this procurement does not come without a hefty fee, it is most likely that these people, these clients of Mrs. Warren, are society people. Society in no way wants to admit that one (several) of its own have fallen into disgrace. Faced with acknowledging their own duplicity or corraling it and hiding it away, people- of means or not- almost always choose the latter. And so Mrs. Warren, and by association Vivie, would most definitely have been relegated to the boondocks of good society.

Bt if their fates are so inextricably linked, why should Mrs. Warren have lied to Vivie? Couldn't Mrs. Warren have brought Vivie into her confidence once she was of age, once she could understand the reasons behind the life her mother chose? After a heart to heart, couldn't mother and daughter have walked into the sunset like a modern day Bonnie and Clyde, outlaws

in an unfair world, end scene? Well, no. To begin with, Mrs. Warren would never have wanted Vivie to be a part of her other life. She did not want her daughter to bear any of the burden of her mother's society inflicted shame. She didn't want Vivie to have to live the same dishonest life she is forced to live. She wanted, as the play says, for Vivie to be able to go to university and get high marks, all the while remaining pure and untouched so that her future could be full of all the opportunities that Mrs. Warren never had. As it turns out, Mrs. Warren is eventually forced to tell Vivie the truth and, unfortunately, that goes quite poorly, perhaps because Vivie had been lied to for so long.

If Vivie despises being lied to, her mother also dislikes lying. In the middle of the passage, Mrs. Warren admits that she "can't stand saying one thing when everyone knows [she] means another." Mrs. Warren will later pronounce that everyone more or less knows the business she is in, and thus the entire society- "everyone" if you will- has been complicit in her brothel's existence. But if she truly feels what she asserts to Vivie, then why does she only reveal the whole truth about herself in (what she assumed to be) the sanctity and safety of her daughter's confidence? If everyone knows that her business affairs are not quite legitimate, then according to her confession, Mrs. Warren should have stopped feigning innocence long ago. It is interesting that she chose to say when "everyone" knows that she means something different. This "everyone" is, given later information, shorthand for everyone *else*. It is not that she is having a moral dilemma within herself; she is just keeping up outward appearances.

While Mrs. Warren "cannot stand" living a double life by deluding others, she refuses outright to live a life of self delusion. Meaning, she will go along living a double life for society, but she won't try to rationalize her behavior to herself. She does indeed mind holding one viewpoint in her mind and espousing another. That is why, as soon as she recognizes that she

wasn't ashamed, she corrects herself. So, after a close reading of this exchange between Mrs. Warren and her daughter, readers can see that Vivie was somewhat unjustified in saying to her mother, at the end of the play, "I should not have lived one life and believed in another" (p. 55). Because, as shown here, Mrs. Warren did live and believe in the same life, she just projected another for the benefit of the outside world and, indeed, for Vivie herself. Vivie cannot recognize this distinction because she is unable to separate her mother the prostitute procurer from her mother the lady. Her mother the lady is nothing more than a cardboard cutout. Mrs. Warren is not living that life at all, she's not even convincingly going through the motions. Mrs. Warren does not believe in her projected life either, in the sense that she does not believe women should be made to act that way, or that, if given the choice, she would be that way.

That same pivotal line that began our analysis of Mrs. Warren- women must pretend to feel a great deal that they don't feel- is revived and given new life because of the way the play ends. Vivie is ensconced in her figures, hunched over and secluded from the world, giving off the impression that she is content to have lost whatever little love, family, and acquaintance she had. Are readers supposed to believe this? Perhaps not. It seems as though Vivie too is acting out the role that she has been assigned by society. She is pretending to feel relief and joy at having finally broken off ties from her mother. But if we look at their last interaction on page 55, we see that Vivie's dialogue always ends with a question. A question begs for an answer, for a continuation of banter, and makes for a prolonged contact in hopes of staving off a goodbye. Indeed, it is Mrs. Warren who actually takes the scissors to the ties between mother and daughter, as it is she who says the first Good-bye (p. 54). And with that, all of Vivie's questions have effectively hit a brick wall, and all she can do is respond in kind.

But is this change from devoted daughter on page 32 to resigned loner by play's end unexpected? Perhaps even unfounded? If we return again to the end of Act 2, we are able to see hints of Vivie's upcoming decision. After speaking with her mother, Vivie says, "It is I who will not be able to sleep now." Her mind is ill at ease. But what is she pondering? Her mother's brothel? Her mother's upbringing? In the stage directions accompanying the aforementioned line, Vivie lights a candle and extinguishes a lamp, "darkening the room a great deal." Thus the room (and Mrs. Warren with it) are darkened and only Vivie is illuminated, by virtue of the recently lit candle. This shows that information she recently gleaned has shed some light on who she is as a person. It is a moment where she is thinking of herself and no one else. What Vivie would like to do, had she the means, is to live with and love her mother as she deserves, society and propriety be damned. Additionally, everyone else is left in the dark, literally and figuratively. Literally, the rest of the room is darkened and figuratively, only Vivie knows what is going through her mind, what her next actions will be. Unfortunately, Vivie realizes that she cannot act as if she is in a vacuum. She must "let in some fresh air before locking up." That is to say, she must consider others- her mother, Frank, society, and all the rest- before making up her mind on what to do.

Upon opening the cottage door, she finds that the landscape is bathed in the radiance of the moonlight. That the night is bright and clear and not dark and dank shows that, to Vivie at least, the outer world is a thing of beauty. To Mrs. Warren on the other hand, society is a malevolent place from which one constantly needs protection, lest you "catch your death of cold from the night air." That she precedes this by saying "Take care" shows that Mrs. Warren feels that, in order to avoid the evils of society, you have to be very mindful of the way you present yourself and the way society sees you. In order to do this, you need to have a carefully

Mrs. Warren's Profession Close Reading Revision

constructed and tended to demeanor, like the one Mrs. Warren wears. To Vivie, this outlook is clearly “nonsense.” She values society much more than her mother does. So much so, in fact, that her mother’s denigrating comments about it are enough to spur swift change in Vivie’s emotions towards her: from admiration to “contempt”. It is this contempt that will again flare up in the play’s ending scene. And so we see that the reason Vivie found herself unable to sleep had very little to do with her mother directly- she was not ruminating on her mother’s business or childhood. Never once do the stage directions say that the light bathed Vivie and Mrs. Warren, or Mrs. Warren alone. The light shone on different combinations of Vivie and the outside, suggesting that Vivie was thinking of herself, society, and her place in society. Vivie’s thoughts do not always so easily trump her emotions. She is not always able to keep her feelings in accord with her rationale. When the two come head to head with each other, she seeks to doff her emotions in favor of her intellectual conclusions. For example, the end of her conversation with her mother at the end of Act 2 is extremely lovey dovey and overflowing with emotion. It is roughly analogous to the overt flirting and coddling that Vivie engages in with Frank at his home. Neither of those two cooing scenes are in accordance with Vivie’s thinking, so she must rid herself of them. In order to do that fully, in order to rid herself of even the temptation, she must also rid herself of the people. So when, at the end of the play, Vivie is left all by her lonesome, readers are not entirely shocked or surprised, if at all.

It’s almost as if Vivie were “trying out” being a standard, typical woman at the end of Act 2. She loves and shows deference towards her mother. But that she is so easily vexed when her mother’s view differs from hers on something as benign as the weather shows that the role of a traditional woman is not the lifestyle for her. This realization is echoed throughout the play in her interactions with Frank. The exchange between Vivie and her mother also helps explain why,

Mrs. Warren's Profession Close Reading Revision

during the climax in Act 3, Mrs. Warren is so hysterically obsessed with her Vivie's duties to her as a daughter. It is because Mrs. Warren has spent her entire adult life doing her own duties as a mother, even if it meant betraying who she is as a person. Why has she had to supposedly, "live one life and believe in another", as Vivie claims? Not for herself, but for her daughter. Mrs. Warren no longer longs for a place in decent society: she spends the bulk of her free time with people like Praed and Crofts, hardly pillars of society. Instead, she uses her dirty money to provide Vivie with the opportunity to surround herself with good company (if only she would choose to do so!) and the means with which to live a life unbridled by want.