



A Brief Analysis of the Irony and Sarcasm in Mrs. Warren’s Profession

ZHENG Chang^{[a],*}

^[a]College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 26 December 2015; accepted 22 March 2016

Published online 26 April 2016

Abstract

The motivation and purpose of choosing this topic are to probe and investigate George Bernard Shaw’s ironic and sarcastic tone in the play, Mrs. Warren’s Profession, and how irony and sarcasm are skillfully used by George Bernard Shaw to reveal the theme of prostitution as an antisocial profession and the society’s complicity in its own evils.

To have a better analysis of the formal features: Irony and sarcasm, this study tries to approach this play from a formalistic perspective, to add something to our understanding of the writing techniques of this play with the assistance of the methodology of “close reading”.

The term irony and sarcasm are in detailed explanation of examples extracted from the play. Four major types of irony are discussed in this article: verbal irony, situational irony, attitudinal irony and dramatic irony. Verbal irony in its most bitter and destructive form becomes sarcasm, in which the speaker condemns someone by pretending to praise him or her.

Through the analysis, the article finds out that how the four types of irony together with sarcasm, work together to help author’s characterization and bring out the theme of the play: hypocrisy and injustice of the social reality and its complicity in its own evils.

Irony and sarcasm are two of the major writing techniques Bernard Shaw has adopted in this play. The versatile use of them can help forge his dramas, combine moral passion and intellectual conflicts, experiment with symbolic farce, and bring into the spotlight the contemporary issues. Irony and sarcasm are equal to his sharp pen, therefore the investigation

on irony and sarcasm can benefit us both as readers and writers.

Key words: Mrs. Warren’s Profession; Formalistic perspective; Close reading; irony; Sarcasm

Zheng, C. (2016). A Brief Analysis of the Irony and Sarcasm in Mrs. Warren’s Profession . *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(4), 39-43. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8299> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8299>

INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Warren’s Profession was written by George Bernard Shaw, one of history’s most proliferate and versatile writers, in 1893. This play was once banned by the censor as obscene from the British stage by the censor, allegedly for its presentation of sex but actually for its presentation of business. However, It is one of the most powerful and shocking plays, dealing with the theme of prostitution as big business in bourgeois society, which gives a sharp and bitter attack upon the very foundation of the so-called “civilized” capitalist world (Cheng, 2000, p.438).

The motivation and purpose of choosing this topic is to probe and investigate Bernard Shaw’s ironic and sarcastic tone in this play, and how irony and sarcasm are skillfully used to reveal the theme of prostitution as an antisocial profession and the society’s complicity in its own evils.

Many researchers have focused on the theme of this play, and have criticized this play from a sociological point of view, but few researches on the stylistic features of this play. Therefore this study tries to approach this play from a stylistic perspective to add something to our understanding of the writing techniques of this play with the assistance of the methodology of “close reading” by the school of formal critics. The term irony and sarcasm are in detailed explanation of examples extracted from the

play. Hopefully, the study can benefit us both as readers and writers.

1. LITERARY REVIEW

Laurence States (1970) that Shaw's third Unpleasant Play, Mrs. Warren's Profession (1893), reveals his feminist stance as he portrays the successful brothel-keeper as making a practical career choice in a society that underpays and undervalues women. From Mrs. Warren's perspective, marriage is prostitution:

The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. If she's in his own station of life, let her make him marry her; but if she's far beneath him she cant expect it. (Lawrence, 1970)

Holroyd States (1988) that Shaw uses the socially disreputable profession as a metaphor for the way in which society actually conducts its business. In Mrs. Warren's Profession, Shaw directed his corrective pen toward the fiction of "clean" moneymaking and exposed, through the metaphor of prostitution, capitalism's coupling of gender, money, sex, and freedom disguised by middle-class "family values".

Powell States (1998) Mrs Warren's profession would have pleased some new women with its straightforward linkage of prostitution and marriage, but its representation of Vivie Warren surely would have been problematic. Not only is she a caricature of the New Woman with her manly dress, bone-crushing handshake, but her uncritical focus on working and making money in a capitalist and sexist economy makes her no more appealing than her notorious mother, an underworld entrepreneur who owns a chain of brothels, but has thought long and hard about what she does, and why.

Marker States (1998) that by contrast, the greater depth of passion to be felt in Mrs. Warren's Profession, the last and most effective of the Plays Unpleasant, sounds an entirely new note in Shaw's dramatic writing. In his long, argumentative Author's Apology in the Stage Society edition of the play in 1902, he still maintains staunchly "that only in the problem play is there any real drama", hence allowing "no future now for any drama without music except the drama of thought" (Marker, 1998, p.115).

Concerning dramatic irony, Mrs. Warren's Profession is an "unpleasant" play and hence also a "problem" play, in the sense that it is serious rather than frivolous in intent, is again concerned with social corruption (in this case prostitution), and is determined to fasten the blame for such vice not on the individual (the brothel madam) but on a (male capitalistic) social system that fosters it. This being said, however, there is nothing "cold" or "tame" of Vivie Warren's emotional confrontation with the truth about the nature of her mother's profession. The real point at issue for Shaw is that the crucial process of her disillusionment must not be allowed to degenerate into the sham sentiment of melodrama, as Shaw explained in a letter

to Golding Bridge, a young critic, "The drama, of course, lies in the discovery and its consequences" (Shaw, 1955).

The previous studies have pointed out that Mrs. Warren's Profession, the last and most effective of Shaw's Plays Unpleasant, sounds an entirely new note in his dramatic writing. It is different from the melodramatic human emotions, the Victorian romantic stage morality, for there is no hysteria and suicide-committing in his play.

For the play itself, it portrays the successful brothel-keeper as making a practical career choice in a society that underpays and undervalues women, using the socially disreputable profession as a metaphor for the way in which society actually conducts its business and also the straightforward linkage of prostitution and marriage.

These researches have tried to link irony and sarcasm directly to the theme, which is obviously true to what Shaw intends. However, among them, very few focus on irony and sarcasm as formal elements.

Then the purpose of conducting this research is to probe and investigate Bernard Shaw's ironic and sarcastic tone in this play, and how irony and sarcasm are skillfully used to reveal the theme of prostitution as an antisocial profession and the society's complicity in its own evils.

Irony as a literary category can be further subdivided into: verbal irony, situational irony, attitudinal irony, and dramatic irony. Therefore, this research tries to explain how the four types of irony work together to achieve the ultimate theme of the play by extracting examples from this play. The best way to conduct research on irony is using formalistic criticism. Investigation on irony and sarcasm can be beneficial to us both as readers and writers.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ABOUT IRONY AND SARCASM

2.1 Introduction to Irony

Authors use irony pervasively to convey their ideas. But Irony is a diverse and often complex intellectual phenomenon difficult to define in a sentence or two. Irony and paradox are often the resolution of tension, confrontation of opposites (Guerin, 2004, p.90). Generally, irony makes visible a contrast between appearance and reality (Griffith, 1994, p.61). More fully and specifically, it exposes and underscores a contrast between: (a) what is and what seems to be, (b) between what is and what ought to be, (c) between what is and what one wishes to be, and (d) between what is and what one expects to be. Incongruity is the method of irony; opposites come suddenly together so that the disparity is obvious to discriminate readers. There are many kinds of irony, but four are common in literature.

2.2 Four Types of Irony

2.2.1 Verbal Irony

Verbal irony is perhaps the most common form of irony (Griffith, 1994, pp.61-62). Most people use or hear verbal

irony daily. In verbal irony, people say the opposite of what they mean.

Understatement and overstatement are two forms of verbal irony. In understatement, one minimizes the nature of something. In overstatement one exaggerates the nature of something. The reason for people using verbal irony is because verbal irony is more emphatic than a point-blank statement of the truth. It achieves its effect by reminding the hearer or reader of what the opposite reality is and thus providing a scale by which to judge the present reality. Verbal irony in its most bitter and destructive form becomes sarcasm, in which the speaker condemns someone by pretending to praise him or her.

2.2.2 Situational Irony

In situational irony, the situation is different from what common sense indicates it is, will be, or ought to be (Griffith, 1994, p.62). It is ironic, for example, that General George Patton should have lived through the thickest of tank battles during World War II and then, after the war, have been killed accidentally by one of his own men. It is ironic that someone we expect to be upright—a minister or judge—should be the most repulsive of scoundrels. Authors often use situational irony to expose hypocrisy and injustice.

2.2.3 Attitudinal Irony

Situational irony results from what most people expect, whereas attitudinal irony results from what one expects (Griffith, 1994, pp.62-63). In attitudinal irony, an individual thinks that reality is one way, when, in fact, it is a very different way.

2.2.4 Dramatic Irony

Dramatic irony occurs in plays when characters state something that they believe to be true that the audience knows to be false (Griffith, 1994, p.64). Although dramatic irony gets its name from drama, it can occur in all forms of literature. The key to existence of dramatic irony is the reader's foreknowledge of coming events. It intensifies characterization and makes you aware of tensions that you could not have known about during your initial reading.

3. LITERARY APPROACH

Formal criticism regards literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms.

To a formalist, a poem or story or a drama is not primarily a social, historical or biographical document, it is a literary work that can be understood only by reference to its intrinsic literary features, that is, those elements found in the text itself (Glola, 2006, p.879). Therefore, a formalist critic focuses on the words of a text rather than the facts about the author's life or the historical milieu in which it was written. The critic would pay special attention to the formal features of the text: the

style, structure, imagery, irony, sarcasm, tone and genre, etc..

These features, however, are usually not examined in isolation, because formalist critics believe that what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all of its elements work together to create the reader's total experience. A key method that formalists use to explore the intense relationship within a literary work is "close reading", a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text.

The purpose of close reading is to understand how various elements in a literary text work together to shape its effects on the reader. Since formalists believe that the various stylistic and thematic elements of literary work influence each other, these critics insist that form and content cannot be meaningfully separated. The complete interdependence of form and content is what makes a text literary.

4. DISCUSSION

This part of article analyzes the irony in Mrs. Warren's Profession, with examples extracted from it.

4.1 Verbal Irony and Sarcasm

As the theoretical framework has suggested that verbal irony is perhaps the most common form of irony (Griffith, 1994, pp.61-62). In verbal irony, people say the opposite of what they mean. Understatement and overstatement are two forms of verbal irony. The reason for people using verbal irony is because verbal irony is more emphatic than a point-blank statement of the truth. It achieves its effect by reminding the hearer or reader of what the opposite reality is and thus providing a scale by which to judge the present reality. Verbal irony in its most bitter and destructive form becomes sarcasm, in which the speaker condemns someone by pretending to praise him or her. Examples are as follows:

4.1.1 Praed's Anxiety to Please Vivie

Praed: [who has just unfolded his chair.] Oh, now do let me take that hard chair. I like hard chairs.

Vivie: So do I, sit down, Mr. Praed. (Act I)

This is a verbal irony, for Praed is not true to himself about hard chairs. The verbal irony, or overstatement indicates his anxiety to please Vivie, but it strikes Vivie as a sign of weakness of character on his part.

4.1.2 Vivie's Overstatement on Her Devotion to Mathematics

Vivie: I'm a more ignorant barbarian than any woman could possibly be who hadn't gone in for the tripos. (Act I)

Vivie is exaggerating her devotion to mathematics. She seems to concentrate on mathematics, and no time spent in law-tennis, eating, sleeping, cycling like other women who are in favor of those things.

4.1.3 Frank's Exaggeration of the Importance of Love

Frank: Do you know that all the most advanced thinkers are agreed that half the diseases of modern civilization are

due to starvation of the affections in the young. Now, I- (Act II)

Frank is exaggerating the lack of affections in the young, and this irony from overstatement help characterize Frank: a romance seeker.

4.1.4 Crofts's Hypocrisy

Crofts: But while we're in this world we're in it; and money is money. Nice day, isn't? (Act II)

Crofts: But my code is a simple one, and I think, a good one. Honor between man and man; fidelity between man and woman. (Act III)

Crofts: I am a safe man from the money point of view. (Act III)

Crofts: My wife shan't be troubled with business. (Act III)

When Crofts sees Frank and Vivie in the garden, playing merrily, he interrupts, and points out harshly that Frank is a good-for-nothing man, intending that Vivie should not marry him. The utterance "Nice day, isn't?" actually mocks the stupidity of Frank and Vivie's partnership. And Crofts further explains that he has the virtues of characters, fidelity, simplicity, honesty, but we audience know that he is intending the opposite.

The sarcasm of Crofts lies in that Crofts addresses Vivie as "my wife" and tells her that she won't be in her mother's business. Actually, he is intending the opposite: Vivie has already been involved in Mrs. Warren's profession because of the education fee paid by her mother.

4.2 Situational Irony

As the theoretical framework suggests that in situational irony, the situation is different from what common sense indicates it is, will be, or ought to be. It is ironic that someone we expect to be upright—a minister or judge—should be the most repulsive of scoundrels. Authors often use situational irony to expose hypocrisy and injustice.

4.2.1 Vivie's Amicability Versus Her Harsh Treatment on Her Mother

At the beginning of this play, Vivie is described as a girl "an attractive specimen of the sensible, able, high-educated, young middle-class English woman". Everything seems to be very good to her. But later on, after the exposure of her mother's profession, Vivie, though firstly shocked, forgives her mother after understanding her situation. But her good opinion of her mother is totally destroyed after Crofts's revelation of the abominable truth of Vivie's education fee and her mother's continuation of the business. Her final stone-heartedness treatment of her mother surprises readers.

4.2.2 Warren's Lack of Communication With Her Daughter

Vivie: "My mother has rather a trick of taking me by surprise—to see how I behave myself when she's away, I suppose". (Act I)

Vivie: "I have been boarded out all my life. My mother has lived in Brussels or Vienna and never let me go to her." (Act I)

Vivie: I have no mysteries to keep up; and it seems she has. (Act I)

In common people's eyes, a mother always communicates with her daughter, no matter how far away from each other. But in this play, something is unusual, that is in the beginning of the play, The irony of mother's surprise-taking of her daughter and the daughter's lack of knowing about her mother, the daughter's guessing about her mother's mysteries cause audience to wonder if there is something peculiar about the mother-and -daughter relationship, and the irony causes suspense.

4.2.3 Ruin of the Womanhood Beauty

Vivie: I hate holidays. (Act I)

Crofts: [Ruefully]. She has a powerful fist.

For a young girl, she is supposed to like holiday cheers as the common girls do. But she is work alcoholic, the hatred of holiday causes irony. She seems to avoid romance and no beauty in her life. Besides this, Vivie's powerful fist causes irony, because a powerful fist is against the usual image of the genialness of a young woman.

4.2.4 The fashionable and Decorum Appearance of Mrs. Warren and Crofts Versus Their Dirty Profession

Mrs. Warren is described as "in a brilliant hat, a genial and fairly woman", and Crofts "fashionably dress, strong frame, clean-shaven, gentlemanly combination, courtly manner", no doubts for the audience that they are decent people with decent clothing, but the later stories expose their dirty profession. It causes situational irony.

4.2.5 The Hypocrisy of Archbishop of Canterbury

Crofts: You wouldn't cut the Archbishop of Canterbury, I suppose, because the Ecclesiastical Commissioners have a few publicans and sinners among their tenants. (Act II)

The irony is that our audience expects the Archbishop of Canterbury to be pure religion, ecclesiastical, the representative of God's love for all, but actually, the Archbishop is involved in the dirty business of running brothels.

4.2.6 Vivie and Frank Are Half-Sister and Half-Brother

The final blow falls when the loathsome Sir George, having been rejected by Vivie and about to be driven from the garden at gunpoint by Frank, spitefully informs them that Sam Gardner, the fatuous clergyman, is Vivie's real father, making her Frank's half-sister.

4.3 Attitudinal Irony

Situational irony results from what most people expect, whereas attitudinal irony results from what one expects (Griffith, 1994, pp.62-63). In attitudinal irony, an individual thinks that reality is one way, when, in fact, it is a very different way.

Praed: [Much damped.] Lord bless me! That's a very practical way of looking at it.

Vivie: Did you expect to find me an unpractical person?

Praed: But surely it's practical to consider not only the work these honors cost, but also the culture they bring. (Act I)

To Praed's exclamation of surprise, the women like Vivie, so kind and tender, cannot be practical. So the reality is out of his expectation, there are so many New Women in the world.

4.4 Dramatic Irony

As the theoretical framework points out, dramatic irony occurs in plays when characters state something that they believe to be true that the audience knows to be false (Griffith, 1994, p.64). The key to existence of dramatic irony is the reader's foreknowledge of coming events. Dramatic irony intensifies characterization and makes you aware of tensions that you could not have known about during your initial reading.

Praed: When I was your age, young men and women were afraid of each other; there was no good fellowship. Nothing real. Only gallantry copied out of novels, and as vulgar and affected as it could be. (Act I)

The dramatic irony lies in that Praed praises highly the friendship in Vivie's times, and he thinks that the friendship in the past was fake, only now it was true. But according to our audience, his judgment is wrong, because the friendship is also fake in Vivie's times.

CONCLUSION

A. Main findings and Significance

This article tries to analyze irony and sarcasm in George Bernard Shaw's play: Mrs. Warren's Profession, from a formalistic perspective. Four types of irony discussed in this article are: verbal irony, situational irony, attitudinal irony and dramatic irony. Some findings of these four types of irony are as follows: (a) Understatement and overstatement are two forms of verbal irony. Verbal irony in its most bitter and destructive form becomes sarcasm, in which the speaker condemns someone by pretending to praise him or her. (b) In situational irony, the situation is different from what common sense indicates it is, will be, or ought to be. Authors often use situational irony to expose hypocrisy and injustice. Situational irony results from what most people expect, whereas attitudinal irony results from what one expects. (c) In attitudinal irony, an individual thinks that reality is one way, when, in fact, it is a very different way. (d) Dramatic irony occurs in plays when characters state something that they believe to be true that the audience knows to be false.

The significance of this article is that it uses some vivid examples extracted from the play to demonstrate how the four types of irony work together to achieve the ultimate theme of the play. The research can benefit us both readers and writers. With the assistance of the research, we can better use irony and sarcasm in our literary writing for characterization and revelation of themes.

B. Limitation and Suggestion for Further Study

Though "close reading" of formalistic critics can help us probe and investigate the formalistic features of a play: style, structure, imagery, irony, sarcasm, tone and genre, etc.. But one thing needs to bear in mind is that these features, however, are not examined in isolation, because what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all of its elements work together to create the reader's total experience. Therefore, when we conduct research on the formalistic characteristics of irony and sarcasm, we need to investigate them in their relation to the theme and characterization.

Irony and sarcasm are two of the major writing techniques Bernard Shaw has adopted in this play. The versatile use of them can help forge his dramas, combine moral passion and intellectual conflicts, experiment with symbolic farce, and bring into the spotlight the contemporary issues. Irony and sarcasm are equal to his sharp pen, thus more further investigation is required.

REFERENCES

- Gloia, D., & Gwynn, R. S. (Eds.). (2006). *The art of the short story*. New York: Pearson Longman.
- Griffith, K. (1994). *Writing essays about literature: A guide and style sheet*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Guerin, W. L., & Earle, L. (2004). *A handbook of critical approaches to literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Holroyd, M. (1988). *Bernard Shaw: A biography* (Vol.1.). New York: Random House.
- Lawrence, D. H. (Ed.). (1970/1974). *The bodley head Bernard Shaw: Collected plays with their prefaces* (Vols.7). London: Max Reinhardt, The Bodley Head.
- Marker, F. J. (1998). Shaw's early plays. In C. Innes (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to George Bernard Shaw* (pp.103-123). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Powell, K. (1998). New women, new plays and Shaw in the 1890s. In C. Innes (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to George Bernard Shaw* (pp.76-100). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shaw, B. (1955). *Advice to a young critic and other letters*. New York: Penguin Company.
- Shaw, B. (2000). Mrs. Warren's profession. In X. M. Cheng (Ed.), *Selected reading of British dramas* (p.433- 531). Wuhan, China: Wuhan University Press.