Chapter 3: Mother's Day

Exercise 3.1 — Reading with Insight

Q1 This play, written in the 1950s, is a humorous and satirical depiction of the status of the mother in the family.
(i) What are the issues it raises?
(ii) Do you think it caricatures these issues or do you think that the problems it raises are genuine? How does the play resolve the issues? Do you agree with the resolution?

SOLUTION

(i) The play raises several interconnected issues about the position of a mother within a household. At its centre is the question of thankless domestic labour: Mrs Pearson cooks, irons, mends, and keeps the home running, yet receives no wages, no thanks, and no consideration. The family treats her as a servant who is perpetually on duty. Alongside this is the issue of unequal leisure — the husband attends his club and the children go out whenever they wish, while the mother is expected to stay home every evening. The play also raises the issue of disrespect: Doris issues orders about ironing without so much as a please; Cyril is brisk and dismissive; George complains about the absence of a tea he had not even wanted. Finally, the play questions why a woman who has 'joined the movement' (adopted the logic of a forty-hour work week) is treated as if she has gone mad.

(ii) The issues the play raises are fundamentally genuine, even if the dramatic means used to explore them — the supernatural body-swap — are a comic exaggeration. The caricature is deliberate: Doris's vanity over her yellow silk dress, Cyril's entitlement about his tea, and George's pomposity (he is mockingly called 'Pompy-ompy Pearson' at his own club) are all drawn with broad strokes. Yet the inequity they represent — an overworked mother taken entirely for granted — was a real social reality in the 1950s and remains recognisable today.

The play resolves the issues through Mrs Fitzgerald's temporary body-swap strategy. By inhabiting Mrs Pearson's body and confronting the family with firmness rather than apology, she shakes them out of their complacency. The resolution comes in the final moments: the chastened family quietly accepts Mrs Pearson's request for a game of rummy and offers to help with supper. Mrs Fitzgerald's parting advice is simply that Mrs Pearson must maintain a 'firm hand' and never slip back into over-apologetic servility.

Whether one agrees with the resolution depends on how one reads it. It is hopeful — the family's change in attitude suggests that respect can be won — but it is also limited. The underlying structures that made Mrs Pearson a household servant in the first place are not dismantled; the play relies on individual assertion rather than any deeper change in social expectations. A reader might agree that self-respect and firmness are necessary first steps, while also recognising that a single evening of disruption is unlikely to produce permanent change.

Answer: The play raises issues of thankless domestic labour, denial of leisure, and disrespect toward the mother; it resolves them through Mrs Pearson's newly asserted firmness, which brings the family to a chastened compliance.

Q2 If you were to write about these issues today what are some of the incidents, examples and problems that you would think of as relevant?

SOLUTION

Note: This question calls for a personal response. The following is a model answer that a student may adapt.

If I were writing about the same issues today, I would set the play in a household where both parents hold full-time jobs, yet the mother is still expected to manage all domestic tasks after office hours — cooking dinner, helping children with homework, and handling household management, while the father rests or scrolls through his phone. This 'second shift' phenomenon is well documented and directly echoes Mrs Pearson's predicament.

I might include an incident where the mother's festival day off — perhaps Diwali or a personal birthday — is quietly absorbed by family demands: she ends up cooking sweets, cleaning the house, and managing guests while everyone else celebrates. Another relevant example would be a teenage child who orders food using the mother's phone and card without a word of thanks, treating her digital labour (ordering, scheduling, managing appointments) as invisible, just as Doris treats the ironing of her yellow silk dress.

A contemporary version might also address the expectation that a mother be permanently 'available' via mobile phone — responding to messages at all hours — while any reciprocal attention to her needs is considered optional. The core problem Priestley identified — that a mother's work is simultaneously essential and unacknowledged — remains as relevant today as it was in the 1950s.

Answer: Contemporary parallels include the 'second shift' of domestic labour after paid work, invisible digital labour, and the expectation of round-the-clock availability — all modern forms of the same thankless servitude the play depicts.

Q3 Is drama a good medium for conveying a social message? Discuss.

SOLUTION

Drama is a particularly effective medium for conveying a social message because it combines emotional immediacy with intellectual argument. Unlike an essay, a play presents its ideas through living characters whose conflicts an audience can observe and feel directly. In 'Mother's Day', Priestley does not lecture the audience about gender inequality; instead, he shows it through the behaviour of Doris, Cyril, and George, allowing the audience to judge for themselves. This show-don't-tell quality makes the message more persuasive.

Drama also uses humour and satire to lower the audience's defences. A person who might

resist a direct argument about women's rights may laugh at Pompy-ompy Pearson and, in laughing, recognise the truth being exposed. The comic exaggeration of the body-swap device keeps the play entertaining while delivering a pointed critique.

Furthermore, drama is a social event: it is watched in a community, which encourages collective reflection. When an audience laughs or falls silent together at a moment on stage, it is sharing a moral judgement. This communal dimension makes drama a powerful instrument for sparking debate and change.

On the other hand, drama is limited by the length of a performance and the need to entertain as well as instruct. Complex social problems can only be sketched, not fully analysed. A play may raise awareness without offering solutions, or its message may be weakened if the entertainment overshadows the argument. Despite these limitations, drama has historically been one of the most accessible and far-reaching vehicles for social commentary.

Answer: Yes — drama conveys social messages through immediate emotional identification, satirical humour, and communal viewing, though it is limited by performance length and the need to entertain alongside instructing.

Q4 Read the play out in parts. Enact the play on a suitable occasion.

SOLUTION

Note: This is a performance activity. The following guidance supports preparation.

Assign parts: Mrs Annie Pearson, Mrs Fitzgerald, Doris, Cyril, and George. A narrator may read the stage directions aloud so the audience understands the setting and the body-swap scene.

Pay close attention to voice contrast: the text specifies that Mrs Pearson originally speaks in 'a light, flurried sort of tone' while Mrs Fitzgerald has 'a deep voice, rather Irish perhaps'. After the body-swap, each actor must convincingly adopt the other's manner — Mrs Pearson becoming bold and incisive, Mrs Fitzgerald becoming nervous and apologetic.

The body-swap itself (the mutual hand-holding and the repeated incantation 'Arshtatta dum — arshtatta lam — arshtatta lamdumbona') should be acted with deliberate stillness followed by a visible physical shift in posture and expression to signal the personality change to the audience.

Suitable occasions include classroom presentations, school cultural events, or community theatre, since the play's themes of domestic respect are universally relatable.

Answer: Performance activity: focus on contrasting voices before and after the body-swap, use a narrator for stage directions, and choose an occasion where the play's domestic theme can resonate with the audience.

Q5 Discuss in groups plays or films with a strong message of social reform that you have watched.

SOLUTION

Note: This is a group discussion activity. The following is a model response to guide the discussion.

Many celebrated plays and films carry strong messages of social reform. For example, Henrik Ibsen's play 'A Doll's House' (1879) — which is widely read and sometimes staged in Indian schools — deals with themes very similar to 'Mother's Day': a woman trapped in a domestic role who eventually walks out to claim her independence. It raises questions about marriage, self-respect, and the expectations placed on women.

In Indian cinema, films like 'Drishyam', 'Taare Zameen Par', and 'Dangal' carry social messages about the justice system, learning disabilities, and gender equality respectively. 'Dangal' in particular parallels this play's themes: a father who defies societal expectations to train his daughters as wrestlers challenges the assumption that women belong only in domestic roles.

In a group discussion, participants might consider: What made the social message in the play or film convincing? Did the characters feel real, or were they caricatures? Was the resolution satisfying, or did it feel too easy? Comparing these responses across different works can reveal how medium, culture, and era shape the way social problems are presented and resolved.

Answer: Works such as Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' and Indian films like 'Dangal' carry strong social-reform messages; a group discussion should compare how effectively each work portrays its issue and whether its resolution feels genuine.