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English literature essay

“Top Girls moves backward in time over the course of Act 3, from Angie's visit to London to Marlene's visit to Joyce's house. Discuss this flashback technique and its effect on our perception of the relationship between Joyce, Angie and Marlene.”

Throughout Caryl Churchill's play, the viewer is presented with the representation of the female life around the 1970-1980s. He's faced with the forced polarity that women face: they either dedicate themselves to their professional life, or their private life. It's in this context that we see the characters of Marlene, Joyce and Angie: all of them represent different ends of this spectrum: one is a self-made business woman, while the others seem to be doomed to live a private life without any hope of pursuing their careers.

The final act of the play happens a year before the main events of the play, flashing back to the last time Marlene visited Joyce and Angie. In this act we learn that Marlene is Angie's biological mother, who gave her up to escape her working class background and pursue her professional career, forcing her sister to abandon her hopes for a sensible career and making her stay at home to take care of Angie. In fact, this act can be seen as the portrayal of the capitalist exploitation, with Marlene, the businesswoman, who abandoned her family to pursue her career, and relied upon Joyce to raise Angie. The viewer can get a feeling that the author is rejecting the policies and presumptions of the Thatcher regime, whom Churchill portrays as viciously individualistic and exploitative, making success available only through using other people: most commonly the rich and middle classes using the working class to rise through the social ladder. Throughout the act the author seems to be siding with Joyce, but she's far from portraying her as a social-class hero. It is true that Joyce reminds Marlene through the entire act how much she abandoned her family to fulfil her professional life, leaving her parents and sister in her home town to be able to work, giving up Angie to Joyce, ultimately showing how much out of touch Marlene is with her family, but Joyce isn't the good one either: it is apparent that Joyce is full of contempt, with nothing in her life that could possibly satisfy her. She seems to look at life through the prism of how Marlene left her alone and used her to fulfil her own goals, while Joyce remained stuck in her home town, she even says “You're the one who went away, not me. I'm right where I was.”, showing her resentment towards Marlene.

This flashback also shows us how far Marlene and Joyce ended up, the first being a strong conservative, where as the second being closer to the working class and labor, showing Churchill's political undertones: her being often associated with socialistic works and criticising Thatcher's regime. Their political alignments take part of this flashback, linking to their current condition and their relationship: they seem to somewhat resent each other, one using the later. This division is shown when they talk about their parents' lives, where Marlene defines their poor condition through their father's alcoholism, and saying that their mother wasted their life with their father, which shows Marlene's lack of socio-political understanding that her sister seems to have: Joyce links the family's poor condition to the fact that their father was “Working in the fields like an animal.”, yet still they remained poor. According to Marlene, if someone is determined and works hard, he will succeed in life, but that Thatcherian stereotype can't be universal. What Churchill tries to actually portray is that the main obstacle for people is the class structure itself, making it almost impossible for people to elevate themselves from poverty. Marlene however, just like most of the wealthy people, is blind to that obstacle and remain confident that to succeed one just needs to be self-determined, that there's no class and people can achieve anything “if they've got what it takes”. But what she doesn't realise is that it's practically impossible to arise without using others, and the relationship between the 3 characters portrays that. That is even reinforced within the main part of the play, during the dinner and the second act, where the viewer sees what Marlene has achieved by sticking to her career, getting a promotion and approaching management positions.

In addition, Marlene tries to reject her working class roots by trying to pass for Angie's Aunty and not Mum. This only reinforces her attempt to embrace the image of her independent and fulfilled life with her successful career, while she tries to forget that she got here only thanks to her family, just like the conservatives refuse to acknowledge that private wealth is amassed through the exploitation of working class labor, and stick to linking lack of success to laziness, lack of ambition or stupidity. However, the viewer should remember that Marlene's professional success came only because she sacrificed her private life. Joyce also represent the other end of the spectrum, being fully dedicated to family and private life.

In conclusion, the final act of “Top Girls” uses the flashback to Marlene's last visit to show how contrasted is the relationship between Marlene, Joyce and Angie, to capitalise on the class differences between them and reinforce the author's critique of the Thatcherite regime. But yet, while the author criticises capitalism, she acknowledges the limited forms of independence that women were increasingly able to pursue as a consequence of feminism and the opportunities that gave capitalism.