

## **Discuss how conflict and resolution are treated in two works you have studied.**

Conflict is a central component of literature; without conflict there would be no story and characters would all be static. Yet conflict does not have to be with an external force, an antagonistic villain. In order to develop, characters often face internal conflict against their own selves. In both *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong and *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill, characters must overcome their own fears and hesitations to succeed in their personal journeys. Both works explore this conflict with the self; however, the works differ in the way conflict is resolved. Vuong shows how, with deep introspection, he can overcome conflict to find a new, authentic self. By contrast, Marlene's conflict can only be resolved through the sacrifice of her feminine self in pursuit of success in a man's world.

In both works, writers explore the protagonists' conflict with the self. In *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, Ocean's conflict arises from the absence of his father who abandoned his family after their immigrant journey to the US when Vuong was just a small boy, creating an absence in his sense of identity and a fear of what he might become in the future. For example, in *Threshold*, he remembers listening to his father singing in the shower. He describes the way his father's voice "*Filled me to the core like a skeleton.*" This line creates an image of Vuong being empty inside, and needing his father to support him, as the skeleton supports the body. At the same time, he is conflicted over his fear of inheriting his father's violent tendencies. In the same poem, he uses the image of a "*dark colt in a downpour*" to describe his father. The word 'colt' has powerful and violent connotations, meaning either a wild horse or a type of gun, and this line is embellished with dental D alliteration, emphasizing the inner conflict Vuong feels when remembering his father. Similarly, Caryl Churchill reveals the inner conflict of her protagonist Marlene in the opening scene of the play *Top Girls*. Having just been promoted to director of a talent agency, Marlene is celebrating with dinner at an expensive restaurant. But the guests at her dinner are women from the past, both real and fictional, who represent aspects of Marlene's own character. The stories the women tell reveal choices that Marlene will have to make if she wants to be successful. For example, both Lady Nijo and Patient Griselda tell stories of having their children taken away from them, raising the question as to whether Marlene can be successful if she also has to mother her own daughter. Therefore, both works open with protagonists who must deal with inner conflict and resolve questions about who they are and how to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, to represent the inner conflict felt by Ocean and Marlene, both writers use writing methods which 'fracture' or fragment the conventional genre forms of both poetry and writing for the stage. For example, Caryl Churchill uses a non-conventional way of

overlapping dialogue, whereby characters speak over each other and interrupt each other constantly. She marks these lines of dialogue using a 'slash' / indicating where the next actor must cut in. In the opening scene, when the women cut over each other's dialogue, this represents aspects of Marlene's personality in conflict. For example, during Lady Nijo's story of her relationship with the emperor of Japan, Marlene interrupts with "*you mean he raped you?*" Lady Nijo's response ("*Of course not I belonged to him*") conflicts with Marlene's point of view. As the scene progresses and Churchill uses more instances of overlapping dialogue, the audience gets a sense that Marlene is a conflicted character. She wants to succeed in her new position as head of the Top Girls agency; but in order to succeed as a woman in a man's world, she will have to sacrifice any feminine desires (such as motherhood, or marriage) which are burdens in patriarchal systems. Equally, Ocean Vuong uses non-generic aspects of poetic form to represent his inner conflict. Many poems from part one of the collection feature dropped lines, caesura, and use of white space to 'fracture' his poetry on the page. For example, in the poem Telemachus, on finding a body that may or may not be his father, Vuong writes: "*I touch                      his ears*" using white space to form a caesura between words. The effect is to create uncertainty as to who or what he is finding as he examines his fragmented memories of his father. On approaching each poem, the reader has a visual impression of a 'fractured' and conflicted speaker. Therefore, in order to present the conflict each character has with themselves, their memories and their own values, both authors use methods that fragment their writing on the page or stage.

However, while both works feature protagonists who conflict with their own selves, the works differ in terms of how conflict is resolved. On one hand *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is, in large part, about how Vuong's commitment to introspection and reflection allows him to overcome his fear and uncertainty about his father. As the collection progresses, Vuong makes discoveries that allow him to resolve his inner conflict. For example, in the poem *To My Father/To My Future Son* he considers the legacy left to him by his father and imagines the legacy he will leave his own son in the future. Where his father has been symbolized by the 'colt' gun (and even substituted himself for a gun that he left under Ocean's bed) Ocean imagines himself through the symbolism of a book, which he leaves to his son as a gift. In part three, at the end of the collection, Vuong writes explicitly that: "*Your father is only your father until one of you forgets*". Not only does this line acknowledge that his father has no real power over him now, the use of soft fricative F alliteration contrasts with the hard dental alliteration of *Threshold* to suggest a 'softening' of his father's influence and his own self-judgment. Therefore, the whole work *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* can be interpreted as a process of introspection, where Ocean grapples with his fleeting memories of his father and tries to resolve the conflict of identity caused by his father's absence.

On the other hand, in *Top Girls*, Marlene's conflict is not resolved through introspection or reflection, but through sacrifice and self-denial. After hearing the stories of women from across time, Marlene concludes that there is no way for her to inhabit her feminine self and be successful in her career at the same time. Therefore, she resolves to deny her own femininity in order to succeed. This is exemplified by her decision to abandon her daughter (Angie) to be raised by her sister. Throughout the play, when she is given the opportunity to support Angie or reconcile with her, instead she chooses to alienate her further, calling her "*thick*" in front of her colleagues at work. Furthermore, she adopts the posturing of a man, leading her colleagues to describe her as "*pushy*" and use male-inflected language about her: "*she's got balls*"; like Pope Joan, to succeed in a man's world Marlene had to metaphorically transform herself into a man. Unlike Ocean, Marlene is unwilling to reflect or introspect on this transformation. In the final scene, an argument with her sister, she doubles-down on the choices she's made, telling Joyce "*Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.*" This line is notable as it shows Joyce ignoring all the evidence of systemic injustice between men and women that the play has put forward, and leaning into a capitalist, dog-eat-dog way of thinking about success. In this way, the resolution of Marlene's self-conflict stands in stark contrast to the resolution of Ocean's self-conflict.

In conclusion, both Caryl Churchill and Ocean Vuong explore an aspect of conflict within characters: the conflict with the self. Each character reveals fears and insecurities over their own identities. In Ocean's case he fears the violent legacy of his father and worries about how to fill the void left by his father's abrupt departure from the family. In Marlene's case, she wrestles with the truth of historical injustices against women and the tough choices women are forced to make to succeed in the workplace. However, the writers differ in their ideas of how conflicts can be resolved. In Ocean's case, his conflicts were personal, and his insecurities derived from his own family and identity so through introspection he was able to overcome these conflicts. By contrast, Marlene's conflicts derived from a history of systemic injustice against women. Unable to overcome such barriers alone, she decided to join the system rather than fight it, sacrificing femininity and betraying Feminism to achieve success.