HL Essay

How does Caryl Churchill use dramatic irony to expose the limits of feminist empowerment in *Top Girls*?

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Throughout her play *Top Girls*, Caryl Churchill uses dramatic irony to establish a gap between what the audience knows and what her characters think and say. This gap allows the audience to understand the limits of feminism as practiced by Marlene in her position as managing director of the Top Girls agency. While Marlene and other characters celebrate her promotion, the audience becomes aware that Marlene's success depends on behaviours and structures that are resoundingly *un*-feminist, including the suppression of emotion, competitiveness, and complicity in marginalising others, such as Joyce – her own sister – so that Marlene can make it to the top.

Arguably the biggest effect of dramatic irony is to reveal that Marlene's success depends on her ability to suppress emotion. This can be seen most clearly in her discussions over children, where Marlene speaks coldly, almost ruthlessly. In Act three, Joyce suggests to Marlene: *"Have a child now if you want one. You're not old"* and Marlene replies: *"I might do."* (*Top Girls*, *Act 3, p151*) Her short, sharp sentence reveals her dismissive attitude towards Joyce's suggestion. For Marlene, a child is something that she 'might' consider, the use of this modal verb makes her comment about something as emotionally significant as having a child unserious and throwaway. Dramatic irony sharpens this effect, as the audience has already heard Act one stories of women such as Lady Nijo, Dull Gret, and Patient Griselda, who experienced their children being forcibly removed from them or killed. Knowing how intimate and painful this topic has been for so many other women, by comparison Marlene's dismissive answer to Joyce is cold, painting her as an emotionless character. When she goes on to speak in a blithe and dismissive way about birth control *("I've been on the pill for so long, I'm probably sterile." (Act 3, p151*) her words reveal a casual attitude about losing the future opportunity to have children. The same is true of abortion: *"I've had two abortions, are you interested?" Shall I tell you about them?"* (*Act 3, p151*) Here, Marlene uses rhetorical questions to attack what she considers to be Joyce's

‘soft’ heart, using her aborted pregnancies to wound her sister, who has suffered miscarriages and is now unable to have children. In this case, the irony is not dramatic as Marlene is well aware of her sister’s miscarriage. Her deliberate attack on her sister’s emotions shows her cruel side; she not only suppresses her own emotions but dismisses the genuine pain of her sister who is unable to bear her own children. Through the depiction of Marlene as heartless and cruel in a family setting, Churchill links her professional success to these qualities as well. Dramatic irony allows audience members to question the limits of feminism if cruelty and ruthlessness are rewarded by promotion to a position of power.

Furthermore, dramatic irony allows the audience to see the costs of Marlene’s emotional detachment: she has no friends at her party and willingly sacrifices her personal relationships. From the start, Marlene is characterised as impatient and intolerant of others when she says *“we won’t wait” (Act 1, p63)* for a late arrival to her party. Her ruthlessness is so pronounced that other characters frequently comment upon it. For example, when discussing promotion opportunities at work, Nell and Win say: *“There’s not a lot of room upward. Marlene has filled it all up.” (Act 2, p110)* This image pictures Marlene as a successful person, but also a somewhat selfish one who takes up more space than might be fair and edges others out. Moreover, it depicts Marlene taking advantage of a hierarchic, capitalist system which prioritises competitiveness over other, kinder qualities. Her colleagues might admire Marlene for her success, but their opinions of her are not warm, and they speak about her unfondly: throughout Marlene is described using words like *“tough”* and *“pushy”, (Act 3, p141)* implying she has the ability to put herself forward over others who may have strengths of their own, such as empathy or patience, which are not valued as much. Elsewhere, Nell and Win use more explicitly gendered, derogatory language to suggest Marlene *“has balls”,* (*Act 2, p109)* which, while intended as a compliment, strips her of femininity. Mrs Kidd goes further, dehumanising Marlene completely by calling her *“not natural”. (Act 2, p127)* Having similar descriptions spoken by different people in separate scenes allows a clear picture of Marlene to emerge for the audience, which is the essence of dramatic irony. Through this gradual reveal, Churchill

shows how, to be successful in a context where opportunities for women are limited, Marlene either chooses to or is forced to abandon personal relationships and – like Pope Joan centuries before her – sacrifice her own femininity to get to the top.

Ironically, unlike the audience, Angie sees Marlene as a symbol of opportunity. She idolises the woman she believes is her aunt and dreams of following in her footsteps. She tells Kit: *"She's special." (Act 2, p104)* When Kit asks why, Angie answers: *"She is… She is…" (Act 2, p104)* the simple repetition implying that she finds it hard to explain exactly why she reveres Marlene so much. In fact, the audience discovers that Marlene has neglected Angie. The last time she visited was a year ago, and before that she had not seen Angie for six years! The gap between what Angie says and what the audience learns encourages them to question Angie's devotion and wonder whether Marlene is really an effective role model to follow. Angie is finally able to articulate to Kit that *"she gets people jobs" (Act 2, p104)* which is, on the face of it, admirable. But the structure of the play allows the audience to juxtapose this line with the next scene in which Marlene interviews Jeanine for a new position. They see for themselves that, far from supporting Jeanine's ambitions, Marlene undermines her and limits the opportunities she is prepared to offer. Where Jeanine wants to work in advertising, Marlene instead pigeonholes her into *"lampshades"* and *"knitwear." (Act 2, pp116-117)* Similarly, Angie admires the way Marlene tells Mrs Kidd to *"piss off"*. *(Act 2, p128)* Yet, unknown to Angie, Marlene is just as dismissive of her as well, telling her colleagues that Angie's *"thick"* and that she's *"not going to make it." (Act 2, p135)* While Angie admires Marlene's competitive spirit, through this instance of dramatic irony, the audience is able to recognise a trait which empowers Marlene at the cost of other women, revealing the limits of feminism in that only women who are ruthless in protecting their own opportunities and ration out the opportunities they will permit other women to have are uplifted.

Finally, through dramatic irony, the audience is able to see that Marlene's success is an exception rather than a standard to which all women can aspire. She represents 'Thatcher's Feminism', where individual advancement comes at the cost of other women. The prime example in the play is her exploitation of her own sister, Joyce, whom she relied upon to

raise her own daughter in Marlene's place. Yet rather than appreciate Joyce for the sacrifices she made, she is dismissive of her sister. Marlene believes that success is down to the individual. In an allusion to Thatcher's politics, she says: *"Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" (Act 3, p158)* where 'got what it takes' equates to qualities such as determination, grit, and persistence. What Marlene fails to see is that Joyce shares these qualities, especially when it comes to raising Angie, something that dramatic irony allows the audience to recognise. When Joyce points out systemic barriers to women's success, Marlene dismisses her arguments by saying: *"I don't believe in class" (Act 3, p158)* despite evidence to the contrary even within her own family! Yet Churchill's dramatic irony means the audience have heard the historical stories of Act one, in which women from all parts of the world endured the same sexist treatment. They have seen workplace barriers oppose women's advancement, even in an office with a female managing director. They know how endemic poverty will intersect with gender to keep Angie down, despite her adventurous spirit. Written in 1981, after Margaret Thatcher's rise to power, dramatic irony allows the audience to recognise parallels between Marlene's opinions and Thatcher's Feminism, which does not challenge but exploits existing systems in order to allow a woman – but only one – to get to the top of a hierarchy that in all other aspects remains profoundly patriarchal.

In conclusion, Caryl Churchill's dramatic irony shows the audience that Marlene has risen to the top not through feminism but by adopting the same strategies that enable male success in a capitalist world: emotional suppression, competitiveness, and complicity in marginalising other women. Like Thatcher herself, who never promoted another woman to her cabinet in all her years of leadership, Marlene fails to pass on the advantages or opportunities to other women that she enjoyed herself. Ultimately, the failure of feminism in *Top Girls* is seen to come not from the patriarchy, but from the inside, as Marlene is unable to acknowledge that her success depends on efforts and sacrifices made by others.

Works Cited

Churchill, Caryl. *Top Girls*. Methuen Drama Student Edition, Bloomsbury, 2018.