

How does the play
challenge or



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In Caryl Churchill's play 'Cloud Nine', stereotypes are significant in forming an important part of representation, as they are social constructions, which are used to characterise groups of people, beliefs, ideas and places.

Therefore, as the first act of Cloud Nine took place in Victorian Africa in 1879, it was vital that both men and women should play characters that were viewed as being stereotypical at that particular time in Victorian Africa, as this would reflect society's assumptions of their norms and values of what was considered to be ideal in Victorian Africa in 1879. Playing these stereotypical, strictly gendered roles typed roles would fulfil audiences' expectations of how women and men were expected to behave and in reality how they did behave in Victorian Africa in 1879. Therefore, in order to effectively answer the question above the extent to which the play criticises or celebrates the traditional relations between the sexes must be determined. In this essay I will attempt to examine closely, looking at how far the characters' in question can be said to be confirming the traditional roles between the sexes then going on to examine the possible challenges they offer. The first scene in the first act introducing the characters', Clive who is a colonial administrator and Betty who possesses the role of the housewife, immediately evoke gender stereotypes. Clive: " My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be, And everything she owes to me.

" He presents Betty. She is played by a man. Betty: " I live for Clive. The whole aim of my lifels to be what he looks for in a wife.

I am a man's creation as you see, And what men want is what I want to be."

This introduction of the characters' clearly displays a notion of a patriarchal

society. Clive reflects and confirms to the traditional male stereotype as being dominating and powerful as he believes he controls Betty. She is reflected as the weaker sex whose only ambition in life is to be a 'good' wife and always be dependent on him. Both are confirming to the traditional notions of the 'breadwinner' and 'housewife' role where the main role of the woman's life was expected to be that of a housewife and mother, having dinner ready on the table, looking after the children and answering to her husband, while he went out to work to provide income for his family. The above idea is illustrated in the following quotes: 'Long ride in the bush' (To Betty, page 2), which emphasises Clive confirming to the role of the 'breadwinner' and the independent and dominating nature of the male character.

" Betty, you know what to do" (Clive to Betty when guests come to visit), implies her duties as a housewife and significantly illustrates that she is aware of her 'housewife' role hence she is confirming to the traditional stereotype. The fact that Betty is played by a man is also significant in symbolising her confirming to the traditional female stereotype as it implies that she is played by a man because she wants to be what men want her to be and does not value herself as a woman. Therefore, the portrayal of a man symbolises Betty as possessing men's ideals and confirming greatly to them. It also illustrates her claim of being a man's creation' and that she is also confirming to the Christian belief of Eve created out of Adams rib and therefore confirms to these stereotypical roles. The following quotes throughout the scene further reinforce Betty's dependency on Clive and the traditional stereotypical roles that she confirms to as a woman.

“ I thought you would never come. The day’s so long without you.” (Page2)”
Its just that I miss you so much when you are away. We’re not in this country to enjoy ourselves. If I lack society that is my form of service.” (Page 4)”
Clive is my society.

” (Page 9)These quotes also reflect lack of independency that she has a woman and that she totally conforms and accepts this norm hence the quotes above. Therefore, her lack of education as a woman due to of her lack of independency is also acknowledged when she says:” I’ve read a little.” The fact that is poetry that she has read also further implies this view, as poetry at the time was not acknowledged as being very hard source of material to read but a very ‘ light -hearted, easy’ source of material that women could understand. According to Rousseau and Wollstonecraft:..

. “ Give without samples, a woman’s education to women, see it that they love the cares of their sex, that they possess modesty, that they know how to grow old in their marriage and keep busy in their house.” This means that being a ‘ good wife’ was the only source of education that women were expected to learn and portray and Betty confirms to this notion. Betty’s nature of a possessing a stereotypical ‘ motherly’ role is also evident in the duties that she performs for her children and Clive.

” I was singing lullabies.” (Page 13).” My poor dear foot!” (To Clive, Page 2)This clearly indicates a typical ‘ motherly’ duty and the typical ‘emotional’ characteristics that she withholds as a woman, as singing lullabies to children was an expected norm of a ‘ motherly’ role at the time. The second

quote seems over-exaggerated and implies that Betty is over- worried about Clive hurting his foot.

Therefore, it also signifies her confirming to the expected stereotypical ‘caring’ nature that women were supposed to possess as part of their identity at the time. Clive and Betty’s confirmation to stereotypical characters’ can be summarised using the following quote:”...a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman..

. He has monopolized nearly all profitable employments...He closes against her all avenues to wealth and distinction..

.. He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education..

. He has endeavoured, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.” (From the first women’s rights convention, Seneca Falls, 18481). The capital ‘ H’ at the beginning of each sentence also implies that it is a patriarchal firmly structured society and that is the reason as to why the characters’ behave in such a manner. Clive progresses to this patriarchal structure by forgiving Harry for his affair with Betty as Clive himself has Mrs Saunders as his own mistress and blames it on Betty’s sexual weakness as a woman.

Mrs Saunders confirms to this sexually weak figure by allowing Clive to use her as a sex object....” The sexually aware woman is degenerated to the level of being denigrated to the level of being deserving of male abuse: the

metaphorical 'slag', it goes without saying that double standards are in operation here.

" As shown above, Clive and Betty confirm to this quote from an essay on gender stereotypes. Betty and Clive further reinforce their gender stereotypical behaviour by the way they try and control Edward's upbringing hence Edward being socialised into the norms and values of a typical boy's behaviour. Clive: " My son is young. I'm doing all I can To teach him to grow up to be a man." Edward: " What father wants I'd dearly like to be. I find it rather hard as you can see.

" The fact that Edward is played by a woman supports his quote. The significance of his character being played by a woman implies that he is the first to challenge the stereotype of portraying a traditional young gentleman's character. However, it can be said that Edward's character is quite contradictory. This is evident in the comparison of the first scene and the third scene. Betty: " Its Victoria's doll.

What are you doing with it Edward?" Edward: " Minding her." Betty: " Well I should give it to Ellen quickly. You don't want papa to see you with a doll." (Page 8) Edward's quote strongly implies a more feminine 'caring' type character than a 'macho' male character. The challenging of his male stereotype is reinforced when Betty takes the doll off him and gives it to Ellen as she believes that he is not following the traditional norms and values that 'boys should not play with dolls.

' Therefore to reinforce this caring 'motherly;' role only for women and to show that she is confirming to her traditions, she gives the doll to Ellen. The

idea of Edward experiencing a homosexual relationship with Harry is also a significant factor in challenging his male stereotype, as homosexuality was considered taboo in the Victorian era. Clive further reflects this division of boys' and girls' gender socialisation by offering to take Edward horse riding which implies a more 'masculine' nature. However in the third scene, we see Edward confirming to his traditional 'macho' stereotype when he demands Joshua to fetch the blue thread.

Edward: " You fetch her sewing at once, do you hear me? You move when I speak to you, boy." (Page 35) Here, the language that he uses implies a more controlling and 'macho' nature and is almost a reflection of the way in which Clive talks which implies that he is conforming to his father's ideals. Victoria is played by a dummy and is wearing a dress, which symbolises that she is representing her father's ideals of a woman being passive and being controlled just like a female should be and also following traditional connotations of dress style. Harry also eventually confirms to the traditional stereotype of committing to a heterosexual marriage in order to prevent himself from being a homosexual. The dramatic methods such as language used in the play are also significant in implying gender stereotypes.

For example: Mrs Saunders: " Can I tell you something Clive-? Clive : " Let me tell you something first." The overlapping of Clive's language over Mrs Saunders implies male domination and therefore Clive conforming to his role. The rigid structure of the first act also indicates that strict firm gender stereotypes are conformed to. The second act of the play is set in London in 1979-in the motion of the changing sexuality of our own time. A hundred years have passed, but for the characters only twenty-five years. It is in this

act where we come to realise that the notion of the patriarchal society is shattered and challenged by the characters.

Edward, Betty and Victoria have all changed from the rigid positions they were left with by the first act due to their involvement with Lin and Gerry. This act is ruled by significant elements of feminism and therefore has a less authoritarian feeling to it. These changes and uncertainties are reflected in the looser act of the play. Betty is now played by a woman, which most significantly indicates that she is true to herself and values herself as a woman and that she is independent of Clive and possesses her own ideals of femininity. Her independency is reflected through her conversation with her mother.

Maud: “ Let Mrs Saunders be a warning to you, Betty I know what it is to be unprotected.” Betty: “ But mother, I have a job. I earn money. A challenge of her traditional stereotype is highly indicated, as no longer does she confirm to the ‘ housewife’ and ‘ motherly’ role and neither is she dependent on Clive as she has a job. This illustrates that gender stereotypes no longer remain the norm in society. The final scene confirms this notion: Clive: “ You are not that sort of woman, Betty.

I can’t believe you are. I can’t feel the same about you as I did. And Africa is to be communist I suppose. I used to be proud to be British.

There was a high ideal.” The quote above signifies a good closure that Betty has challenged the stereotype. Clive using the past tense-‘ used to be’ implies that he sees these new values as negative, which implies that this is because the patriarchal structure no longer stands. Betty from act one

comes and Betty and Betty embrace. This symbolises her freedom from him and now that she has become one with herself and is now a new independent woman. Clive's authority is no longer preserved.

Lin is divorced, lesbian, does not wear dresses, which shows that she also has challenged old traditions of female behaviour. She also possesses new attitudes to gender socialisation. Lin: " I'm desperate for her to go to school." This illustrates that she does not want her child to follow traditions of being a housewife and wants her daughter to challenge these stereotypes by becoming an educated woman. Cathy is played by a boy, which further symbolises the challenge of these old stereotypes and the fact that she draws spacemen and likes violence signifies a change in a typical feminine character. Cathy is seen to be a tomboy.

The character Martin, Victoria's husband challenges the masculine stereotype by adapting to more ' feminine roles' such as washing up and babysitting. He also comments on how he favours The Women's Liberation Act and lets Victoria do as she pleases, such as experimenting with lesbianism. Edward challenges his masculine stereotype by being open about his sexuality. He too like Martin plays a traditional ' wife' type character. He does the domestic duties and waits for his partner to come home just like a feminine would.

He is now played by a man, which also indicates that he is true to himself. The notion of bisexuality is also present as he also sleeps with Lin and Victoria as he considers himself to be a ' lesbian', thus challenging the traditional notion of a heterosexual relationship. Gerry however conforms to

his traditional behaviour as being 'macho' and more of the husband in the relationship. He goes out drinking in the pub and comes home late.

This may be because he was born in England so adapted to the norms that were present at the time. Victoria greatly challenges the traditional female stereotype." I feel apologetic for not being quite so subordinate as I was. I am more intelligent than him. I am more brilliant." She leaves Martin, which shows her independency and becomes lesbian with Lin.

Victoria portrays a belief that to her, lesbianism is more than an issue of sexuality, it is a source of knowledge and power available to women. The quotes below indicate this notion; Victoria: "The priestess chose a lover for a year and he was king because she chose him and then he was killed at the end of the year." Victoria: "And the women had the children and nobody knew it was done by fucking so they didn't know about their fathers and nobody cared who the father was and the property was passed down through the maternal line." Not only do these quotes emphasise women's power but also reflect how Victoria is challenging the traditional female stereotype and destroying the image of patriarchy.

Victoria's power of intelligence is reflected when she says, "It never hurts to understand the theoretical background. You can't separate fucking and economics." Here, she implies that women have changed as they become more educated, thus challenging traditions. In conclusion, it can be said that the reason as to why women conformed to their traditions was because they had no women's rights at the time of the Victorian era and colonialism and they had no choice but to conform to these stereotypes in order to fulfil

Victorian expectations and be accepted into society. Men conformed to their roles for the same reason. However, in the second act all of the characters' especially the women challenged these traditions.

This was due to events such as the suffragette movement, the women's liberation movement in the 1970's, the equal pay act, the sex discrimination act and equal right act in property ownership. These events meant that social norms and values had changed and therefore influenced the characters to challenge old traditions in order to be accepted into new ones. Therefore although it is obvious that the characters conformed in the first act and challenged in the second act, it can also be said that they conformed to new British values in the second act (for example, women in employment) and challenged them too, for example lesbianism. However, the answer to the essay question is that the play confirms conventional gender stereotypes as demonstrated in the first act and challenges them in the second act.