

Top girls and under the blue sky | comparison



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Discuss and compare how Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and David Eldridge's *Under the Blue Sky* deploy the conventions of Dialogue and Objectives/Obstacles, and assess the connection between these formal choices and the meaning and impact of the play.

The conventions of dialogue and objectives and obstacles are intertwined through the playwright's portrayal of character and in the process of creating dramatic conflict. Dialogue is a revelatory device, where action is conveyed through speech to communicate character objectives; it is 'the chief means by which the premise is proved, the characters revealed, and the conflict carried out'.^[1] Dialogue reveals subtext as well as character and motive, and communicates 'the internal dimension of the plot...[through] psychological, or inner action'^[2] within each character, whose objectives become apparent through the translation of thought into speech and its function in drama.

Character objectives are defined as goals or desires for individual characters, often in opposition to each other. For David Edgar '[W]hat characters do is pursue objectives [but they] are not necessarily - or even often - pursued directly'.^[3] Objectives alter according to the nature of changing conversation and character revelations, thus transforming its intensity, pace, and meaning. The motivation behind a line of dialogue informs what the character wants to achieve by them saying a particular thing. Edgar refers to Stanislavsky's theory of 'Actioning', where actors place an intention behind each individual line. This is a rehearsal technique utilised by the director Max Stafford Clark:

Max Stafford Clark... and his actors 'action' individual lines with transitive verbs: in pursuit of the objectives, say, of seduction, a character may befriend, please, intrigue and flatter in as many lines, to which the other character, in pursuit of the objective of remaining unsexed, may respond by warning, snubbing, and challenging before finally spurning.[4]

This technique highlights obstacles to these intentions. Obstacles are defined as factors working against a character's objective, often taking the form of another character in the scene, ensuring a more emotional undercurrent between characters to create conflict, particularly as

[A]nother important function of the dialogue is the expression of emotion. Characters don't just state facts; they express their feelings toward conditions they feel strongly about. The most highly emotional dialogue is often a free release of feelings stemming from an open clash of wills.[5]

In order to evaluate how playwrights have deployed these conventions within their writing, *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill and *Under the Blue Sky* by David Eldridge will be used as examples to explore how these dramatic practices create meaning. *Top Girls* was directed by Max Stafford Clark and premiered at The Royal Court Theatre, returning early in 1983 following its transfer to New York. The play emerged as a socialist comment on Thatcherite regimes and the championing of the Individual. This has led to debate over whether it is first and foremost a feminist or a socialist play. It is not only the political content of the play which is so significant, but the structure of its content and Churchill's use of unconventional dialogue:

The play is informed by a pivotal moment in the early 1980s, when social and economic change had liberated women but also fostered ruthless individualism. The subject finds expressive form in the play's hybrid structure, reverse chronology and verbal technique - Churchill's precise notation for interrupted, overlapping and non-consecutive dialogue that specifies rhythm and discontinuity for the actors in performance.[6]

The overlapping dialogue echoes the flow of real conversation or argument, thereby having an impact on the pace of a scene, making any silences more significant. The opening act is well known because it represents five historical or fictional characters, all talking over each other in an effort to become principal storyteller. However, I will focus on the argument between Marlene and her sister Joyce in the final act of the play, where the dialogue is heavy with personal history and both characters' objectives reflect the issues of the play in a more pertinent and grim reflection of Churchill's intention to demonstrate the prices of success.

David Eldridge's *Under the Blue sky* was first performed in 2000 at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, an appropriately intimate space for three volatile acts of two-handers. Its revival in the summer of 2008 transported the play to the Duke of York's theatre, where Eldridge reflected on the differences between a small theatre space and a West End theatre production, and on what he terms a "cult of virginity" in contemporary British theatre:

As one critic has noted, a revival is "something that normally only happens to the dead". Theatre in this country is currently preoccupied with a cult of

virginity, with new plays premiered and discarded in rapid succession; far more than it is nurturing a contemporary repertoire that will sustain modern playwriting long-term.[7]

The motivations behind the play derive from Eldridge's reaction to how teachers are portrayed in drama, but also his interest in the question of unrequited love. Eldridge says of his intention that 'I did very much want to meditate on the nature of unrequited love with three couples in different relationships and at different stages of their life'.[8] These couples have an act each to deliberate on their individual relationships. Eldridge shows that such temperamental subject matter obstructs character desires to express themselves, resulting in the 'unnerving proof that the body of a teacher is at least as fallible as the mind of a child'[9], until the final act of the play which ends on 'a note of possibility'.[10] I will focus on the opening act of the play, between Nick and Helen which explores the impact of direct conflict of desires in the exploration of unrequited love.

In the translation from thought to speech, what do characters really mean and what do they really say in relation to their objectives. Even if characters are attempting to conceal information, it is revealed, either through subtext or through an emotional outburst, thus heightening or pacing the drama. The relationship between thinking and speaking becomes a complication for the characters, in the conflict between want and need, rational and emotional, or truth and security.

Dialogue is used in exposition. Different devices reveal past events, including the conflicting objectives behind the dialogue which move the scene forward.

In both scenes the past is very much in the present, an obstacle to it, affecting the characters now. As a result, the process of communication may be compromised, by a character trying to conceal or even change the past in an attempt to protect themselves.

In both *Top Girls* and *Under the Blue Sky* the character driven dialogue is stichomythic, organised into alternate lines. The dialogue technique employed throughout *Top Girls* makes the characters overlap and interrupt each other. In the act between Joyce and Marlene the conversation is emotionally loaded with their history, so the dialogue must function to illuminate how important their clashing wills are to substantiate the overlapping, and convey their 'inner action'. In contrast *Under the Blue Sky* delineates alternate lines to Nick and Helen, amid frequent pauses, and strained laughter. Each playwright employs the relationship between thinking and speaking differently. Joyce and Marlene speak as they think, as they react to the other's words to avoid the obstacles put up by their contestations, whereas much of what Nick and Helen say is deliberated, to conceal or protect. Each playwright has defined opposing objectives within the scene, to create conflict and achieve a dramatic situation. So dialogue 'grows from the character and the conflict, and, in its turn, reveals the character and carries the action'.^[11]

Eldridge has structured his scene so that both characters' wants are in opposition, so they must change as they clash with obstacles put up by the other. Helen's primary goal is for Nick to reveal his desire to be the same as hers, but she discovers it is in direct contrast. So her objectives alter to overcome this and change his mind; first she attempts to make him stay,

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then to find ways to maintain her presence in his life. In the rest of the play we learn what happens to them through what other characters say because they are not seen again. From information gained through others, Eldridge provides suggestions of their continuing objectives following on from Act One and indicates whether they are achieved, as they become obstacles to the play's new characters in the continuation of the story.

'Although they are described with verbs, objectives are not actually done; they are something the characters aim at doing in the future'.[12] Therefore, the process of 'actioning' is key to the dialogue, despite it being an actor exercise. Max Stafford Clark used this technique during rehearsals for Top Girls and its television adaptation in 1991. In such a fast-paced, non-consecutive dialogue that stems from rapid and unrestrained thoughts this technique illuminates intention behind each line and explores which character is in control at a particular point. In this final scene, the status of both sisters is relatively equal in their objective, even if not in their social position, meaning that when one exerts more control over the other it is even more significant. Joyce's control is demonstrated through her resistance to Marlene's attempts to appease:

Marlene I didn't really mean all that

Joyce I did.

Marlene But we're friends anyway.

Joyce I don't think so, no.[13]

Here, Joyce asserts the finality of her decision to be distanced from her sister. The dynamics of this argument in *Top Girls* reflects the nature of a conversation which has opened up old hostilities between two sisters who are almost strangers. So the dialogue has become the means of communicating their opposing wants and needs, resulting in a heated, almost uncommunicative emotional exchange demonstrating a clash of wills and their shared history:

Dialogue can narrate and explain ideas. Characters under stress, however, rarely stop to describe and analyse their thoughts and feelings. Such dialogue is seldom a cool academic debate. Instead it must reveal the strong emotions the characters feel for the practical outcome of their ideas.[14]

The dialogue is raw and emotional in its argument, conveying both character and the stress they are under to prove their objectives. It reveals truth, not just about Angie, and illustrates characters who are bound together but clash so irrevocably. Dominic Droomgoole described the final act of *Top Girls* as a big, old-fashioned, stichomythic fistfight, a ball of love and rage, a classic scrap where two political philosophies and two sisters rehearse how much they loath, and how much they need each other. The play is a journey from high style to high naturalistic emotion.[15]

Churchill's techniques when drafting dialogue has an explicit effect on the exchange of conversation between characters and each line is carefully structured into its position within the organization of the dialogue as a whole; her 'slash and asterisk notation for interruptions and overlaps speeds up the dialogue by compressing it: the slash indicates a point of interruption, the

asterisk indicates a common starting point between two speeches'.[16]

These indications of interruption also highlight the immediacy of one character's reaction to what the other has said before, expressing how conversation is complicated, that people interrupt and do not listen to one another. So Churchill's dialogue is very truthful in its delineation of interruptions and reactions and has a particular intensity to it which echoes the unpredictable, complicated nature of conversation filled with such vehemence. The argument is not based solely on Marlene's unwelcome visit, but is burdened with their relationship as sisters. Thus they can dig into the roots of an argument which has been constrained for six years, and more. This relationship, and the history stemming from their connection, is all but shattered, rendered secondary to the issues which mount between them and is perhaps the tragedy of the scene; ultimately this bond cannot be repaired by one or both of them because they have each chosen something more important in its place.

Throughout the scene, Marlene's main objective to pacify her guilt is continually evaded by her sister. This, as an obstacle put up by Joyce, stems from her own desire for things to remain the same, even to protect against the possible threats of Marlene's visit. So Churchill promises dramatic conflict by making them enter the scene with opposing goals. Following the first heated exchange about "gynaecology"[17] and the revelation that Marlene is in fact Angie's biological mother, Marlene breaks down:

Marlene I was afraid of this.

I only came because I thought you wanted...

I just came...

Marlene cries

Joyce Don't grizzle Marlene, for God's sake.

Marly? Come on, pet. Love you really.

Fucking stop it, will you?

Marlene No, let me cry. I like it.[18]

Churchill demonstrates that there is still some feeling between them, before we witness the further collapse of their relationship which follows this. In using this moment where the dialogue breaks down and the objective is to soothe, Churchill appeals to our sense of hope, but as the conversation builds once more, as Marlene and Joyce question each other to fill the gap of time and of affection whilst slipping in comments about Angie, 'I don't see why you couldn't take my money',[19] the distance between them is widened:

[In the last scene], in an extraordinarily effective piece of dialogue, the characters seem to change places before our eyes; Marlene shouts, weeps, pleads for sympathy and it is Joyce who gains stature by rejecting her sister's wheedling attempts at eliciting a compromise.[20]

Here, Churchill's intention is to create possibility, then shatter it, so 'the play offers a glimpse of affectionate relations between the sisters, before their political differences drive a wedge between them once and for all'.[21] This is also the moment where Marlene's vulnerability is shown, as she seemingly

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finds her femininity again in the private company of her sister, liking that she is finally able to express it. Despite comforting Marlene, Joyce continues to snub her attempts to compromise:

Marlene You've been wonderful looking after Angie.

Joyce Don't get carried away.

Marlene I can't write letters but I do think of you.

Joyce You're getting drunk. I'm going to make some tea.

Marlene Love you.

Joyce gets up to make tea.

Joyce I can see why you'd want to leave. It's a dump here.[22]

Immediately, Joyce starts distancing once more, making it clear that these words are not enough, subsequently proving her as an obstacle to Marlene's desire in that moment to be comforted. In Joyce's reluctance to repair the relationship with her sister, the promise of resolution is threatened once more; and is exacerbated by the political stance of each character, as they finally establish a permanent gulf between them:

During the final scene, Churchill repeatedly gestures toward reconciliation as a possibility that remains unrealized. In the final moments of the play, the sisters recognize that a chasm has opened up between them-though they come from the same family background, their present socioeconomic and political differences place them on opposite sides of the divide between " us"

and " them". Churchill keeps these positions in dialectical opposition, resisting synthesis or resolution, through Joyce's repeated rejections of Marlene's attempts to gloss over their differences... The expectation of reconciliation remains frustrated right through the sisters' final exchange.

[23]

Throughout the scene, the sisters constantly challenge each other's personal and political views. The threat of change is something that scares Joyce, which Marlene takes as jealousy because she was able to leave, but at great cost to her family, gender and future relationships. In this final act, Churchill shows that things do run deeper than blood, that a person's beliefs can be an obstacle to comfort they seek, and intensifies the play's meaning that Marlene has sacrificed more than a daughter for the sake of the Individual.

The main objective informing the dialogue between Joyce and Marlene is to tell the other what their life has been like, to justify their choices. However, these claims are complicated by the obstacle of memory and its discrepancies, or deliberate blocking of certain facts. Furthermore, both sisters have something to say, in a heightened situation, where both claims are valid, but there is nothing to allow for polite, uninterrupted conversation. Churchill uses dialogue to open up old arguments, demonstrating how the past affects their choices, through exposition within the debate which reveals much about why and how they have reached their current beliefs and situation. For example, Marlene mentions visiting their mother earlier and comments on how she had a wasted life, and Joyce reacts, undermines Marlene's opinion when she feels that her own choices and way of life have come under attack:

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Joyce You say mother had a wasted life.

Marlene Yes I do. Married to that bastard.

Joyce What sort of life did he have? / Working in the fields like

Marlene Violent life?

Joyce an animal. / Why wouldn't he want a drink?

Marlene Come off it.

Joyce You want a drink. He couldn't afford whisky.

Marlene I don't want to talk about him.

Joyce You started, I was talking about her. She had a rotten life because she had nothing. She went hungry.

Marlene She went hungry because he drank the money. / He used to hit her.

Joyce It's not all down to him. / Their lives were rubbish. They

Marlene She didn't hit him.

Joyce were treated like rubbish. He's dead and she'll die soon and what sort of life / did they have?

Marlene I saw him one night. I came down... I had to get out,

Joyce Jealous?

Marlene I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me, / never let him, make my own way, out.[24]

This highlights a number of important details. Firstly, Churchill has illustrated the family life Marlene and Joyce lived as children through their clashing memories of it, and the impact of their disagreement on the standard of life alters the possibility of them finding a common ground. Their opinions, particularly of their father, inform the later debate about their separate political beliefs; showing that the personal does influence these politics. Furthermore, this dialogue demonstrates how these two realities clash, even though these characters share the same past. Churchill also reveals here how Marlene knew she needed to escape this life and the impetus which led her to where she is now; and not even her illegitimate daughter would stop her. In contrast, Joyce's ability to relate to her parents' lives and her desire to keep things the same means that Marlene cannot properly understand why Joyce could not leave. Marlene has become a separate individual, outside this life, this family. Because Churchill's dialogue moves at the speed of thought and there is so much to say, there is no reprieve. Instead the 'argument is a drunken one between two angry sisters, not a considered political assessment, and is exaggerated and oversimplified on both sides', [25] so the dialogue gives substance to these character as flawed people, in the heat of the moment, revealing exposition in their attempts to justify themselves and the origins of their clashing objectives, to ensure an emotional intensity.

In contrast to the overlapping exchange in Top Girls, the scene between Nick and Helen in Under the Blue Sky relies on dialogue which is predominantly

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thought through. The thought processes of the characters inform the pace of the dialogue, which is symbolized in the methodical preparing and cooking of the chilli and acts as something to return to in the awkward silences, and as ingredients are added and it gets hotter, the conversation escalates. The mechanical actions of cooking contrasted with emotional dialogue creates intensity which is emphasized by the moment it is ignored: 'When [the water] boils neither of them takes any notice'.[26]

In her review of the 2008 revival, Deborah Orr concluded that the situation of this first act is that 'Helen loves Nick, and Nick loves being loved by her. There, if he's honest, his interest ends'.[27] This is where the clash of objectives lies in the scene. Helen hopes that Nick's invitation to dinner will be a further invitation to advance their relationship. She enters the scene expecting this will happen. Nick's revelation that he is leaving to improve his career, also a cover for his desire to minimise any chance of furthering their relationship, becomes Helen's main obstacle. Nick's primary objective is to delay revealing this information, until Helen asks the inevitable question:

A long pause.

Helen So what's this thing you wanted to talk to me about?

Nick looks at Helen and thinks.

Nick Let's wait until after dinner. Yeah? Ok, darling

Nick smiles. Helen drinks.[28]

Nick's reply to the question is very considered, he thinks and he delays.

What is communicated in these given objectives is that these characters enter a scene where the process will be harmful and complicated. The impact of Nick's pauses and careful discourse is enhanced when the scene becomes, inevitably, more emotional, Helen takes the news badly, and Nick fails to cope well with her reaction.

Once Nick admits he is leaving, he then has to overcome the obstacle of Helen's desire to understand why, without admitting the real reason. So he projects his guilt onto Helen, thereby obstructing his ability to be honest with her.

Nick It isn't my duty to be unhappy. I owe it to myself to be happy in my work and I'm not. Why are you trying to put me on this huge guilt trip?

Helen I'm not making you feel guilty. You feel guilty. If you're feeling guilty don't blame your guilt on me.

Nick Helen, you're being so hard on me.

Helen Am I?

Nick I thought I could talk to you about this.[29]

Both characters want to know what the other is thinking before they speak, but neither is willing to go first. Both postpone their admissions in fear of the reactions they will receive as a result. At this point, Helen's desire moves from convincing Nick to stay, assuring him that the situation in their school will change, before appealing on a more personal level. Helen acts as Nick's

obstacle, 'This is like talking to a brick wall'[30]. Both of them are thrown, because control is slipping away as their objectives are challenged, and Eldridge shows efficiently how rarely conversation goes according to plan, particularly prevalent in this scene because these characters are trying to conceal what they came to say. Eventually though, they are forced to articulate these thoughts, braving embarrassment, disappointment, or as Helen says, 'I feel like I'm shrinking in front of you'[31].

The use of alcohol in the scene also allows the dialogue to escalate, and enables them to discuss the past between them, which is dramatically affecting the present and revealing important details about their relationship. The past is an obstacle because it confuses things presently, and memory is subjective or unremembered. Helen is taken back to this time through a negative association and subsequently becomes emotionally exposed. Once Nick suddenly reveals that they slept together and that he thinks it was a mistake, his attempt at explaining himself backfires, shocking Helen into reacting to this truth.

Helen No, you were drunk and you wanted it... The things you said to me.

Nick When

Helen That time. Then.

Nick I was drunk.

A slight pause

I didn't know what I was saying.

Helen You were heavy and pissed and you moved me around the bed like I was a prone body. But your words? The things you said. Your promises... Your memory of it is that we were both drunk but I was sober. I remember every clumsy movement and every word you said like it's shot through my memory.

A slight pause

I thought tonight would be my turn. You know that? To fall on you. Half cut.
[32]

The use of the word 'promises' is repeated throughout the scene and has a connotative impact on the dialogue; implying hope and expectation.

Consequently, the idea of broken or unremembered promises heightens the emotional content of the scene. Eldridge uses this repetition to warn his characters, essentially, about the danger of making promises to escape a difficult situation.

Throughout this scene, the conversation goes round in circles as the issue is avoided but forever at the centre. The characters fail to communicate in a way in that they can achieve their primary objectives, so they must alter as the conversation continues. However, Eldridge uses a dramatic gesture to communicate a strong objective. When Helen first picks up the knife to show her experience of being attacked, there is no danger, but it does foreshadow what comes later in the scene. As much as she is appalled by this event, Helen uses the knife to react in a way that she has been reacted against to make her point. Choosing to place a knife in the scene may appear melodramatic, but in fact Eldridge gives Helen a very significant way of

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communicating her objective, which heightens the tension and reveals more about this character, an essential technique as she never appears physically after this scene. At this point, Helen is communicating, where words are not enough. With this device in her hand, she is able to say certain things: 'You're not going... I'm not going to let you leave'[33] and we understand that Helen has been 'driven to distraction'[34] by this situation.

In his exploration of unrequited love, Eldridge has shown the brutality of his theme and how it has affected both characters when their situation is based on clashing personal objectives, 'portraying the pain that they both feel when confronted with a love that one of them will not admit and the other can no longer keep within bounds'[35] The characters are unable to communicate successfully, failing to achieve these goals. Of course, this creates the tension and the drama in the scene. The play is 'a fine exploration of the cruel inequality of love, and of the violence passion can stir in even the gentlest souls. [Lisa Dillon's (Helen)] vulnerable, breathless intensity powerfully captures the pain of unrequited love'.[36] The ebb and flow of the conversation, keeps the pace and lures both characters and audience into false security when the dialogue returns to the cooking chilli before reverting back to the central issue, implying that this is a safe place for both characters to return to, just for a brief reprieve in the heavy dialogue. In many ways, this device is quite aggravating because the characters need to address what is between them, but still are unable to communicate with each other. Nick keeps telling Helen to talk to him, but neither will admit before the other, which is why the conversation continually rises and falls.

Nick Why can't you say what you feel?

Helen Say what?

A pause

Nick I'm confused. You're clearly not. But you only ever meet me halfway emotionally. And I don't know if that's good. I don't know how I feel about it. Us. I feel really confused.

Helen So am I.

Nick I don't think you are. I am... Of course I wanted you to talk about your personal feelings.

Helen Personal feelings.

She can't believe it. A slight pause

So I can put my heart and guts on the floor in front of you? Sob and wail like a widow and hope it might change your mind? And in the process confirm your gut feeling it might be good for us to see less of each other. Good for you to see less of me. While you create a new life for yourself in Essex. Is that what you want? Well, you can get stuffed.

Helen tries to leave. Nick stands in her way.[37]

This, along with frequent pauses, paces the argument and ensures the portrayal of the awkward cruelty of Eldridge's theme of unrequited love. Contrary to Top Girls where there is so much to be said and it is being said,

for Nick and Helen, what needs to be said is punctuated by silences and tension which intensifies the weight that hangs in the air between them.

Are either of these scenes about successful communication, and are any of the characters' able to overcome the obstacles to achieve their objectives?

In *Under the Blue Sky*, Nick communicates his real reason for leaving through what is left out of the dialogue, until finally confessing. Helen's objective becomes centred on her protection from exposure, which she is unable in the end to suppress. In *Top Girls*, the sisters are talking, but they are also competing to be heard. The competition they are playing out involves proving who has sacrificed the most. Churchill used this argument to show how their personal experiences informed the progression into a political debate.

At the end of both Acts, the issues between the characters are not resolved and the dialogue has traced the thoughts they have been trying to conceal or not. Issues are left hanging in the air. For Marlene and Joyce, this encompasses the idea of solidarity, of sisterhood which has been usurped by their political ideals. Nick's suggestion to 'put the last half-hour behind us'[38] ensures that it will be hanging over them even if they agree not to voice it, just it has always been; it even prevails throughout the other two acts of the play. Despite the process of dialogue in the scene and the clashes of wants and needs, things have changed but nothing has been resolved. In both plays we know what happens afterwards; *Under the Blue Sky* communicates these events through the dialogue of others; and in *Top Girls* it has already happened in the play. The meanings that stem from these decisions ensure that we never reach any resolution in either situation.

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Although we are told that Nick and Helen continue to be friends, we know that the issue from Act One has not been addressed again, which becomes the downfall of both of them: Helen dies and Nick is left to feel guilty about why. The placing of the final scene in *Top Girls* changes the essence of the story and its meaning in relation to Marlene's success, which defies the ideals of individualism and the positives of Marlene's success in a seemingly male-dominated world. It also means that in hindsight the impact of this scene on the rest of the play takes on a new emotional force. Because both playwrights have written these scenes between two characters, the action is scaled down and therefore emerges through the dialogue. It becomes the most direct way of communicating character wants, conflicts and obstacles, particularly effective as the other characters prove to be the obstacle. These characters use dialogue to persuade, appease, appeal to, insult, instruct, upset, challenge, dissuade, anger, judge, apologise, be honest, lie, conceal, explain and reveal, to convey character 'inner action' in an exploration of the dramatic conflict of wills, utilising varying levels of tension and presenting back-story through speech which is now living in each present situation. By the end of both plays, the relationships have been ended in some significant