Odsjek za anglistiku

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilište u Zagrebu

DIPLOMSKI RAD

Working-class Women in 1980s British Drama

(Smjer: Književno-kulturološki)

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Ak. godina: 2017./2018.

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1. Introduction

The 1980s were a rather tumultuous decade for working-class women and feminism in Great Britain. The first and most influential factor in this matter was the election and subsequent second term of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. Hailed by the rich as a powerful woman, she was far from a feminist. The working-class women's position in the working place and outside of it received no help from Thatcher; rather, she fought for the rich to remain rich and for the poor to remain poor. During this time, theatre suffered rather large budget cuts and thus the production of plays was diminished. Still, three excellent plays that portray the grimy reality of working-class life were written by an aspiring young playwright from the working class, Andrea Dunbar. These plays serve as a testament to a time in British history.

Dunbar's plays give voice to young working-class women by using their typical discourse and jargon, through which they speak out about problems that are often specific for their gender and class. Even though the girls are active in initiating and accepting relations with boys (and men), they are portrayed as badly educated on terms of sex and reproduction through the fault of schools and (often) their parents who avoid these topics. Their parents are uneducated and apathetic due to Thatcher dismantling the welfare state and not educating nor preparing people for economic liberalism in any way. Furthermore, the girls have bad relationships with their own families because their parents abuse them psychologically and physically. Moreover, the girls enter relationships with abusive partners and become victims of sexual predators.

All of these problems that the characters from the plays face are conditioned by their gender and social class. The sociological and historical research McRobbie and Skeggs, experts on the working class in the twentieth century, support the majority of the problems indicated in the plays. Through them we shall examine the implications of gender and class on the lives of Dunbar's working-class characters.

2. The private sphere of working-class women's lives

While middle-class observers have studied the working classes, they have often been the source of disappointment and disgust, and Steph Lawler argues that this is depicted through the lack of legitimacy acknowledged to working-class cultural capital (116). Roberts (1999) argues that sociological accounts of the working class have historically characterised working-class people as "untrustworthy, disgusting, apolitical (or right-wing) and chaotic. They do not know the right things, they do not value the right things, they do not want the right things" (qtd. in Lawler 116). Even though they have been described negatively, Walkerdine contends that the working class has become the "repository of desire, horror and fascination for middle-class people" (Lawler 116), which is a classic example of othering, a term coined by Gayatri Spivak for the process through which imperial discourse creates its "others" (Post-colonial Studies 156); when observed from a middle-class perspective, working-class women are constituted as exotic and repulsive Others (Lawler 123). The working class becomes the excluded subject created by the discourse of power of the middle class. The middle class projects everything they find repulsive about themselves to the working class and at the same time they are fascinated by them, because, as Lawler argues, middle-class existence has become normalised and working-class existence is pathologised (123). Working-class women are represented as the sexually excessive, vulgar and deviant counterpart to middle-class restricted and tasteful femininity (Lawler 124), which is why they became an object of fascination.

The plays focus mainly on young women and teenage girls, since, as Angela McRobbie claims, working-class girls are "one of the most powerless sectors of society" (46). Moreover:

> their lives are more highly structured than their male peers' and their actions are closely monitored by the school, by youth leaders and by parents. The girls are firmly rooted in the home and local environment, and lack the social knowledge and expertise which derives from being able to visit and explore different parts of the city by themselves in the way boys can. (McRobbie 46)

Girls with working mothers were expected to regularly cook family meals by the time they were fourteen. They actually accepted this willingly, because their parents allowed them their freedom every evening if they cooked for the family (McRobbie 47). McRobbie states that girls started going out in the evening regularly by this age, which is confirmed by Dunbar's plays.

McRobbie states that the girls do not unquestioningly accept the careers envisaged for them, even though they are taught to look forward to a "feminine career" in the home. Additionally, this shapes the girls' own self-image and the views they hold of women in general, resulting in them continually referring to women in terms of their role in the family, not their occupations, as they do with men. The only instance in which women are referred to in occupational terms is when they are "middle-class figures of authority – teachers, careers advisors, social workers and so on" (McRobbie 49). Regardless of the fact that all women in their communities worked, they were conceived only in terms of their domestic role, which implies that the girls gave greater importance to the family role (McRobbie 50). Oakley's research on housework supports this as it revealed that middle-class women usually based "their self-concept on individualism, whereas working-class women defined themselves through their domestic roles" (Skeggs 144).

Neither of Dunbar's plays mentions what the women's jobs are, which leads the reader to believe that they were either housewives or that it was not important from the girls' perspectives because they did not think about their mother's careers due to society's pressures about marriage and family life for women.

McRobbie goes on to observe that because of the pressures of the media "working-class and middle-class girls alike begin to under-achieve as "romance" and boys take on an increased importance" (53), which should be taken into account when discussing the girls' ambitions in life. As opposed to boys, girls are conditioned to prioritise relationships over school and work.

One of the girls in McRobbie's research said that she and her friends are all really brainy and do not need the teachers to tell them that. The girls make fun of the teachers because they do not take them seriously as authority figures. Even though the girls are smart and self-confident, they are not interested in school, but in going out every night (57). While the disinterest is reminiscent of *Rita* and *The Arbor*, where the girl thinks she and her friends are too clever for their teacher, the girls' perception of their own intelligence is different in *Rita*, where Rita and Sue do not think they are smart, with Sue even saying "That's why we're so thick 'cause we never go [to school]" (Rita 54). Sue is mad at herself and her family (and society) because she skips school; she envies the middle class because of their nice things, better education and more opportunities in life.

3. Working-class feminism

By late 1978, the Labour Government imposed a five percent limit on wage increases, which incited trade unions to resist the government's resolutions (Martin 49). In the winter of 1978/1979, more than two thousand strikes against statutory wage limits were staged by a wide range of British workers, from nurses to gravediggers (Martin 49). Hence it came to be called the Winter of Discontent. In 1979, 64% of women in Britain were working, which is a rise of 21% since 1951. This rise coincided with the gradual disappearance of male-dominated jobs in manufacturing and production (Martin 53). In her article on working-class women's trade unions, Tara Martin states:

> In the case of women, many trade unions viewed women's work as a temporary state before marriage, or as a part-time endeavour after marriage, to earn "pin money" or extra wages for consumer goods or leisure. Also, women's supposed "psychological passivity" made them unsuitable for the rigors of trade union membership and activism. (53)

Female membership in trade unions grew at a rate of 73% between 1966 and 1979, which means that there was a high rise in women's participation immediately before and during the Winter of Discontent (Martin 54). Even though male-dominated manufacturing unions played a key role in the strikes, female-dominated service-sector unions also played a fairly relevant role (Martin 52). It was the coalitions of working-class women and activists from the Women's Movement that challenged gender inequalities in trade unions first. Campaigns to organise women workers were enhanced by efforts to broaden trade unions' agendas to include issues such as domestic violence and sexist imagery in the media. As Martin states:

> In 1976, the National Union of Journalists published a pamphlet called "Images of Women in the Media", citing examples of sexist imagery in the workplace and how to correct it. Although many mocked and criticised the pamphlet as "farcical" and "typically committee-written crap", the work reveals how the influence of the Women's Movement began to reframe so-called "women's issues", like sexist imagery and sexual harassment as pressing concerns for the entire trade union movement. (54)

Such efforts were important and instrumental in the improvement of the working environment for women. While women were increasingly involved in unions and strikes, it does not necessarily mean that it was easy to recruit new female members (Martin 58).

The trade union which was most active in the involvement of women was NUPE, the National Union of Public Employees. Their steward Jonathan Neale observed that even though in 1982 men continued to be the formal leaders, “about half the people who could actually get things done were women” (Martin 59). Instead of being “lone voices in a man's world”, women were beginning to assert a more “collective presence” in the union. Moreover, other newly energised groups of women began to be instrumental to the fight against privatization (Martin 62). In addition, an interesting fact is that during the 1970s and early 1980s, West Indian and Asian women had higher rates of trade union membership than white women (Martin 54).

The increase in women's involvement in local unions soon translated into the regional and national level: by 1982, one-third of the individuals on the National Executive Council were women. In the same year women in NUPE began to highlight issues of equal opportunity at work and child care, forcing NUPE to focus not only on pay and working conditions, but to be more comprehensive in serving the needs of its membership (Martin 61), concerns that *The Arbor* deals with as shall be discussed below.

In her study on working-class women's perception of feminism, Beverly Skeggs notices that despite not identifying as feminists, their public, collectivist behaviour can be interpreted as actually more feminist than the individualism of some academic feminists who do identify as feminists. Skeggs states that by being involved in working practices struggles many women from the research were moved towards producing a feminist analysis of their condition. As it turns out, it is through union involvement that they realise that exploitative practices in institutional caring could be generalised to other women, which is why union involvement is so important (Skeggs 154).

The achievements of the women involved in the strikes of the Winter of Discontent encouraged trade unions not to look at the demands of working-class women as strictly women's issues, but as an integral goal of the British labour movement as a whole. While the strikes of 1978 and 1979 were partly responsible for Thatcher's victory, they can also be seen as launching an era when women began to transform their collective role in the British labour movement (Martin 63).

4. Analysis of plays

4.1. *The Arbor*

In his introduction to the play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too,* Max Stafford Clarke states that Dunbar "had no desire to move away from Buttershaw [Estate, where she was born] and had little curiosity about life elsewhere" (Rita Introduction, unnumbered). When she was fifteen she wrote the first act of her play *The Arbor* as a school assignment. The play is set on a northern council estate similar to the one she lived in. According to Joe White, who wrote the research materials for the 2000 Methuen edition of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too / A State Affair*, while Dunbar was seventeen years old and pregnant, living in a hostel, one of the hostel workers got hold of *The Arbor* and showed it to a friend who entered it for the Royal Court's Young Writers competition (Rita Appendix, unnumbered). The play won and it was performed as a part of the 1980 Young Writers Festival at the Theatre Upstairs. Max Stafford Clarke, the theatre director, saw big potential in the play, and he collaborated with Dunbar, so she extended it into a full-length play that moved to the Royal Court's main stage (Rita Introduction, unnumbered), becoming the first Young Writers' play that had transferred in this way because of high demand (Three Stage Plays, unnumbered).

The play will be analysed in four parts. Firstly, the title will be explained. Secondly, the characters' relationship to sex and reproduction (and lack of their knowledge about it) will be discussed. Next, the relationships in the play will be analysed in terms of family dynamics and romantic relationships (violence and racism). Lastly, the segment about factory work in the play will be discussed to show the influence of gender and class on working-class women's lives.

As mentioned earlier, the title of the play derives from the council estate where Dunbar lived with her family for the majority of her life. Brafferton Arbor in Bradford had the reputation of being the most deprived council estate in England (even though its state took an even worse turn after Dunbar's death, with drugs being a lot more common). Duncan Sim argues that these are the indicators of deprivation (living standards below a generally agreed minimum) found in many council estates: unemployment, overcrowding, single-parent households (because they often have low income levels), households lacking or sharing amenities, the concentration of ethnic minorities, population decline and households that are not in self-contained accommodation (304). Furthermore, many council estates came up against problems from the time of their construction, for example social homogeneity which meant

that in the absence of a “white collar” population the estates were affected by a large rising unemployment rate during the 1970s and 1980s (299). Moreover, the houses were physically decaying, which made them difficult to let, so the number of vacancies increased (Sim 300).

All of these factors affect the lives of people living there, especially children. According to Diane Reay: “places form an important source of meanings for individuals which they can draw upon to tell stories and hereby come to understand themselves and their place within wider society” (152). Moreover, Reay states that the places people grow up in have a great influence in shaping people’s personalities, which becomes a problem when these places and people are demonised by the media. Reay argues that working-class children are often caught in between the dominant perception of the urban poor and “their own different, locally constructed realities” (153). These council estates are all that the girls from the plays know, thus it shapes their behaviour and perceptions of life in general.

One of the most prominent themes of the play is sex and the characters’ relationship to it. The girl has different and sometimes opposing attitudes about sex, for example, at the very beginning of the play she is kissing a boy and he tries to go further with her, but she rejects him. The reason she gives him is plainly this: “Because I don't want to“ (Arbor 4). She does not feel the need to explain herself and her decision. Still, in the very next instance they argue about having sex and the boy suggests using a condom, but her response is not in line with her previous attitude: “Not on me you won't“ (Arbor 5), which is due to her lack of sexual education, since she is afraid of getting pregnant. The girl seems to be very self-assured, yet at the same time her utterances are contradictory. While this may be just a regular interaction between two confused teenagers who do not know what they want due to their age and being unguided, Schooler et al. give a more plausible explanation of such behaviour. They discuss the impact of experiencing body shame on the person distancing oneself from their own interests, which leads to difficulties in protecting oneself from unwanted pregnancy and infection (326). Furthermore, they argue that self-objectification, fears of negative evaluation and avoidant responses “may inhibit a woman's sexual agency; her ability to act in accordance with her own interests and assert her own desires may be impaired” (Schooler et al. 326), which explains why the girl does not have a firm stance on the question.

In the second Act, scene one, the girl's friend Karen is telling her a story about a sexual encounter she had where the boy suggested buying some condoms, which surprised her: “Don't know why, they don't usually” (Arbor 25). Upon getting to a pharmacy, he was

embarrassed and did not want to go in and buy them, because “it was a woman at the desk. And he'd of been embarrassed so he wouldn't go in and ask” (Arbor 25), so the girl ends up buying the condoms. This is an example of the boy's fear (or shame) of judgement by an unknown person. Varnhagen et al. conducted a study where, among other opinions on sex, they asked high school students about their opinions on buying condoms and they stated “that they would be more comfortable buying condoms from machines in school washrooms than in stores” (130), exactly because of shame.

In Act Two, Scene Six, the girl is walking on the street in the Arbor, and the boys who are sitting on a wall are talking about her: “Shall we hang about and try it on with her?” (Arbor 33), which is an example of harassment girls face from a young age. The theme of sex is explored more extensively in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*.

The girl gets pregnant twice in the play, once in each act. The first pregnancy ends in a miscarriage, and the play ends before the second pregnancy is carried to term, but readers can assume that the girl will give birth. At the beginning of Act Two, we learn the girl’s age; she is only fifteen years old. At the beginning of the play, she gets pregnant and her confession leads to a very dramatic argument between her and her family. While a fifteen-year old girl’s pregnancy is certainly a shock, the family’s reaction to the situation leaves much to be desired and is symptomatic of the way the girl was raised. At one point, the father says: “All she will end up as is a prostitute” (Arbor 7), leaving the girl feeling like a failure and a disgrace to the family. Furthermore, it perpetuates the idea that there is no future for girls unless it is related to family life and their objectification. Morris and Fuller speculate that finding a steady boyfriend with a view to marriage was of greater importance for working-class girls in the 1970s and 1980s than it is now, as “Lees (1986) proposed that finding a steady boyfriend was important as a way of protecting a girls' reputation - a reputation that must be carefully guarded in order to be an attractive marriage prospect (Griffin, 1981)” (534), and, according to the girl’s father, having a child with someone she is not in a relationship with is detrimental to her reputation and thus she will not be able to find a husband, which is of great importance to them.

The play also points out that teenage pregnancy is not an isolated case, because the girl's teenage best friend is also pregnant. What is more, she says that there are eight children in her family and that it runs in the blood (Arbor 10). Dunbar’s girls’ thoughts merely express the only reality the girls have been exposed to, that having children is the only option for women

and that they constantly get pregnant. They know that they have no way out of that life, because that was the fate of the women in their families, which is why they think having a lot of children "runs in the blood" of someone. Brooke argues that during the 1920s and 1930s working-class women were considered to be counterpoints to middle-class ideas of sexuality and femininity, where working-class women were deemed unable to control their reproduction which was represented as a cause of deprivation for the working classes (105). Moreover, McRobbie argues that since the early 1980s there has been a "moral panic surrounding the question of teenage mothers, specifically because their financial dependency shifts from the male partner to the state", which in 1985 led Rhodes Boyson[1] to say that "the state should not encourage bastardy" (159). Furthermore, Thatcher argued that mothers of teenage daughters who get pregnant "must be more willing to take responsibility for their children's behaviour" (159), thereby expressively blaming the mothers for their daughters' "going wrong".

Birth is mentioned only once in the play when the girl is talking to her friend. The girl mentions her mother's crude description of birth: "No. My mum said it's nothing. Or as she would put it, it's like having a good shit" (Arbor 30). This is the only information the girl received on the topic and it is evident that the girl gets no true support from her family, or any practical information about sex and pregnancy. This is explained by the same shame her mother feels about talking about sex, so she avoids the topic altogether. The girl did not spend much time with her mother, so she gathered information from her surroundings, just like the unprepared working-class women from Nelson's 1982 study who valued the information they got from their friends, relatives, doctors, television and books (343).

While pregnancy is not something the girl planned for herself at that point in life, when she is offered a free abortion she rejects it by saying: "I don't believe in them" (Arbor 10). Whether this opinion is a result of careful consideration of facts and personal beliefs is not explicitly expressed in the play. Furthermore, she does not even want to hear about giving up the baby to foster care. Reed, Mader and Nelsen argue that people living in rural areas are more likely to adopt conservative stands taken by rural authority figures and their peers (106), which can be applied to the girl's situation of an unguided child who has no other option but to figure things out by herself through the information she picks up on the streets and the options she

[1] Boyson was an educator and member of the Conservative Party, "the most colourful champion of traditional educational values in the Thatcher era" https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/aug/30/dr-rhodes-boyson-dies-87

sees other women in her community having. Moreover, Porter argues that difficult decision-making involves "negotiations between social structures, ideologies, immediate social contexts, and particular desires . . . Moral praxis involves deep grappling that draws on all of our resources, religious beliefs, moral frameworks, and personal experiences . . . Their [working-class women's] decisions are likely to be morally informed" (85), which supports the interpretation that the girl's opinion and decision are in a greater measure morally informed than based on information about abortion.

In Scene Six, she is riding in a stolen car with a boy who just got out of prison and is driving dangerously fast running from the police. She does not want to jump out of the car because she is pregnant. It is general knowledge that pregnant women should not do such things, so an uneducated and unguided teenager directs her actions through such information. On the other hand, on the very next page she states that it does not matter if she loses her child, because she will have another one (Arbor 14-15). As it is mentioned earlier, the girl knows that women around her are constantly pregnant, so she is sure it will happen to her again.

When her headmaster finds out about the pregnancy, he tells her she needs to transfer schools and go to a so-called "mother-and-baby home" (Arbor 8). It is essentially a school for unmarried mothers. The very existence of such a school in the late 1970s and early 1980s is problematic as it is archaic and shows a connection with a more conservative time. In this school they have notebooks in colours for different subjects, as if they were children. Their subjects are drawing, knitting and sewing (which is highly evocative of Victorian England) and the girl's friend Ann claims it is really easy (Arbor 12). As Peacock states, Thatcher's attitudes concerning the role of women in general were Victorian and were part of a desire to return to "Victorian values" (25). The girls are being taught only these things because the state sees pregnant working-class girls as only able to lead a family life and possibly work a menial factory job. They are only expected to become mothers and not have any other skills or tools for critical thinking. Thatcher promoted the Conservative model of the mother and housewife; she claimed that the battle for women's rights has largely been won and that women's demands for rights should be gone forever (Peacock 25). Loach argues that Thatcherism exploits the contradiction that caring and looking-after others "binds women in relationships of constraint but also connect us to something beyond ourselves" by talking about the hardworking, voluntary effort of the nation's carers, only to abandon them to a political passivity (26). Moreover, Thatcherism burdens working-class women by presenting service and duty as a moral objective, which makes the process of giving and caring the

reward itself, still, emotional production cannot be quantified by the market, so working-class women “remain caught in the cycle of deferred desire” (Loach 26). While Thatcher has obtained her position thanks to the efforts of the suffrage movement and later feminists, it is obvious from her rhetoric that she did not care about the struggles of other women, specifically working-class women.

The students laugh at the teacher continually, they smoke in the classroom even though they are pregnant, and again show no regard for what is healthy and what is not. Arguably, not even the teachers know or care about that. “We're too clever for her” (Arbor 13) is what they say when the teacher does not see, or at least does not show that she sees that the girls are smoking. It is highly likely that the teacher does see what the girls are doing; she just does not care enough to intervene. Moreover, the girl does not want to learn how to knit and says: “I'll just read a book if you don't mind” (Arbor 13). It is unclear whether she is serious and really wants to read or is just teasing her teacher. The whole scene can be compared to McRobbie's research where teenage girls talk about their teacher: “She's always walking up and down seeing what you're doing. You don't get a moment to yourself” (56), just like the girls in the play complain. Furthermore, “she's always on at you to tie your hair back and stand up straight. She talks to you like you was all babies. She's always saying how you shouldn't wear this kind of make-up” (McRobbie 56). On the one hand, teachers do not care about what the girls do and think, but on the other hand they reinforce conservative norms. The teachers reinforce Thatcher’s politics through imposing traditional roles on the girls, but they have also given up on engaging the girls with their classes. Even the teachers show apathy towards the state of the youth as they seem not to care whether the girls will learn anything through their classes apart from learning how to “behave”.

While the girl does and says many things that could be considered as irresponsible and just plainly clueless, in the second Act she grows a lot. Even though she does not show any respect for her teachers, in the second Act she states that she hated her teacher for punishing her, but now she realises that “he was only doing it for my own good. It was a long time before I realised that though” (Arbor 28), which shows character growth. She is starting to learn from her mistakes, for example, she thinks about her future partners more thoughtfully: “Firstly, I've got to get to know him really well to see if he repeats the things Yousaf had done. Then I need some time by myself to think things over. Then I've got to think of the baby when it's due” (Arbor 37).

The girl is in a relationship with Yousaf, a young Pakistani boy who is deeply dissatisfied with her pregnancy and wants her to abort the child. She visits a doctor who tells her she cannot have an abortion at this point, and Yousaf calls the doctor a “white cunt“ (Arbor 31), which is an example of his violent temper and inability to accept and understand the informed opinion of professionals. The girl tells him the doctor will not give you an abortion unless you have a good reason for it, to which Yousaf orders her to tell the doctor that the father left her, and she replies that that is not a good enough reason. She believes she could raise the child on her own, which sounds hopeful if her economic dependence on her parents is taken into account. He then proceeds to tell her he will make her fall off her chair and thus lose the baby. Gelles argues that for some families violence that brings about a miscarriage is more acceptable than having an abortion, because violence is often normative in family life (83). Moreover, pregnant women are less likely to retaliate because of their vulnerability, which often makes violence a more likely outcome (Gelles 83) in partners like Yousaf. Later Yousaf says he will let her have the baby if she will get a childminder when the baby is three months old, so that she can go back to work and she agrees to this (31). The girl finds this agreement acceptable inasmuch she is aware that her new family will not be able to survive without her pay check and, because she internalised harmful norms that a child should have a father even if he is violent, she wants to remain in this relationship.

Another point about being a working-class pregnant woman Dunbar points out is maternity allowance. The girl thinks she will manage to support herself and the child with the maternity allowance she gets, which is a mere 17.55 pounds a week, but she gets it for only 18 weeks. Unfortunately, she says she already spent the 25 pounds she got from the maternity grant two weeks ago. To make matters worse, she bought nothing for the baby (Arbor 36), which shows how unprepared she is to have a child, but also that her family offers her no support. Dunbar makes an excellent point of how low maternity allowance was in the early 1980s, but also how people often do not know how to properly spend it. As the girl was merely 15 years old, living with an abusive boyfriend (who was also a teenager, as far as readers can tell), it is not surprising that her money spending habits were not reasonable. One could also argue that it would be extremely difficult to be a reasonable spender with such a small amount of money.

Many forms of violence are present in the play. Besides physical violence, the girl is subject to verbal and emotional abuse, both by her parents and by her partner, Yousaf. In Act Two, the family fights after the girl's youngest brother dies. Her older brother is fighting with their father and tells him: “Do you want a fight, bastard?” (Arbor 26). This kind of language is

present throughout the play, it is not shocking to them and the parents barely get offended by it. It seems as though it is a regular form of address in their family, which is why at one point the girl says: “When you've lived there for years you get used to it” (Arbor 28). Furthermore, her mother does not comfort her; she thinks giving her daughter food and a place to live is a sufficient expression of love, again because that is how her mother acted towards her and it is the only approach she knows. Even after pleading to her mother and asking for support, this is the answer the girl gets: “I wish you'd fuck off and leave me alone . . . Oh go on then. Get out of my way” (28). Still, from the next exchange one can see that it is not that she has no understanding; rather, she feels there is nothing they can do to change the father’s behaviour and that they should just ignore it:

> GIRL: What about me? He's always calling me a Paki lover and I'm a poxed up bastard. Did you know that?
>
> MOTHER: Take no notice like we do. (Arbor 27)

Victims of domestic violence sometimes react to it with passive resignation or endure it out of concern for their children and fear of economic hardship (Yount & Li 1127). Similarly, McRobbie states that “the girls recognised the home as a site of conflict, sometimes even of violence, but this did not stop them from being rooted in it, and all its daily melodramas. Family disputes, quarrels and violence merely led them to reflect all the more on its role and function” (58), which is why the girls in the play accept the violence in their families and violence from their partners as something normal.

Domestic violence is explored more in the play, especially in the second Act. According to Warrington, domestic violence is the most prevalent violent crime against women in England and Wales (365). It is first mentioned in a conversation the girl is having with her friend Karen from work:

> KAREN: Does he belt you?
>
> GIRL: No.
>
> KAREN: How did you get that black eye last week then?
>
> GIRL: He belted me.
>
> KAREN: Don't it bother you?
>
> GIRL: I think I'm getting used to it now. (Arbor 31)

At first, she does not want to admit he is molesting her, but rather soon she sees that her friend supports her, so she confesses. What is truly disturbing is her resignation to the violence from her partner. Even though she is merely a teenager, she is used to receiving violent treatment

from the people who are closest to her, so she deems getting beaten by her boyfriend as something normal. Wilson (1983) argues that violence is "an extreme form of normality, an exaggeration of the way in which society expects men to behave as figures of authority" (qtd. in Warrington 371), which is why nobody is shocked by the girl's confessions. This notion is best exemplified in the scene where her neighbour asks her how she is, the girl says: "OK I suppose. If you like being beat in all the time that is. . . . There's nowt wrong between us. I think he just does it for the sake of doing it" (Arbor 35). Even though Yousaf is increasingly violent with her, the girl stays with him. According to Glass (1995), women stay with abusive men because they feel that they are the problem and that the violence is entirely their fault, moreover, they think breaking up the family would be the worst sin a woman could commit (Warrington 371). In a qualitative study of marriage Dryden (1999) found that "both men and women blamed women for conflict, with husbands continually reflecting back negative images of their wives to their wives, while simultaneously absolving themselves of any responsibility for their own behaviour" (Warrington 371), which is similar to Yousaf blaming the girl for her pregnancy and the fact that she did not terminate it. Even though domestic violence is classless, through his research John P. McKendy found that almost all of men he met in a treatment programme for batterers labelled as abusers were either working class or poor (144). Still, this cannot signify that only working-class men commit domestic violence, suggesting that it is likely that men from middle- and upper-classes are plainly able to peruse legal services and seek advice from attorneys that frees them from attending such programmes.

The girl is sure Yousaf would come to strangle her in the night if she left him and returned to live with her mother. She is afraid of leaving him, but she is afraid of staying with him, too. Even though she says she wants to stab him, she cannot fight back, obviously out of fear that he will hit her even more. Still, she manages to leave him and stays with her mother. Yousaf comes to look for the girl and tells her mother: "Well if you see her before I do, tell her she's dead when I get her" (Arbor 39). The mother then finally gets concerned for her well-being and actually shows affection towards the girl, so she tells her not to tell her the address of the place she will be staying at, so that Yousaf could not possibly find out about it. The girl stays at a refuge centre for women and children where she finally manages to break all ties to Yousaf. He does find her and tries to buy her back, but now she stands up for herself: "You can't give me anything now. It's gone too far. The only thing you can give me is peace. So

leave me alone" (Arbor 39), which provides a long-awaited moment of triumph for the girl and leaves the reader or audience member with a sense of hope.

In the play, racism is mainly directed at Yousaf, but the girl is also insulted because of her relationship with him and their future child. Her friends tease her about Yousaf multiple times in the play:

> KAREN: Yuk. You're not going out with a Paki are you?
>
> ANN: He's not bad looking for a Paki, is he?
>
> KAREN: I can't stand Pakis. They smell. (Arbor 25)

They move on to comment on how she dares to walk around with him, saying that they would be ashamed to be seen with him, to which the girl replies "everybody to their own liking" (Arbor 25). Another friend tells her she should call her child Hovis, because it will be brown[2], which is racist, insulting, and it is a comment on how deeply embedded racism is in smaller communities. Jacobs states that before the Race Relations Acts were enacted in 1968, racism was widespread in the private and public housing market; it was common for private renters to display signs saying "no coloureds", which was a huge obstacle for obtaining good-quality housing for non-white people (199). Moreover, Smith and Hattery argue that urban ghettoes and prisons house unruly drug users and unwanted non-white people by removing them from middle class neighbourhoods and from public life (85), meaning that to the government all non-white people fall into the same category as disorderly citizens, which often causes them to become disobedient, too.

The girl's brother is explicitly racist and violent with him in Act Two, Scene Two:

> DAVID: Get out of here and don't come back again or I'll smash them fucking black brains out of that black head of yours.
>
> YOUSAF: I can't help it being a Paki. I didn't ask to be. (Arbor 27)

By using simple, everyday language, Dunbar expresses the complete reality of racism and violence. David is plainly racist and Yousaf defends himself in the calmest manner by trying to appeal to David's common sense. He is who he is, just like David. Unfortunately, this approach does not change David's mind, but Dunbar truly hit the nail on the head. Keith Jacobs described a similar phenomenon that occurred on the Brooke Estate in Eltham, south-east London well-known for racialised violence, where black people were aware of the

[2] Hovis is a bread company.

estate's reputation and chose to live elsewhere, while "white youths living on the estate felt able to harass and victimise those black people who were there" (201).

Another important point Yousaf makes about immigrants is this lament about the lack of education he has because of his family's poverty:

> I can't read and I can't write. I can't get a job because of it. So I've got to work in textiles because I don't do any kind of writing. People laugh at you when you tell them you can't read or write . . . They don't realise you come from a poor country. They don't know what poor means over here. In Pakistan you can't say I'm going on social security or going to scratch on. They haven't got such places. (Arbor 28)

This could be interpreted as Dunbar's way of saying that being working class in England is difficult, but non-white working-class people struggle more than white people. By adding this lament Dunbar appeals to the audience to be more understanding of the backgrounds of the people subject to racism and ridicule. Miles states that "Asian and Caribbean people in Britain constitute an underclass because of the disadvantaged position that they occupy in the markets of work, housing and education" (233). They can often be uneducated and when trying to change that they are faced with many difficulties, including having to show their passport when requesting access to education, housing, healthcare or social security (230). Furthermore, this makes them specifically vulnerable to harassment in a society where skin colour is an indicator of being an immigrant (230).

Women's position in society is not openly discussed in the play except in the scene where the girl is talking to Karen about Pakistani women, she says: "It's their religion. To them a man is higher than a woman. Where's we're equal you see" (Arbor 25). It is interesting that the girl deems women to be equal to men in England, but she probably means that both men and women can work and vote. Karen does not understand why Pakistani women are deemed to have lesser value than men in their community and the girl tells her she does not know either, but: "A Paki woman only serves one purpose . . . To cook, clean, have kids and look after them" (Arbor 25), which is the reality of working-class women in England and the girls do not understand that they are all in the same position.

A very important part of being working class is factory work. The girls are working in a factory and Karen tells the girl about having less work next week, because no wool has been sent from the dye house yet. This is an important comment because it points out the instability

of work, the possibility of having less work and subsequently earning less money through no fault of their own. Another important point Karen makes is how little time she has to spend with her child: “Mind you I'm glad in a way because it means I'll be able to see more of the baby, I only see her first thing in the morning, I see her at night for half an hour, then it's her bedtime, then at weekends I go out at night. So I don't see her that much” (Arbor 29). This represents an important comment on the reality of being a working-class mother working long hours for a small wage. Thatcher's politics simultaneously promoted the rhetoric of motherhood and made economic conditions worse for working-class mothers (Skeggs 143). Skeggs also states that in the 1970s, before Thatcher, “attempts were made to develop feminism as a representative movement with a clear agenda which included: free 24 hour nurseries; abortion on demand; free contraception; a woman's right to control her own fertility” (140-141), but despite the hard battles not all of these demands were met in the 1980s (141).

In Tara Martin's article on women's role in trade unions, she writes about the *Equality For Women Within Trade Unions* charter published in 1979 by the national Trades Unions Council. The charter urged unions to bring forward greater equality for women members by encouraging unions, among other things, to provide child care for women members who attend union meetings and to have union publications written without using sexist terms. In 1984, the TUC reviewed the policy and published the report For Pay and Women Workers. This report brought a previously marginal issue to the foreground of the British trade union movement and it cited goals to specifically address the issues of women workers (Martin 62).

Moreover, Myra Marx Ferree's 1974/75 survey on working-class women shows that employed women were less likely to claim that they were unaware of their friends' opinions about women's place in society, which is consistent with the greater discussion of the movement among employed women (180), just like it is exhibited in the play. Dunbar's critique coincided with the beginning of the unions' efforts to eliminate sexism in the workplace and help workers who are mothers.

4.2. *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*

In 1982 Dunbar’s second play, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too,* was first performed at the Royal Court and won the George Devine Award (Rita unnumbered). The most prominent theme of the play is sex, so it will be discussed first. Next, working-class teenage life will be discussed

through the girls' perception of their current lifestyle and their bleak future. The only outright political commentary in the play is spoken by Bob and it will also be mentioned.

Sex is explored in the play through a number of motifs: sex education, contraception, adultery, pregnancy, menstruation and intercourse itself. The play opens with the girls completing their babysitting job for the evening and Bob, the father of the children they babysit, is taking them home. Bob is essentially a felon, since the girls are teenagers and later he has sex with them, but him being a felon is mentioned only by the girls a lot later in the play, when they start feeling bad about what they have done (as if they were the only ones accountable).

As Rita and Sue themselves say in the play, sex education is something their school gave barely any attention to: "We've learnt a bit at school but it's not much to go by. All we did was drawings of the male and female sex organs" (Rita 18), which can barely be considered as a sex education class, meaning that the girls were clueless. Moreover, they say that all that they know is what they learnt from other people from the neighbourhood, which means that teenagers learnt from teenagers. In her research, McRobbie notices that: "the school . . . redefines sexuality as human biology and the club outlaws it altogether. In each case the girls are left without any real source of support or advice and have to fall back on each other, and their teen magazines" (51).

To make matters worse, they say their parents never spoke to them about it, because: "Talk like that is dirty in our house. We haven't to say owt or we'll get a belt" (Rita 18), which is due to her parents being uneducated and not knowing better themselves. They do not know what the girls are being taught at school and considering that the state keeps quiet about sexual education, it is not surprising that parents do not discuss sex. Still, after the first encounter with Bob, Sue and her mother talk about contraception: "You're fifteen now. And girls of your age get up to all kinds of things" (Rita 29). Her mother does not really explain anything about intercourse to her, but she makes an effort to help her daughter think about safe sex: "I'm only telling you for your own good. Get out and enjoy yourself. You only get the chance once. So take it while you've got it. Anyway it's up to you what you want to do. But I'd advise you to go on the pill" (Rita 30). This quote says a lot about her mother's life and what Rita can expect of her own life. Her mother learned she grew old quickly due to hard working conditions and now nobody desires her; she knows the same fate awaits her daughter, so she wants her to have fun while she is still young. In a study conducted by

Costos et al. in 2002, through qualitative interviews with 138 women aged 26 to 60 years, they "found that 64% [of women] reported that their mothers gave them negative messages (e.g., "grin and bear it") about menstruation and sexuality" (Allen & Goldberg 535), meaning that they were not able to have honest and informative conversations about sex with their mothers, just like the girls in the plays.

Considering that this is their reality, it is not that surprising that the first person to impart any practical knowledge about sex on them is Bob, an adult man who is about to have sex with them both. Besides laughing throughout the "lesson", the girls keep asking him about the terms he uses, for example, if he says "sexual intercourse", they ask if he means "have it off", or if he says "Durex", they ask if he means "a rubber-johnny" (Rita 17). Next, they do not know what an erection is, so they stop Bob and tell him this:

> SUE: Well instead of using the proper names, use hard-on and things like that. Because that's all we understand.
>
> RITA: Yes you should. We've never been taught words like erection and Durex. (Rita 16)

This interaction reveals how uneducated the girls are and that all the knowledge they have is picked up from the streets where sex is discussed in a crude manner. Brooke states that "In the twenties, a plaintive record of working-class women's desperate desire to obtain sexual knowledge could be found in the letters sent to the birth control advocate Marie Stopes" (107), proving how young women want to know more about sex, the problem is that they often do not know or even have anyone to ask about it. Furthermore, the girls in the play mention that the only times they see condoms are on the street and not in sexual situations: "Lads around our place buy them for a laugh and blow them up for balloons" (Rita 15). In a 2005 study by Prata, Vahidnia and Fraser, they concluded that intervention programs that address misperceptions among youth about condom use should be aimed at less educated and unemployed young people as a part of an effective disease and unwanted pregnancy prevention strategy (192), because many young people believe condoms diminish sexual pleasure (192) and are ashamed to buy them (Varnhagen et al. 130).

What is more, the girls do not understand the process of reproduction. At one point Bob tells the girls that sperm can fertilise the egg inside a woman and Rita says: "We haven't got eggs inside us. We're not ducks you know" (Rita 17), which is funny to the girls who keep giggling throughout the scene; they truly act as teenagers and Bob is taking advantage of their youth and *naïveté*. To add to their inexperience, Rita exclaims "Jesus! It looks like a frozen

sausage!" (Rita 21) upon seeing Bob's penis. When Bob puts the condom on, Sue and Rita agree that they are glad they refused to do that. Later, Sue is mad he did not let her put one on, because Rita gets to put it on, so now she wants to do it, too (later, Sue will want a "hickey" because Rita got one), which proves how childish they are. Griffiths argues that many young girls who want to seem more mature do so by adopting certain social practices (such as going out with boys), but they usually combine childlike and adolescent qualities (Morris & Fuller 536), much like the girls in the play who have intercourse, but giggle throughout the "outing".

Rita and Sue talk about their menstruation and how Sue did not even tell her mother when she started having her period. Sue is conditioned to feel shame about her body and, possibly, her mother is also ashamed of her own body which is why they cannot have an open conversation about menstruation. The girls continue talking about how embarrassing it is going to the shop to buy sanitary pads and how they fight for the last "rag" (Rita 32). Martin (1987) confirms this through in-depth interviews with women who stated that they manage their menstruation by hiding the evidence of leaking blood and sanitary products to avoid shame (Allen & Goldberg 535). Unfortunately, this shame is widespread throughout society and is present even today, so one cannot argue how characteristic this is of the working class, but it is certainly a problem that concerns the female sex and gender. According to Schooler et al.:

> [B]ecause feeling shameful frequently evokes a critical evaluation of one's whole self, shame about menstruation is likely to extend more broadly to the body as a whole. It is not just the act of menstruating that is dirty and shameful; the young woman who menstruates becomes dirty and shameful. (325)

The girls even discuss whether Bob would mind having intercourse with Rita while she is menstruating. Discussing this topic is complex due to mixed or negative perceptions of menstruation (Allen & Goldberg 536), which is evident in Sue's reply that she does not think it would be very nice, while Rita says a lot of people do it (Rita 33). They conclude that Bob might not even notice it because her menstruation will be near the end when they see each other. Rita is concerned because, as Allen and Goldberg argue, during puberty women internalise contradictory societal messages about menstruation and their developing bodies where they learn that women have sexual and reproductive potential, but at the same time they are devalued as women (535). At that point in life they are challenged by the notion of handling their menstruation in their sexual relationships (Allen & Goldberg 536), which is why the girls discuss it together before talking to Bob.

Just like in *The Arbor*, this play employs a teenage pregnancy as a means of showing that the girls have no way out of the situation they are in. Rita is moving in with Bob because she is pregnant. According to McRobbie, leaving home for girls meant moving into the married home, and the worse the situation they had at home, the greater was their desire to get married (60). This explains why Rita does not have any difficulties with moving in with Bob, she knows that this is arguably the easiest way to escape from her current unsatisfying situation. Another point is that, according to McRobbie's research, there is a notion that being pregnant is an "honest" proof of being sexually active. Supposedly, procreation is a more acceptable reason to have intercourse than pleasure, because by not having children, the girls are deemed merely promiscuous (163).

Their lives are quite bleak and they have barely any hope. As any teenager, they are revolted by their surroundings, though it does come off as a resignation with boredom - there is nothing to do, so we do not do anything. While driving in the car with Bob, they ask him where they can go at this time, and he replies that there are not too many places, because there are literally not many places to go to as a working-class youth and also because there are not many places where he could go with the girls as people would recognise him. Another instance where this is mentioned is in a conversation Sue is having with her brother about their plans for the evening, where they expose the reality of a dysfunctional working-class family:

> SAM: Nowt much happening round here tonight.
>
> SUE: There will be when the drunks come home. (Rita 35)

Teenagers do not have a place where they can go out and spend time together, so the only occurrence that breaks their monotonous evenings is the return of the drunken adults who wreak havoc.

When talking about their plans and dreams, Rita says she would like to enjoy herself and go to London "before anything happens" (Rita 38), which probably means before she gets married or pregnant. This is the only instance in Dunbar's plays where the girls express a wish for a different life for themselves. Rita continues to talk about how she would like to travel to many different places, but also work as a policewoman. Rita is afraid of being trapped in a working-class life and she daydreams about exploring the world and being a policewoman to become middle-class and thus avoid having the life of her parents. When asked what her family would think of this, Rita says: "To tell you the truth I think they'll be glad to be shot of me" (38), which is symptomatic of the negative way they treat her, making her feel as if her

family would be better off without her. In her analysis of the play *Breezeblock Park* by Willy Russell, Steph Lawler argues that working-class existence is "an existence which is repeatedly represented as robbing the self of its actualization, in a kind of grinding-down process. Escapism, then, is represented in the play as the (pathologised) solution to a working-class life" (122). The girls in the play are daydreaming, going out and having sex with an older man as a means of escaping their realities.

Later on, the girls are talking about Bob's wife, Michelle: "She's got everything a woman could ask for. Her own house. A nice husband and a couple of kids. She can buy what she wants. And she's still not satisfied. I mean I wouldn't mind what she's got. I'd be satisfied" (Rita 48). A traditional family life seems to be what the girls would find acceptable as long as they have enough money and a handsome husband, because that is the only kind of life they have been shown. Ferree mentions that early studies by Komarovsky (1962) and Rainwater et al. (1959) have shown that working-class women are patriarchal and traditional in their attitudes and behaviour (173). The girls are patriarchal because it is the only option they know about because it is the way all the families in their community are. However, studies that focused on working-class women conducted in the second half of the 1970s have shown extraordinary levels of personal strength (Rubin, 1976; Seifer, 1976) and non-traditional attitudes and behaviour (Howe, 1977; McCourt, 1977; Tepperman, 1970) suggesting their support for feminism (173), from which we can conclude that women who spend time in a working environment can change their opinions on the patriarchy because of their exposure to people who are educated on female worker's rights.

Rita continues her lament by saying: "He is good to her. What more could she ask for?" (Rita 48), even though earlier Sue says: "He's the sort of fella I could live with. As long as he isn't doing to me what he's doing to his wife" (Rita 34). The girls are aware that adultery is a frequent occurrence, but they hope it will not happen to them. Even the older women from their community justify the men's behaviour with the notion that boys will be boys, so it is symptomatic that Rita concludes that she would expect Bob to cheat on her because he is handsome. This kind of internalised sexism is repeated later when Michelle is fighting with Sue's parents and says: "If it's put there on a plate, he's gonna take it isn't he? He wouldn't be much of a man if he didn't" (Rita 71), which is toxic, sexist mindset that makes the girls justify Bob's behaviour, too. What is particularly troublesome in this kind of thinking is that none of them sees the girls as victims, not even their parents nor the girls themselves. If they had the capacity of understanding that, the girls would not become victims. Furthermore, their

parents do not ask them how they feel not even once, instead they instantly start insulting them. Sue's father calls her a "good-for-nothing little prostitute" (Rita 66). This insult is used in *The Arbor* and is discussed in the previous section.

Even though Michelle uttered terribly sexist opinions earlier in the play, at the very end of the play, she and Sue's mother are talking in a pub and this is what she says about marriage: "It's all right for them to do what they want. But when it comes to you, oh no, you're the wife. Stop at home, look after the kids, cook for me, that's what men want for you. And sex of course. They can't do without that can they" (Rita 81). Certainly, this view is not specific to the 1980s. For example, Gilbert and Gubar mention the nineteenth century as an era whose sexual ideology was so oppressive that women were confined to their homes "with all its deprivations and discontents" (Introduction, xxxi) and that very domestic space constituted "a feminine household economy that helped to establish the conditions for modern institutional culture" (Introduction, xxxvii). In a similar vein, Peacock emphasises that Thatcher promoted traditional gender roles:

> The entrepreneurial, bourgeois capitalist male returns home to the wife and mother who controls the domestic sphere. In this idealised scenario women were the guardians of the family and traditional morality, and practical housekeepers who, like Mrs. Thatcher herself, knew the "value of money" and the "impact of rising prices in shops". (25)

During Thatcher's premiership the unemployment rate hit a record high, there were two major recessions, manufacturing declined, the pay gap between men and women got worse, real estate prices rose, the number of union memberships crumbled and a large rise in social and economic inequality was witnessed (Rogers, *The Guardian*)[3]. Dunbar criticises Thatcher's policies openly in *Rita*. Bob gives his reply to the girls who are genuinely interested why "people really hate her" (Rita 50). Besides saying that there is no hope for children today all because of her bringing total destruction, Bob goes on to explain how she is not on the poor people's side:

> BOB: She makes the rich richer. Like MPs for instance: they're not badly paid and she gives them a raise and people like us only get about one pound extra on our unemployment. They won't even give textile workers a rise. They're having to strike

[3] The article can be accessed on: www.theguardian.com/politics/datablog/2013/apr/08/britain-changed-margaret-thatcher-charts.

> for it. This is one of the reasons why the country's gone down the drain. That's what you get for a woman prime minister in Parliament. (50)

While he expresses the pain of the working-class people quite right, he manages to sneak in a sexist comment, perpetuating the idea that women are not capable of being political leaders and subconsciously telling the girls that they are not as competent because of their gender. Peacock argues that Caryl Churchill's socialist-feminist critique of women's status in Britain under Thatcher concludes that the feminist movement had not significantly advanced the position of women because it had not been unified; "the mere presence of a woman Prime Minister, herself a bourgeois feminist, offered no greater opportunities for the majority women who could or did not aspire to be 'top girls'" (95).

4.3. *Shirley*

During the gap between the development and production of the film *Rita*, *Shirley* was written. It was also commissioned by the Theatre Upstairs (Three Stage Plays Introduction, unnumbered). This play focuses on incarceration, unemployment, romantic relationships and sex.

At the very beginning of the play, Shirley's boyfriend Eddie is arrested in her mother's home. When a policeman knocks at the door, he turns himself in and upon hearing he will have to spend twenty eight days in prison, he says: "Oh thank you. I needed to get a couple weeks break anyway" (Shirley 77). West argues that in traditionally English working-class areas sons of convicted parents are unlikely to encounter many opportunities to change their life trajectory and that being exposed to a community where criminal acts are normalised allows young men to break the law (Hagan & Palloni 293). Eddie is not even surprised by the police and he views spending time in prison as time off. Still, the social and economic impact of incarceration is most widely felt by those who already have the weakest economic opportunities, which means that mass incarceration only deepens the disadvantages for the most marginal members of society (Western & Pettit 9). Western and Pettit add that incarceration affects not only those who go to jail, but their families, too (9). Moreover, prisons function as a strategy for removing unwanted and un-useful members of a capitalist society, making prisoners and ex-prisoners nearly non-citizens with smaller to no chances of future employment and unable to challenge structures of power (Smith & Hattery 84), which suited Thatcher just like any other conservative political leader in history. Another important

point mentioned by Smith and Hattery is that incarcerated people are not counted against the unemployment rate, thus incarceration can be viewed as a tactic for artificially controlling the unemployment rate (87), which was high during Thatcher's premiership and it makes for a viable explanation for high incarceration rates.

This is Dunbar's first play where unemployment benefit (or "dole") is mentioned. Eddie's arrest does not particularly upset Shirley because: "It's a good thing he signed on for 'is dole before they arrested him. Otherwise I'd of been skint" (Shirley 78). In a way, he is able to provide for her even from prison and even though they are both unemployed. Still, McRobbie argues that often the small amount of money the girls received from their boyfriends had to be spent on either bail charges or the bus fares to visit them in the detention centre (166). Later, she mentions the dole office and picking up her check again, which means that after Eddie got out of prison, she was able to receive her own unemployment checks (Shirley 89). Wacquant argues that while men are handled by the penal wing of the system's institutions, their women and children are managed by a welfare system that is designed to reinforce casual employment (Smith & Hattery 83), which is portrayed exactly in this play where Shirley receives Eddie's unemployment checks and does not have a steady job. Moreover, Smith and Hattery suggest that most inmates are "unemployed immediately prior to their incarceration and among those who were employed, they were earning wages that put them among the poor and working class (Chang & Thompkins 2002)" (83), which is also reflected in the play as Eddie signed for his unemployment benefit right before getting arrested.

The women in this play often go out, either with their boyfriends/partners, or with their female friends. The notion of women being in control of their own bodies and pleasure will be discussed further below. Skeggs describes the way working-class women confidently went out to bars in large groups and frightened men in a similar way Shirley and her mother did:

> For many men it seemed there was nothing more intimidating than this loud, laughing, together group of women. They appear as terrifying. They were claiming their right to their pleasure and social space. Their appearance made it even more disturbing, for they looked the part of the traditional feminine young woman, yet all their behaviour suggested otherwise. Their feminine performance proves that they are precisely that which they are not. (105)

Shirley simultaneously represents two different sides to attitudes towards sex; on the one hand, she accepts socially conditioned sexist expectations of women, and on the other hand,

she engages in sexual activity for her own pleasure, too. At the beginning of the play, Shirley is trying to persuade her friend Karen to go on a double date with her by saying: "If a fella takes you out and pays for you all night he expects something in return at the end of the night" (Shirley 78). The girls do not think about this notion critically, rather, they accept it as common sense, because that is all that they know and they have never been told or educated to think outside of these norms. In Skeggs' research on ambivalent femininities and their "production" in a working-class social environment, she states that young women knew that their sexuality had a value that could be traded in their local society (Skeggs 110). This is true of women today, too. Certain social environments support certain values and expect certain behaviour, so if one wants to belong there, one must abide to those values and behaviours. Still, by the end of the play Shirley and her mother, Audrey, are discussing sex and Audrey complains about her partner wanting to have sex much less than she wants to. Moreover, when her mother tells her boyfriend to move out of her house, he gets violent and says: "Sex maniacs they are. The pair of them" (Shirley 100). Roy is bitter at Audrey and Shirley and while female sexuality is not exactly discussed in a healthy way, the notion that women have sex for pleasure is present. Sex is not something done to them, they are not there for boys and men to experiment on them, rather, as the young women from Woodlands in Morris and Fuller's research, Audrey and Shirley are actively involved in their sexual relationships, and besides Roy, they are not viewed negatively by others (535). Morris and Fuller continue by stating: "That is not to deny that young women may be harassed and coerced into taking part in sexual acts, but there are situations when young women take an active role and not only in terms of "servicing men" (Halson, 1991), but also for their own satisfaction" (535), which is exactly the case in *Shirley*; wanting sex does not exclude being subject to sexist norms and harassment.

5. Conclusion

Dunbar's plays portray working-class life on council estates, which are depicted as deprived and having a large influence on the girl's lives. These notions are supported by Sim, who explains that council estates in the 1980s were physically decaying and that they were homogenous in terms of class and professions of their inhabitants. Ethnical minorities had no other option but to live in council estates, which subjected them to racism. Life on council estates and the people who live there influence the opinions and approaches to life of the girls in the plays, which is supported by McRobbie's and Skeggs's viewpoints and arguments.

Sex and reproduction are important themes discussed in the plays and they include sexual education (and the lack thereof), contraceptives, menstruation, pregnancy and abortion. Even though the girls from the plays are active in initiating and accepting relations with boys (Yousaf, Eddie and others that are not named) and men (Bob), they are portrayed as badly educated on terms of sex and reproduction through the fault of schools and (often) their parents who avoid these topics, which is why Bob, a man who is about to have sex with them, is the first person that explains sex to them. This is supported by McRobbie who states that girls rely on each other and teen magazines for information on sex. The girls are clueless about their bodies and sex, which is why they have contradicting opinions on sex (they want to use protection, then they do not want it), and Schooler et al. state that this is due to their body shame. Both girls and boys are ashamed of buying condoms, which is supported by Varnhagen et al. Menstruation is also something the girls are ashamed of, which is supported by Allen and Goldberg and Schooler et al.

The girl in *The Arbor* gets pregnant and her parents are outraged because she ruined her reputation and Morris and Fuller claim that for working-class girls finding a husband was of great importance, which explains the parents' reaction. The parents in the plays are uneducated and apathetic due to Thatcher dismantling the welfare state and not educating nor preparing people for economic liberalism in any way. Moreover, the parents merely act the way their own parents acted as it is the only approach they are familiar with. They discuss sex in a very restricted way with their daughters and refer to it in negative terms, which is supported by Allen and Goldberg. Furthermore, the girls have bad relationships with their families because they are physically and emotionally abused. They accept it as a normal part of family life, as is explained by McRobbie who states that girls get used to it.

Factory work is mentioned in *The Arbor* and the girls complain about their bad working conditions that are worsened for them after they have children, which is supported by Skeggs.

In *Shirley*, the effect of her boyfriend's incarceration on her life is discussed in terms of unemployment benefits and the fact that they were not enough for her to lead a normal life, much like McRobbie states. Moreover, working-class men are more likely to be incarcerated, due to their class and surroundings that enable criminal activity, which is supported by Hagan and Palloni.

In conclusion, the plays offer an excellent insight into the lives of young working-class women and the problems they face due to their gender and class. The notions of working-class lives mentioned above are pointed out in the plays and supported by sociological research.

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the representation of working-class women in three plays written during the 1980s in England. The analysed plays are Andrea Dunbar's *The Arbor*, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* and *Shirley*. Dunbar's plays give voice to young working-class women by using their typical discourse and jargon, through which they speak out about problems that are often specific for their gender and class. Even though the girls are active in initiating and accepting relations with boys (and men), they are portrayed as badly educated on terms of sex and reproduction through the fault of schools and (often) their parents who avoid these topics. Their parents are uneducated and apathetic due to Thatcher dismantling the welfare state and not educating nor preparing people for economic liberalism in any way. Furthermore, the girls have bad relationships with their own families because their parents abuse them psychologically and physically. Moreover, the girls enter relationships with abusive partners and become victims of sexual predators. All of these problems that the characters from the plays face are conditioned by their gender and social class. Through their sociological researches McRobbie (2000), Skeggs (1997) and other experts on the working class confirm the vast majority of the problems indicated in the plays and through them we examine the implications of gender and class on the lives of the play's characters. The private side of life of working-class women is discussed using works by Lawler (2000), McRobbie and Skeggs, and the chapter dedicated to working-class feminism focuses on Martin's 2009 text on women's role in unions.

Key words: working-class women, working-class girls, 1980s, drama, Andrea Dunbar.