Top Girls Study Guide

Top Girls by Caryl Churchill

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Introduction

Since its earliest productions, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* was regarded as a unique, if difficult, play about the challenges working women face in the contemporary business world and society at large. Premiering on August 28, 1982, in the Royal Court Theatre in London before making its New York debut on December 28, 1982, in the Public Theatre, *Top Girls* won an Obie Award in 1983 and was the runner-up for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. The play is regularly performed around the world and has quickly become part of the canon of women's theater. *Top Girls* helped solidify Churchill's reputation as an important playwright.

Critics praise *Top Girls* for a number of reasons. Churchill explores the price of success paid for by the central character, Marlene, while using unusual techniques including a nonlinear construction, an overlapping dialogue, and a mix of fantasy and reality. The last occurs at a dinner party celebrating Marlene's promotion, which is attended by five women from different times in history, literature, and art. The dinner party is the first scene of the play and, to many critics, the highlight of *Top Girls*. Churchill brings up many tough questions over the course of the play, including what success is and if women's progress in the workplace has been a good or bad thing. While many critics compliment the play on its handling of such big ideas in such a singular fashion, some thought *Top Girls* was disjointed and its message muddled. As John Russell Taylor of *Plays & Players* wrote, "Like most of Churchill's work, it is about nothing simple and easily capsulated."

Author Biography

Churchill was born on September 3, 1938, in London, England, the daughter and only child of Robert Churchill and his wife. Churchill's father was a political cartoonist; her mother worked as a model, secretary, and actress. Churchill began writing stories and doing shows for her parents as a child. After spending her early childhood in London, the family moved to Montreal, Quebec, Canada, in about 1949, where Churchill spent most of her formative years.

In 1956, Churchill returned to England to enter Oxford University. While studying literature at Lady Margaret Hall, she began writing plays for student productions. Her first play was written as a favor for a friend. One of Churchill's student plays, *Downstairs*, won first prize at the National Student Drama Festival. Churchill graduated with her B.A. in 1960, intending to become a serious writer.

Family matters stymied her plans. In 1961, Churchill married David Harter, a lawyer, and had three sons over the next decade. Still, she managed to write about thirty radio dramas, usually one act, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, as well as some television plays in the early 1970s. Many of these early plays were related to her life experiences and were somewhat depressing, but they did garner Churchill some notice for her writing abilities.

In the early 1970s, Churchill turned to theater, initially writing for fringe theater groups. *Owners*, a tragic farce, was her first major play, produced by a fringe group in London in 1972. This production led to her position as a resident playwright at the Royal Court Theatre from 1974 to 1975. Churchill began exploring feminist ideas with her first play for the Royal Court, *Objections to Sex and Violence* (1974).

Churchill continued to explore feminism with *Vinegar Tom* (1976). She wrote the play both with the help of and for Monstrous Regiment, a feminist touring-theater company. *Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976) use historical settings to discuss repression. These plays garnered Churchill more attention and critical praise.

In 1979, Churchill's *Cloud Nine* had its first production. This was her first big hit, and had a long run on both sides of the Atlantic. The Obie Awardwinning play was set in the Victorian era, with the roles played by their physical opposites. For example, a man played an unhappy and unfulfilled wife. Critics enthusiastically praised Churchill's originality. Churchill followed this success with *Top Girls* (1982), a play about feminism and the price of success for women. Though some did not regard it as highly as *Cloud Nine*, the play cemented her reputation and won her another Obie.

Churchill wrote plays on a variety of topics throughout the 1980s and 1990s. *Fen* (1983), which focused on female tenant farmers, won her the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. In 1986, she wrote *Serious Money* about the London stock exchange. Churchill used music and dialogue that rhymed in the play, which also won the Blackburn Prize and many other awards. She continued to experiment with technique in *Mad Forest*

(1990) and *The Skriker* (1994), which incorporated music and dance. Though Churchill's output decreased in the late 1990s, she continues to push the limits of traditional dramatic forms using dance and music, and other unexpected constructions.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

Top Girls opens in a restaurant where Marlene is hosting a dinner party for five friends. She has recently been promoted at work. The five guests are all women that are either long-dead or are fictional characters from literature or paintings.

The first to come are Isabella Bird and Lady Nijo. Nijo and Isabella discuss their lives, including their families. Dull Gret and Pope Joan, who was elected to the papacy in the ninth century, appear. The conversation wanders between subjects, including religion and the love lives of Nijo and Isabella. Isabella goes on about her travel experiences. Joan talks about dressing and living as a male from the age of twelve so that she could further her education. Marlene proposes a toast to her guests. They, in turn, insist on toasting Marlene and her success.

Joan relates her disturbing story. While she enjoyed being the pope, she also had a discreet affair with a chamberlain and became pregnant. In denial about her state, she gave birth to her child during a papal procession. Joan was stoned to death, and her child, she believes, was also killed. While Joan relates her story, Nijo talks about her four children being born, and only being able to see one of them after having given birth. Isabella talks about how she never had children. Marlene wonders why they are all so miserable.

The final guest arrives. She is Patient Griselda, a character in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Griselda tells her story. Though she was a peasant girl, she was asked to be the wife of a local prince, but only if she obeyed him without question. Griselda agreed, though it later meant losing the two children she bore him—they were taken from her as infants. Then Griselda was sent back to her father with nothing but a slip to wear. Her husband called her back to help him prepare for his next wedding to a girl from France. The girl was her daughter—all this was a test of her loyalty. He took Griselda back, and the family was reunited.

Marlene is upset by Griselda's tale. Nijo is also perturbed because her children were never returned to her. Gret finally speaks up about her journey through hell, and how she beat the devils. The scene ends with Isabella talking about the last trip she took.

Act 1, Scene 2

The scene opens in the Top Girls employment agency in London. Marlene is interviewing Jeanine for possible placement. Marlene tells Jeanine that if she is to be sent on a job with prospects, she must not tell them that she is getting married or might have children. Marlene evaluates Jeanine and suggests jobs based on her perception of Jeanine's future.

Act 2, Scene 3

This scene takes place at night in Joyce's backyard in Suffolk. Joyce is Marlene's elder sister. Joyce's sixteen-year-old daughter Angie and her twelve-year-old friend Kit are playing in a shelter they built in the backyard. Joyce calls for Angie, but Angie and Kit ignore her until she goes back into the house. Angie says she wants to kill her mother.

Angie and Kit discuss going to the movies. Kit gets mad at Angie when she talks about dumb stuff. Angie desperately wants to leave home. Kit believes they should move to New Zealand in case of a war. Angie is indifferent because she has a big secret. She tells Kit she is going to London to see her aunt. Angie believes that Marlene is really her mother.

Joyce sneaks up on them. Joyce will not let them go to the movies until Angie cleans her room. Angie leaves, and Kit informs Joyce that she wants to be a nuclear physicist. When Angie returns, she is wearing a nice dress that is a little too small for her. Joyce becomes angry because Angie has not cleaned her room. It starts to rain. Joyce and Kit go inside. Angie stays outside. When Kit returns to get her, Angie threatens to kill her mother again.

Act 2, Scene 1

It is Monday morning at Top Girls. Win and Nell, who work at the agency, are talking. Win tells Nell about her weekend that she spent at her married boyfriend's house while his wife was out of town. The conversation turns to office gossip. They consider changing jobs as Marlene has been promoted over them, limiting their prospects. Still, Nell and Win are glad Marlene got the job over another coworker, Howard. Marlene enters late. Win and Nell tell her that they are glad she got the promotion rather than Howard.

Win interviews Louise, a forty-six-year-old woman who has been in the same job for twenty-one years. Louise has done everything for her company, but has spent twenty years in middle management with no opportunities to go higher. Win believes there will be only limited openings for her.

In the main office, Angie walks up to Marlene. Marlene does not recognize her at first. Angie has come to London on her own to see her aunt, and she intends to stay for a while. It is not clear if Joyce knows where Angie is. Angie becomes upset when Marlene does not seem like she wants her to stay.

Their conversation is interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Kidd, Howard's wife. Mrs. Kidd upset because Howard cannot accept that Marlene got the promotion to managing director over him. In part, he is disturbed because she is a woman. Mrs. Kidd wants Marlene to turn down the promotion so that he can have it. Mrs. Kidd leaves in a huff when Marlene is rude to her. Angie is proud of her aunt's saucy attitude.

In another interview, Nell talks to Shona, who claims to be twenty-nine and to have worked sales on the road. As the interview progresses, becomes clear that Shona has been lying. She only twenty-one and has no real work experience.

In the main office, Win sits down and talks Angie, who was left there by Marlene while she working. Angie tells Win that she wants to work Top Girls. Win begins to tell Angie her life story, but Angie falls asleep. Nell comes in and informs her that Howard has had a heart attack. When Marlene returns, Win tells her about Angie wanting to work at Top Girls. Marlene does not think Angie has much of a future there.

Act 2, Scene 2

This scene takes place a year earlier in Joyce's kitchen. Marlene is passing out presents for Joyce and Angie. One of the gifts is the nice dress that Angie wore in act 1, scene 2. While Angie goes her room to try it on, Joyce and Marlene are talking. Joyce had no idea that Marlene was coming. Marlene believed Joyce had invited her there. Angie made the arrangements, lying to both of them.

Angie returns to show off the dress. They chide her for her deception. Angie reminds her that the last time she visited was for her ninth birthday. Marlene learns that Joyce's husband left her three years ago. It is getting late, and Angie is sent to bed. Marlene will sleep on the couch.

After Angie leaves to get ready for bed, Joyce and Marlene continue their discussion about their lives. The sisters' conversation turns into an argument. Marlene believes that Joyce is jealous of her success. Joyce criticizes the decisions Marlene has made, including leaving her home and giving up her child, Angie. Marlene offers to send her money, but Joyce refuses.

Marlene is excited about a future under the new prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, while Joyce cannot stand the prime minister. They talk about the horrid life their mother led with their alcoholic father. It becomes clear the sisters have very different views of the world. As Marlene nears sleep on the couch, Angie walks in, having had a bad dream. "Frightening," is all she says.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

The narrative and themes of this play focus on the various roles of women in society and relationships. Its action is anchored by the story of Marlene, a successful businesswoman in early eighties Britain with an unsuccessful personal life. A broad narrative scope combines with well-individualized characters and realistic dialogue to create the sense of a heightened theatrical reality grounded by genuine, deeply experienced humanity.

Marlene arrives at a restaurant, tells a Waitress that one of her guests is going to be late and orders a bottle of wine. As the Waitress goes, Isabella arrives and congratulates Marlene. Marlene speaks self-deprecatingly about her accomplishments and comments that she'd love to be able to travel like Isabella, saying she hates sitting still. This leads Isabella to compare her own wandering life with that of her stay-at-home sister Hennie, and Marlene mentions in passing that she too has a sister.

Another of Marlene's guests arrives - Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan turned wandering Buddhist monk. The Waitress arrives with wine, and Marlene asks that it be poured for everyone while they wait for all the guests. This leads Nijo to reminisce about how she used to preside at traditional wine ceremonies when she was a young woman. Then, she reminisces about her relationship with the Emperor, to whom she says she belonged ever since she was a baby. This leads the women into reminiscences about their various fathers, reminiscences which lead into conversations about the women's various levels of schooling. These conversations continue throughout the arrivals of the monosyllabic Dull Gret and the austere Pope Joan. In the midst of a discussion about angels, death, grief and damnation, each woman orders an appetizer and main course. They discuss which is more important to avoiding damnation, good works or going to church. Isabella comes down on the side of good works. Marlene talks about how she never does good works, and Nijo talks about how she avoided damnation by becoming a wandering monk, suggesting that walking is an expression of her repentance for a life of sin. Marlene asks whether she got angry, and Nijo asks about what. Marlene never answers, ordering more wine instead.

As the Waitress brings the first course and the women eat, Nijo talks about how she embraced Buddhism when she felt her life was over after being forced to leave the Emperor's court. This leads Marlene to refer to how she too felt her life was over, on a couple of different occasions. She adds, however, that those phases only lasted a few hours, not years as in Nijo's case. As Nijo is saying that isn't what she meant, Isabella talks about how much pleasure and fulfillment she got from traveling and how pleasant it was to not have to worry about what to wear. This leads Nijo to comment that she always loved getting dressed and Joan to reminisce about how she had to disguise herself as a boy in order to get the kind of learning she craved. The Waitress clears the dishes from the first course as Isabella says firmly that whenever she went anywhere,

she was never less than feminine. Joan comments that she (Joan) knew as much as, if not more than, the men. Marlene comments that she could where trousers in the office but rarely does. Joan refers to having shared a bed (platonically) with one of her fellow students, which leads Isabella and Nijo into reminiscences of their dead lovers. Joan questions whether they all have dead lovers. Marlene comments that she doesn't.

As the Waitress brings the main courses, Nijo, Joan and Isabella reminisce in detail about the lives and deaths of their lovers. The women comment that there was nothing in their lives after their lovers died - nothing except the desperate desire to go on. Isabella went traveling, while Nijo became a nun. Joan plunged herself more deeply into her studies, eventually being elected Pope. At this point, Joan also reveals that she also took a lover, one of the officials in her household. Marlene orders more wine, saying she wants to drink a toast to her guests. Isabella comments that they should really be toasting Marlene and her success. Marlene explains that it's not that significant a success. She's just become managing director of an employment agency. Wine is brought, and the women drink a toast to Marlene.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

The first act of the play can be described as a fantasy, along the lines of the party game called "What six people from history would you like to have a dinner party?" The women appearing here are noteworthy for reasons other than being based on real people (Isabella, Joan, Nijo) or inspired by works of art (Gret, Griselda). They also serve as manifestations of particular aspects of the life of the play's central character, Marlene.

Isabella's difficult relationship with her sister foreshadows and echoes Marlene's difficult relationship with her own sister, Joyce. Isabella and Nijo's stories of restlessness and long journeys foreshadow and echo Marlene's restless determination to leave home. Joan's disguising herself as a man and the comments of the other characters about wearing men's clothing represent Marlene having to clothe herself in the attitudes and work habits of men. The references to the women's various lovers foreshadow the implication that Marlene, since she gave birth to Angie (a fact of her life hidden until Act 3), she had a lover as well. Significantly, nowhere in the play is the identity of Marlene's lover either mentioned or hinted at. Neither are any circumstances of their relationship defined.

Perhaps the detail the other women go into about their lovers, along with the fact that Marlene eventually becomes so overwrought by the conversation that she has to leave, suggests that on some level she carries as much depth of feeling for her lover as the other women do for theirs. She's just unwilling or unable to cope with it. More parallels between Joan and the other women are developed as the act progresses, with Joan's story about her pregnancy and the stories of the other women about their babies being particularly relevant illuminations of Marlene's character and situation.

The style of dialogue in this act is worthy of mention. It's not written in a traditional style - one character speaking and then stopping, another character speaking and then

stopping, etc. The dialogue here is written with carefully defined overlaps and rhythms. Characters speak over each other, respond to a comment made by one character and in the same breath make another comment to another, etc. This not only creates a very effective sense of realism, but it also reinforces the previously discussed point about the way all the non-Marlene characters, in one way or another, represent Marlene. In other words, experiences overlap in the way the dialogue overlaps.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

As Nijo and Isabella reminisce about the beginnings of their journeys, Joan tells how she took a lover once she became pope - one of her personal attendants. She thought that being pope would lead her to a deeper spiritual truth but then realized that being pope defined the truth, because what the pope says *is* the truth. Nijo asks what happened to Joan's baby. Marlene asks whether Joan ever considered not having it, but Joan says that that would have been a greater sin than giving birth. She also says that when she was a girl no one told her about how a woman's body functions (a reference to menstruation) or about being pregnant.

Consequently, as the baby grew inside her, she just thought she was getting fat. Her story about what happened on the day she gave birth is interrupted on a couple of occasions by Nijo, who tells how her first child, a daughter, was taken away from her immediately after birth. Isabella asks Joan to finish her story. Joan does, telling how she was presiding over an important ceremony, felt pains that she thought were indigestion and then on the way home after the ceremony felt so ill that she had to stop. She sat down, moaned in pain and gave birth. As the other women laugh at the incongruity of the situation, Joan then reveals that immediately afterwards she and her baby were taken away and stoned to death. The other women fall absolutely silent. The Waitress returns and clears the dishes from the main course.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

There are two main points to consider in relation to this scene. The first is the emphasis on babies. Here again the experiences of the women involved (Joan, Nijo) parallel and foreshadow similar experiences in Marlene. When she became pregnant, Marlene kept her pregnancy a secret the same way Joan did. When she actually gave birth, her baby was taken from her the way Nijo's was (and the way Griselda's was, as is revealed in the following section). It must be remembered that throughout this scene there is no reference to Marlene having ever had a baby. The parallels between her and the other women only become clear late in Act 3, when it's revealed that Marlene did in fact have a baby and gave the child to her sister to raise.

The second main point here is related to Joan's eventual fate - death by stoning. It's never actually stated, but the reason she was executed goes beyond the fact that she was a living heresy. At the core of the incident is the fact that she didn't behave in the way people thought she should have behaved. With one exception, all the non-Marlene women in this act had this experience. Isabella was a woman traveling the world alone. Nijo was a female Buddhist monk also traveling the world. Joan was a female spiritual and intellectual leader in a time when such leadership was universally the territory of men. Even Gret fits into this category, as seen in Part 3 of this act when she tells how

she led an assault into hell, a spiritual and physical act of courage reserved in myth and spirituality for men. Only the submissive Griselda, also as seen in Part 3, behaved in the way men and society expected her to. This establishes her as a powerful defining contrast to the other women and also triggers Marlene's angry disappearance from the table. Griselda is everything Marlene refuses to be.

Joan's punishment is a powerful symbol for the dangers associated with the independence embodied in these women - spiritual, emotional and physical. As previously suggested, she is attacked for not behaving the way male-dominated society maintains women should behave. This is the same society that, ironically, Marlene is striving to be part of and obtains a certain degree of success in controlling (as indicated by her promotion). This is one of the play's key thematic points - that women have come a long way from being reviled for their independence. In fact, when women achieve their goals it's perhaps more of a triumph than it is for a man to accomplish a similar goal. Men haven't had to fight with male-oriented, gender-defined opinions about status and power. Marlene, who has clearly had to enter into this fight in order to realize success, faces it again later in the play. In the same way as Joan faces physical condemnation for who she is and what she did, Marlene at that point is verbally condemned by Mrs. Kidd, who berates her for not being womanly enough.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

In the aftermath of Joan's story, Nijo tells how she gave birth to other children and saw her daughter again only once. Isabella tells how she never had children but put all her affection and energy into caring for horses. Joan tells how after her death the Vatican instituted a humiliating test to ensure that all the popes from then on were men. As the women giggle over the ridiculousness of the test, Griselda arrives. It's a while before anyone notices her, since the others have become a little drunk. Marlene introduces her around, and as all the women but Griselda order dessert, Marlene tells them that Griselda's life story started out in the way fairy tales do. She was swept away from the drudgery of her home life and into marriage with a wealthy landowner. Griselda says that she didn't know she was to be married until the landowner came by on the wedding day and took her away, adding that she had been raised to believe that she must obey the man she married (or was to marry). Joan comments that when she was pope everybody obeyed her.

Griselda tells how her husband, Walter, felt that her loyalty had to be tested, and so he took her first child, a daughter, away from her. As Nijo comments that her story was similar, Marlene becomes increasingly angry that Walter did what he did and that Griselda defends both him and her response. Finally, Marlene is so upset that she has to leave the table. As she goes, the Waitress brings dessert. The women listen with increasing disbelief as Griselda tells how she let Walter take her second child away as well. She was treated well as a result, and she forgave Walter everything he did. Joan comments that she can't forgive anyone. Griselda finishes her story by telling how Walter tested her love one more time by demanding that she help him organize his wedding to a young girl from France. Griselda, out of patient loving devotion, helped him in the way he demanded. As Marlene returns, Griselda tells how Walter brought in the young girl and her younger brother, surprising her with the revelation that they were in fact her children, who he had brought up secretly. Griselda again defends him, saying that he too suffered. Meanwhile, Nijo weeps because, as she says, no one brought back her children.

As Joan comforts Nijo, Isabella speaks about how she hated living the same stay-at-home life as her sister and refused to live the life of a "lady." Nijo recalls the intense grief she felt after her beloved Emperor died and then recalls something he did that made her particularly angry. He gave permission for servants to participate in a ritual beating of his women that he alone was supposed to conduct. Nijo tells how she lost her temper, got together with the other women, attacked the Emperor when he came into his bedchamber and beat him. Joan suddenly starts praying loudly in Latin.

Meanwhile, Griselda muses aloud on how pleasant her life would have been if Walter hadn't done what he did. Isabella asks why she should have to life a lady's life, and Nijo recalls the pleasure of beating the Emperor. They're all interrupted by Gret, who has

said nearly nothing for most of the act and who now delivers a long speech in which she describes her journey to hell. She tells how she and other ordinary women had enough of being treated badly and of their children being murdered. They ran through a doorway into hell, beat aside devils and other nasty creatures and just kept running and fighting and running and fighting. Nijo comments on how the fight must have gone in a way that echoes what she evidently felt when beating the Emperor. Joan returns to her Latin, and Isabella refers to the lengths she went to at the age of seventy to experience one last bit of joy.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

In the pre-Griselda portion of the scene, once again the stories of the other women illuminate Marlene's experience. Nijo's story about her daughter parallels and foreshadows Marlene's experience of giving up Angie, while Isabella's comment about putting all her energy into horses parallels how Marlene has put her energy into work. Meanwhile, Joan's comment about the test is a perhaps somewhat oblique reference to the male-oriented challenges and tests Marlene has had to endure in order to get where she is in business.

As previously mentioned regarding Act 1, Part 2, the character of Griselda defines by contrast the independence and courage of Marlene and the other women. Her ongoing and unquestioning submissiveness highlights just how independent the other women have been, a contrast that plays out vividly in the way the other women, particularly Marlene, react to her. Marlene's sudden departure is perhaps foreshadowed in her unanswered question to Nijo at the end of Act 1, Part 1, when she asks Nijo whether she ever got angry. There is the sense here that Marlene is angry at the way Griselda was treated and the way women in general are treated. It's possible, in fact, that Marlene is reacting to an incident in her past in which she too was treated badly, perhaps the disappearance of the father of her child. Since the play at no time offers any defining characteristics of that aspect of Marlene's life, this possibility can only be inferred, not clearly understood.

Gret's story about her journey into hell can be seen as an extended metaphor for the hell of bad treatment at the hands of men and society that all the other women have had to endure. The blending of stories here is the climax of the act and of the play to this point. the intertwined narratives of Isabella, Nijo and Gret make the play's key thematic point about women's struggles for independence, freedom and respect. It is a moment of transcendently definitive courage, strength and triumph, particularly noteworthy because Marlene doesn't participate in it.

Stage directions indicate that all she does is drink more and more brandy. In other words, she doesn't share in the triumphs of the others although the party is intended to celebrate her triumph. The question at this point is why. The play offers no clear answers, but the conclusion of the play offers a potential interpretation in the confrontation between Marlene and her sister Joyce, to whom she surrendered custody

of her daughter. Is it possible that Marlene has regrets about her choices, while the other women here (with the exception of Griselda) do not?

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Marlene interviews Jeanine, a young secretary tired of her job who wants Marlene and her company to find her a new one. Marlene asks a detailed series of questions, and Jeanine's answers indicate to Marlene the kind of job she wants, how much pay she wants and how much she's prepared to challenge her relationship with her fiancy in order to get what she wants. Marlene comes up with two possibilities - good pay with limited prospects and little respect for a private life or less pay with better prospects. Jeanine expresses the desire to travel, but Marlene says there aren't many jobs of that sort available.

Jeanine indicates that she's conflicted about how much time she wants to spend on work as opposed to with her fiancy and also about how far ahead she wants to think. Marlene tells her frankly that she doesn't have the skills to be picky, decides to send her on interviews for both jobs and tells her to make sure she gets one of them. By sending Jeanine out and recommending her, Marlene is putting her reputation on the line. She concludes by saying that if Jeanine believes she's the best person for the job, the employer will believe it as well. Jeanine asks if Marlene believes it. Marlene says that Jeanine could make her believe it if she worked at it. Jeanine promises to do her best.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

This scene functions on several levels. As basic information, it reveals the kind of work Marlene does and the way she approaches it. On another level, it defines the conflicts and sacrifices that women, at the time the play was written in the early 1980s, were beginning to encounter in the post-feminism world. This is done through Marlene's pointed questions about Jeanine's priorities and her closing admonishment to Jeanine that she had better make Marlene look good. This point is not made to suggest that by the early 80s the feminist movement had ended - on the contrary. Women like Marlene, and by extension Jeanine, are the next wave in the feminist movement. They are women on the move in business, a field of influence to which women in general were simultaneously new and unwelcome.

Jeanine, a young woman at a key transition point in her life, might be seen as facing the kind of grilling Marlene faced as she herself began to move into the business world. Jeanine's conflicts about relationship and life versus the demands of a career are likely those Marlene faced earlier in her career. The implication is that Marlene is playing the same game as the men, defining herself through power and domination on their terms. This is the opposite of what Nijo, Isabella, Joan and Gret did. These women defined their own powerful places in their world. The thematically relevant point is that women only truly come out on top - become "top girls" - as long as they strive on their own terms and not those defined by others, society in general and men in particular.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Angie and her much younger friend Kit play aimlessly outside as Joyce, Angie's mother, calls for Angie to come in. As Angie comments about how much she hates her mother and wants to kill her, she and Kit try to figure out a way to get into the movies. After another angry shout from Joyce, Angie talks about how she dreamed she could change things by thinking about them. She and Kit then argue about whether Angie really heard the ghost of a dead kitten mewing in the night, with Kit saying Angie's just imagining it. Angie says that Kit's scared, and Kit says she's not. Angie finally says that Kit's scared of blood. Kit reaches under her dress and pulls out her hand with some menstrual blood on it to prove she's not afraid of blood. Angie licks it off, saying that Kit will have to do the same thing when Angie has her period. Kit threatens to vomit all over Angie, and Angie says she doesn't care. Kit threatens to go home, and they argue over whose mother is nastier. Joyce comes out of the house and overhears the argument. The girls realize she's there and fall silent. Joyce tries to entice them into the house, and then when they don't answer, she calls them names and threatens to lock them out. They still don't respond, and Joyce goes back into the house.

Angie says she Angie has a secret, taunting Kit and refusing to say what it is. Kit taunts Angie in return by saying that people talk all the time about how strange it is that Angie spends so much time with someone so much younger than her. Angie twists Kit's arm to get her to shut up. Kit tries to leave. Angie talks her into staying and then reveals the secret. Angie is running away to London to live with her aunt, who from the dialogue, can be understood to be Marlene. The dialogue also makes clear that Marlene came for a visit the year before, that Angie worships her and that Angie thinks Marlene is really her mother and Joyce is just her aunt. Joyce comes out again and tells Kit it's time to go home. Kit tells her that she and Angie want to go to the movies. Joyce tells them that Angie has to clean her room first. Angie goes in, telling Kit to wait. Joyce and Kit make awkward small talk. Joyce mentions how little faith she has that Angie will either get a job or get married. She asks Kit what she plans to do with her life. Kit replies that she wants to be a nuclear physicist. Joyce doesn't quite know what to say to that, comments on the weather and then asks Kit why she doesn't have friends her own age. Kit says she is mature for her age and that she loves Angie.

Angie comes out of the house wearing a too-small dress. Joyce asks why she's wearing it, but she doesn't wait for a response before telling Angie she's got to go back and finish cleaning her room. Angie arms herself with a brick. Kit tries to get Angie to leave. Joyce insists that Angie clean her room, and then as it starts to rain, she says Angie makes her sick. Joyce and Kit run into the house. Rain pours. Kit cries out for Angie to come in and then comes out to get her. Angie says she put on the dress to kill her mother, and Kit taunts her for thinking she could do it with a brick.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

At first glance, this scene appears to be a sudden and almost jarring shift in tone, focus and style. There are new characters, new relationships, a very different style of dialogue and what seem to be new issues. There are links with what's gone before, most notably provided by the references to Marlene. At the same time, foreshadowing of what's to come can be seen in Angie's revelation that she's planning to run away (which she does later in this act) and the appearance of the too small dress (foreshadowing its appearance in Act 3). Another, and very significant, piece of foreshadowing comes in Angie's almost in-passing comment that she thinks she's Marlene's daughter. This eventually turns out to be true, but at this point in the play, it seems to come out of Angie's palpable dislike for her easily dislikable mother, Joyce. All that being said, there are connections in this scene to the play as a whole that aren't perhaps initially apparent.

These connections can be defined as relating to the play's secondary theme exploring the nature of power. This theme is first explored in oblique terms in Act 1. Isabella, Nijo, Joan and Gret, without actually defining their actions as such, nevertheless each clearly operated from a strong sense of personal power. It's also clear, as the result of the Jeanine scene (Act 2, Scene 1), that Marlene has a similarly strong sense of power, expressing herself in no uncertain terms and practically bullying Jeanine into doing things her way. In this scene, all three characters exhibit similar power, expressed in similar terms as Marlene's. Joyce attempts to bully Angie. Angie attempts to bully Joyce, and Kit and Angie attempt to bully each other.

In fact, from this point on, most of the relationships between the women in the play have, to one degree or another, a power struggle at their core. It must be noted, however, that the women in Act 1 express their power not in terms of dominating others but in terms of courage and self-fulfillment. Marlene and the women in the latter two thirds of the play, by contrast, use their power to at least attempt to dictate the actions of others. In other words, Act 1 was in many ways about female solidarity, a sharing of common experiences and attitudes. Acts 2 and 3 are about female aggression and competition. For the most part, the women here aren't kindred spirits. They treat each other as pawns, hostages to ambition and anger. They are, in fact, in situations of the sort from which the women in Act 1 broke free.

This shift in the play's perspective on female relationships is graphically defined by the exchange between Kit and Angie around the tasting of the menstrual blood. Over the last several years, attempts have been made in art and culture and society to portray menstruation as a shared defining experience of womanhood. Here the opposite is true. Menstruation becomes a vivid symbol and manifestation of the sense of competition between Kit and Angie. They are competing, to put it bluntly, to see who can gross the other out the most and therefore who has the most power over the other.

On another level, because there is little that's more exclusively female than menstruation, the scene between Angie and Kit can be interpreted as a statement that

the characters find femininity in general gross. This idea is supported in three ways. The first is the way Kit and Angie, at the beginning of the scene, are particularly interested in seeing the violent, militaristic kind of movies that males usually enjoy. In other words, their taste in films seems to be non-feminine. Another level of support is the way Angie hero-worships Marlene, who is not overtly butch but does have the conventionally male traits of ambition, determination and ruthlessness. Thirdly, Angie's licking of Kit's menstrual blood can be seen as symbolizing the way she consumes her femininity, as Marlene did when she abdicated her responsibilities as a mother, another uniquely feminine thing. The action of the rest of the act, in which Angie runs away from home to be with Marlene, illustrates just how important becoming less feminine truly is for her. However, the play is not anti-feminine. Only the characters might be seen to be anti-feminine.

One of the play's few symbols appears here. Angie's dress, as is revealed in Act 3, was a gift from Marlene. Since it's eventually revealed (also in Act 3) that Angie is Marlene's daughter, a "gift" to Joyce in the same way as the dress is a gift to Angie, the fact that the dress doesn't fit her symbolizes how the "gift" of Angie to Joyce is also ill-fitting. In other words, Angie has grown out of both the dress and the mother/daughter relationship, an aspect of her personality and experience that also manifests in her intent to go to London to visit her erstwhile mother, Marlene.

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 1

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 1 Summary

Two assistants in Marlene's office, Win and Nell, arrive to start work. They talk about a late-arriving colleague named Howard, saying that Marlene has "far more balls" than he does. Howard was also up for the promotion that Marlene got, and neither Win nor Nell can see themselves advancing any further in the company now that Marlene's running things. Marlene comes in, complains of having a hangover (presumably after her party with the historical women the night before) and gets teased by Win and Nell for being late. Marlene pours herself coffee as Win and Nell fill her in on the gossip, and then she goes into her office, saying she's got to pick up the slack for another staff member who's away.

After Marlene has gone, Win moves into an interview with Louise, a woman in her mid-forties who says she wants to change from her present job. Win asks a series of pointed questions to determine whether she's leaving because of any conflict with her boss. Louise insists everything is fine, chattering at length about the high quality of work she's done. She says that she's improved the department she's in but has reached the limit of advancement. She also talks about how uncomfortable she is with the new, self-confident kind of businesswoman coming into the workforce who doesn't hide her femininity and takes for granted that she'll be perceived to be as good as a man. She believes she passes as a man at work, adding that she believes she's proved herself. Win tells her that the jobs she'll be sent for will most likely see her in competition with younger men and suggests she try a job where women might be more welcome - in a cosmetics company. When it looks as though Louise might start another long speech, Win advises her that it's not a good idea to talk too much in a job interview. Louise tells Win that she doesn't talk too much in job interviews, saying that this is a different situation and suggesting that Win understands her. Win says she understands Louise perfectly.

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 1 Analysis

The play's development of the power-based relationships between its various female characters continues here, as the power Marlene has over the women (and men) in her office is clearly dramatized. Power struggles play out in this act in a kind of domino effect. After Marlene's power over Win and Nell becomes evident (specifically through their comments that their chances for advancement are now non-existent), they, in turn, manifest power over the women they interview, including Louise here and, later in the act, Shona. In other words, powerlessness in one situation leads to attempts to take power in another. It's possible in this context to imagine Louise going back to work and trying to assume power over the people she supervises. The reader can also imagine that Marlene maintains the power she does over Win and Nell because she feels

powerless at the hands of the people who decided whether she would get the promotion or not.

Stage directions indicate that Louise is played by the same actress who played Joan in Act 1. This gives additional resonance to Louise's comments about women no longer having to hide their femininity and how she passes for a man, as well as Louise's habit of talking at length in the same way Joan did.

The references to Howard and his illness foreshadow developments later in this scene, when it's revealed just how ill Howard is, and why.

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 2

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 2 Summary

Angie comes into the office. Marlene comes to meet her and at first doesn't recognize her. When she does, Marlene tries to figure out why she's there. Angie says she just came up for a visit. Marlene offers her something to drink and asks after Joyce. She explains that she's busy and can't spend much time with Angie, and she eventually figures out that Angie has come to stay. Marlene becomes angry at Joyce for not warning her. When Angie compliments Marlene on her office, Marlene tells her she's moving into another bigger office the following week and explains that she's going to be in charge - at least to some degree. Angie says she always knew Marlene would be in charge and then says Marlene will be totally in charge before long. She also convinces Marlene that Joyce knows everything that's going on and is perfectly fine, adding that Angie is planning to stay indefinitely and that Marlene's visit of the year before was the best day of her life.

Mrs. Kidd comes in, introduces herself as Howard's wife and says she's desperate to speak to Marlene. Marlene says she's only got a few minutes, and Mrs. Kidd says that's all she wants. She explains that Howard won't be coming in because he's so upset about Marlene getting the job he wanted. Marlene tells her that Howard will get over it, but Mrs. Kidd insists that it's demeaning for him to have to work for a woman. She adds that he's taking all his anger and frustration out on her. She suggests that Marlene will treat Howard differently from her other colleagues because he's a man and that Howard should have the job because he's got three children to support. Marlene believes she's suggesting that Marlene turn down the job so that Howard gets it. When Mrs. Kidd says she doesn't mean that at all, Marlene tells her that if Howard is so unhappy, he can go and work somewhere else. Mrs. Kidd takes the comment as a threat, saying it would be hard for Howard to find work at his age. She then accuses Marlene of being a "ballbreaker" and says she's not natural. Marlene tells her to piss off. Mrs. Kidd goes.

Angie tells Marlene she was wonderful. Marlene tries to go back to work, asking Angie to come back later. Angie says she wants to stay and watch, because it's where she wants most to be in the world. Marlene lets her stay, and she sits at Win's desk.

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 2 Analysis

In this section, Marlene is confronted by two different consequences of her determination to succeed. The first is in the form of Angie, who is revealed in Act 3 as Marlene's daughter, given to Joyce to raise because Marlene was determined to make her successful way in the business world. To put it another way, her decision to sacrifice family for career almost literally comes back to haunt her, as Angie "haunts" the office in search of a job. The second consequence Marlene faces comes in the form of Mrs. Kidd, whose husband is, as the result of Marlene's determination, no longer able to

advance in his career. The confrontation with Mrs. Kidd is by far the more overt and angry of the two. Mrs. Kidd comments that Marlene is unnatural and hints that Marlene should resign so the "family man" can provide a better life for his wife and children. She represents what both Marlene and the play clearly interpret as traditional, repressive societal perspectives.

There are some interesting ironies here. The first can be found in the casting note at the beginning of the play that Mrs. Kidd is played by the actress who plays Joyce - an interesting choice, given that each character in her own way accuses Marlene of being unnatural and unwomanly. A second irony can be found in Mrs. Kidd's claim that Howard needs the promotion to support his family. The apparently childless Marlene, who has just got the promotion, is clearly about to need the increase in salary to support the hitherto abandoned child who has just announced her intention to move in. Yet another irony is that at the same time as Mrs. Kidd is reviling Marlene for being successful and determined, Angie is worshipping her for exactly the same thing. This last is particularly important. Marlene's experiences with Mrs. Kidd and Angie both trigger Marlene's sense of guilt, which in turn motivates her choice to visit Joyce in Act 3. Even though Act 3 is set before the action of this act (at the time of Marlene's earlier visit to Angie), her motivation for making the visit is defined by the action of this act. Her sense of guilt about her success and about what that success has cost her motivates the visit.

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 3

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 3 Summary

Nell conducts an interview with Shona, who presents herself as an extremely successful salesperson interested in moving up to management. Conversation reveals that Nell was once in sales herself and that she was successful but not perceived as very nice. Shona says she also isn't nice at all and indicates she's interested in selling computers, which Nell says is a very male-oriented field. Shona says she's fine with that, and Nell tells her there's a high-end company looking for sales people and describes the conditions of the job. Shona indicates she'd like to go out for it, leading Nell to ask for a few more details about what she's been doing. Shona speaks at length about her travel routine and her success in selling. Nell realizes that everything Shona has said has been a lie. Shona confesses, but she insists she can do all the things she claims to have done.

Back in the main office, Win comes in and meets Angie. When Angie asks how she came to work for Marlene, Win explains that she was headhunted; she worked for another company and came to work for this company when she was offered more money. As Win compliments Marlene, Angie asks about the possibility of a job for herself. Win asks what experience and education Angie has, and when Angie says she doesn't have much of either, Win speaks at length about her work history, her relationship history, her psychiatric history and her history as a salesperson. She says she got into sales to meet people, but she realized that the only people she met were people who didn't want to meet her. She likes working for the agency better because people want to meet her and because she does them good: "They hope."

Angie has fallen asleep. Nell comes in, and Win tells her who Angie is. Nell tells Win that Howard is in the hospital after having a heart attack. Marlene comes in, already aware of what's happened to Howard and asking how Angie is. Win tells her that Angie wants to work at the agency, and Marlene says there's not much of a chance. She's a bit stupid and a bit strange. Win says Angie adores Marlene. Marlene comments that Angie will never make it.

Act 2, Scene 3, Part 3 Analysis

The thematic focus on power in Acts 2 and 3 is developed further in the interview between Nell and Shona. Shona starts out by clearly attempting to control, and therefore have power over, Nell's perceptions of her. Nell turns the tables on her by confronting her with the truth, which is a manifestation of what Nell sees as her power. Later in the act, the question of who has power over whom is defined in another way, through Win's comment that people think she will do them good. In other words, the people she's talking about give her power over them and their lives. Win makes this

point at the conclusion of a long speech about the ways in which she had no power until she came to work at the agency.

Marlene's concluding comments about Angie are worth particular examination since, as is revealed in the following act, she's talking about her daughter. Does she honestly think Angie is stupid and strange, or does she simply want to keep her daughter away from her so she is not reminded of what she sacrificed to get to where she wanted to go? Does she really think Angie won't make it, or does she not want the responsibility of fighting to help her make it? These are the latest in a series of questions about Marlene, who she is, why she is who she is and what's in her past that made her who she is. Although she is the central character of the play, there's actually very little that's vividly and unambiguously clear about her.

The playwright's intention may be to allow the audience room to create their own understanding of Marlene by filling in the blanks with their own experiences and perspectives. The playwright's intention may also be to portray Marlene, the successful businesswoman, as deliberately and willfully empty of a past in order to heighten the sense that she is far more focused on the potential success of the future. Whatever the reason, it's very clear that regardless of what she's done to get there, she is at the "top" of her game. There is also the sense, however, that for whatever reason she's fearful that the means and truths and ways she's used to get to the top are about to collapse from under her. In other words, she may fear that everything that has defined her to this point in her life is about to be taken from her in the same way as it was taken from Joan and from Nijo and from Griselda. This may be why she's callous about Howard, who was a threat to her success, why she says what she says about Angie and why she reacts with such flaming anger towards Joyce in the climactic confrontations of the play's final act.

Act 3, Part 1

Act 3, Part 1 Summary

This act takes place a year earlier than the action of the previous act, during Angie's fondly recalled visit from her Auntie Marlene. The action begins as Marlene takes presents out of her bag, apologizing for not having remembered birthdays or Christmas more often. Angie has to be reminded by Joyce to say thank you. One of the presents is the dress Angie wore in Act 2, Scene 2. Marlene worries that it's not the right size, and after some disparaging comments from Joyce about Angie's looks, Angie offers to go try it on. Before she goes, she finds a bottle-shaped present for Joyce. Joyce says that Angie can open it, and it turns out to be a bottle of perfume, which Angie insists all three of them wear. "Let's all smell." They all put on some perfume, and Angie goes to try on the dress.

Joyce complains that Marlene should have called to say she was coming and that because she didn't, the place is a mess. Marlene is confused for a moment, explaining that Angie told her in a phone call a couple of weeks previously that Joyce wanted her to come but that Joyce didn't want to call herself because she didn't like using the phone. They bicker over whether Marlene should have known Angie was lying and why Joyce doesn't seem glad to see Marlene, who offers to go. Joyce says Marlene is welcome to come see Angie any time she wants, commenting pointedly that Marlene is the one who went away. They make small talk about tea and the way the air smells different from the air in London. Then Angie comes back in wearing the dress. Joyce and Marlene compliment her and then argue about whether Angie should keep it on or take it off. Angie finally says she wants to keep it on. As Angie thanks Marlene, Marlene says she knows Angie didn't tell Joyce about the visit. Angie says she wanted it to be a surprise.

Kit comes in and makes herself at home as Marlene says Angie's idea was a good one. Joyce introduces Kit and Marlene. Kit comments that she thinks the dress is "all right," that the perfume smells bad and that she wants Angie to come out with her. Angie says she's staying in. Kit goes back out. Joyce says that Angie and Kit are almost like sisters. Their relationship is perfect because Angie is good with little children like Kit. This leads Marlene to ask what Angie wants to be when she grows up, but Joyce answers for her, saying Angie's got no idea and that she's not clever like Marlene. "I'm not clever," Marlene says, "just pushy." She then takes out a bottle of whisky, leading into more bickering, this time over whether Joyce drinks, whether they got drunk at their grandfather's funeral and whether Joyce has seen their mother recently. A brief conversation about their father, during which Marlene hints that he neglected her, leads them into gossip about former neighbors.

Angie remembers a birthday party when she was nine, and Marlene asks Angie where her dad is. Joyce and Angie respond by telling her that he moved out three years ago. Angie asks Marlene what else she doesn't know. Joyce tells her to not be rude and then

reminds Marlene that she was in America at the time. This reminds Angie that she's still got the postcard Marlene sent her from America, and she runs out to get it. While she's gone, Joyce says that Marlene not knowing is nothing to fuss about. Joyce doesn't need to know everything Marlene is up to.

Angie comes back with the postcard, asking Marlene to take her to America someday and adding that she wants to be American. Joyce tells her it's time to go to bed, since it's a school night. Angie argues, and Joyce warns her she's getting angry. Angie says she's got a secret that she wants to share with Marlene, and Joyce tells her to call when she's ready for bed and Marlene will come up to see the secret. Angie goes out. Small talk about whether Marlene will be all right sleeping on the sofa leads to bickering about how things have changed in the town since Marlene left. Marlene comments that Joyce could have left if she wanted to, and Joyce reacts with anger. Marlene says they're getting drunk, and Joyce says Sunday night is a peculiar time for a visit. Angie calls for Marlene. After Marlene goes out, Joyce sits at the kitchen table in silence.

Act 3, Part 1 Analysis

The dramatic action of this act is anchored by the increasingly intense conversation between Joyce and Marlene. On one level, their discussion is a manifestation of the play's secondary theme relating to power, with Joyce and Marlene each struggling to force the other to see the situation her way. Their bickering over who remembers the past correctly, over who has the responsibility to tell the other about her life, over whether Joyce could have left or whether Marlene should have left - it all represents how Marlene and Joyce struggle for power over the other's perspectives and interpretations.

On another level, the dialogue is another manifestation of Marlene's attempts to shore up and reinforce the choices in her past so that her current success and potential for more success don't fall apart. In other words, she's fighting to keep Joyce from convincing her that she made the wrong choices, a struggle that intensifies and climaxes in the following section.

The second of the play's two key symbols appears in this section, the perfume brought by Marlene. Angie's desire to spray herself, Joyce and Marlene with Marlene's gift so they can all "smell" represents the way the lives and attitudes of all three women have been affected by Marlene's gift in the past - the giving of Angie to Joyce. The use of the word "smell" here carries the metaphorical idea that as the result of this act, they all "smell" bad. Meanwhile, the first key symbol, the dress, makes its second appearance in the play and its first appearance in Angie's life. In both appearances, to Angie it clearly represents Marlene's amazing success, a life she idealizes. For Marlene, in this scene it represents guilt over not being more involved in her daughter's life. When it first appears in Act 2, Scene 2 and no longer fits, it implies that Marlene's guilt is smaller in the same way the dress is smaller. This doesn't mean that Marlene is unafraid that the guilt will not return. In fact, the ending of Act 2, in which she speaks disparagingly of Angie's potential, is an attempt by Marlene to continue to keep that guilt at bay.

Meanwhile, the remaining action of this act portrays a moment of Marlene's failure to suppress her guilt.

Act 3, Part 2

Act 3, Part 2 Summary

When Marlene comes back, Joyce asks whether the secret Angie wanted to show her was her exercise book. Joyce knows it is part of the "secret society" Angie has with Kit. Marlene hints that she knows more about it than Joyce, but Joyce speaks disparagingly of the whole idea and calls it childish. They resume their conversation about the timing of Marlene's visit, and Marlene admits that she's been in the area all day and went to visit their mother. As Marlene comments on what an awful life their mother had, Joyce comments that she knows nothing about how bad it really was because she went away, adding that from now on Marlene can stay away. Marlene accuses Joyce of never wanting her around, and they resume what seem to be usual arguments over who's the better daughter, whether Marlene was right to leave or not and whether Marlene was a good mother to abandon her child with her sister. At this point, it becomes clear that Marlene is Angie's mother, and Joyce raised the girl as her own.

Joyce and Marlene argue over whether Marlene abandoned Angie in order to pursue her career. Marlene says she knows a woman who's made a success out of being both a wife and mother. Joyce calls her stupid for getting herself pregnant and not seeing a doctor. Marlene reminds her that Joyce wanted to take Angie. She adds that if Joyce doesn't want her, Marlene will take Angie back to London. Joyce says Angie is her child and she won't give Angie up, telling Marlene that when Angie was six months old Joyce got pregnant and lost the baby because she was running around so much after Angie. Marlene tells Joyce she's had two abortions, and then near tears, she asks Joyce whether she wants it to be another six years before she comes for a visit. Joyce angrily says that would be fine. Marlene starts to cry. Joyce comforts her, saying she actually does love her. Marlene tells Joyce she's been wonderful with Angie. Joyce tells her to not get carried away, comments that Marlene is drunk and makes tea. Marlene asks what happened with Joyce's husband. Joyce says she kicked him out after discovering he was having an affair with a twenty-two-year-old. After arguing briefly over whether Joyce needs money (she refuses to take any) and whether Angie misses her dad (she doesn't say), Marlene confesses that Joyce's husband tried to kiss her. She turned him down because he looked like a fish. Joyce says at the time she fancied him a lot, and then after he left, she was propositioned by several of her friends' husbands.

After a brief resumption of the argument about money, Joyce asks about Marlene's job, which she speaks about dismissively, and about men, who Marlene says all want her to stop being a businesswoman and turn into a wife. She then talks about how she's looking for something more adventurous than being with a man, saying the eighties are going to be great for her, the company and the country as the result of the influence of Margaret Thatcher. Joyce warns her to stop talking about it, and Marlene accuses her of thinking just like their father. This leads to angry reminiscences of their parents' married life, with their conversation revealing that their father was a drunk, which was the reason

their mother had a miserable life. Marlene again mentions how determined she was, and still is, to leave that life behind.

Joyce accuses her of being jealous and ashamed of her. Marlene says she's not personally attacking Joyce, saying she believes that anyone who's got the guts and the strength to make something of herself is worthy of respect. Joyce asks what Marlene plans to do about Angie, and Marlene says Angie is the exactly the kind of person Marlene hates - no guts, no strength. Marlene says Angie will be all right, but Joyce says Angie's children will probably talk about what a wasted life she had. Marlene tries to apologize, suggesting she and Joyce are still friends. Joyce says they aren't. She and Marlene prepare Marlene's bed and say good night. Marlene makes one last effort to apologize. Joyce refuses to accept it and goes out.

Angie comes in, having been frightened by a nightmare. She looks for her mother, Joyce, but she finds only Marlene, who comforts her as best she can. She says Angie's all right because she's awake, but all Angie says is: "Frightening."

Act 3, Part 2 Analysis

This long and complex scene develops and defines several of the play's earlier ideas and themes. The first of these is the idea of the power struggle, with both Marlene and Joyce continuing to fight to get each other to alter her perspective. They both think they were absolutely right to make the choices they did. They are both desperate to get the other to change her mind, and they are both so desperate because they feel so guilty. Marlene is guilty for having abandoned her child, and Joyce is guilty for not having escaped from a life she clearly despises. In other words, desperation gives each both a more intense desire to succeed and a deeper fear of what she will have to face about herself if she fails.

Another repeated idea can be found in the briefly but vividly sketched portrayal of Joyce's husband. This is another in a string of unreliable, irresponsible and selfish men in this play. Howard fits this description in Act 2, as do the various husbands and emperors and unnamed believers in male popes of Act 1. Once again, the women appear strong by contrast. Yet another idea reinforced here is that of Marlene having sacrificed a fulfilling personal life to achieve professional success.

This is developed through the revelation that Angie is Marlene's daughter and also through the mention of Marlene having had two abortions. Both revelations support still another idea - that Marlene continues to struggle with guilt over what she's done and fear that her current success will be destroyed by her less than successful past. This aspect of her experience is further defined by her repeated insistence that she had to leave her past life behind and will continue to struggle to do so in spite of what Joyce says.

An important element introduced for the first time in this scene is a more defined socio-political context. This is done through the reference to Margaret Thatcher, a key figure in

British history. She was the country's first female prime minister and was a powerful role model for ambitious, strong-willed women like Marlene who wanted the same kind of power and influence. Also, Margaret Thatcher espoused and personified a system of beliefs in which personal success was measured by money, power and influence. This is opposed to any kind of more spiritual, personal or relationship-oriented criteria. The working class, people like Joyce with little chance for the kind of advancement sought after and embodied by both Marlene and Mrs. Thatcher, were the sacrificial lambs of this kind of belief system, individuals exploited by those who created fortunes and great success from the work of others. Marlene clearly falls into this latter category, and herein lies the play's key theme - questioning the true nature of success.

Achievement based on spiritual independence, strength and courage is clearly held up as much more admirable than the financial and power-based victories of Marlene and other Thatcher-ites. The experiences, resolve and eventual triumph of Isabella, Joan, Nijo and Gret are in the play's perspective worthy of much more admiration than the apparently selfish, ambitious, ruthless and power-based triumphs of Marlene and others like her. The irony is that on some level Marlene considers herself a "top girl" whose success has come from the same place. Her comments to Joyce that success can come to anyone with guts and strength show her position. On this level of experience, she clearly sees herself as on a par with the women of the first act. On another level, however, she is guiltily and insecurely aware that she has in fact achieved her success at a cost the other women did not pay. She has contributed to the spiritual emptiness of the lives of the bitter, unfulfilled Joyce and the deluded Angie. This suggests that the play in fact goes a great deal beyond examining issues of success and power from a woman's perspective. It is as much about men, and ultimately about all humanity. Ultimately, *Top Girls* asks whether success for anyone is truly success if it comes at the cost of other people's unhappiness. Is anyone, under those circumstances, truly at the "top"?

Characters

Angie

Angie is the sixteen-year-old adopted daughter of Joyce. Angie is the biological daughter of Marlene, but was given up by her birth mother, who was only seventeen at the time and had career ambitions. In act 1 of *Top Girls*, Angie realizes that Marlene is her mother, though she has not been told directly. Both Marlene and Joyce do not think highly of Angie and believe her future is limited. She has already left high school with no qualifications. She was in remedial classes, and her best friend is Kit, who is four years younger. Angie is frustrated and wants to murder her mother. Instead, she runs away to visit her aunt in London and hopes to live with her. Previously, Angie tricked Marlene into visiting her and Joyce. Angie is Marlene's embarrassment, but she is also one of the things that links her to the women at the dinner party.

Isabella Bird

Isabella is one of Marlene's dinner party guests in act 1, scene 1. She is a Scottish woman who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and who traveled extensively later in life. In *Top Girls*, Isabella is the first to arrive at the party and dominates the conversation in a self-absorbed manner. She talks on and on about her travels; her complex relationship with her sister, Hennie; her clergyman father, and husband; her illnesses; religion; and her lack of children. While Isabella does listen and respond to the others, she mostly tries to figure out her own life and what it meant. She could never be as good as her sister, but her adventures made her happy. Isabella is one of the characters who helps Marlene define herself.

Dull Gret

Dull Gret is one of Marlene's dinner guests in act 1, scene 1, and the third to arrive. Gret is the subject of a painting by Brueghel entitled "Dulle Griet." In the painting, she wears an apron and armor and leads a group of women into hell to fight with devils. Gret is generally quiet through most of the dinner, answering questions only when directly asked and making a few comments on the side. Near the end of the scene, Gret makes a speech about her trip to hell and the fight with the devils. Like all the dinner guests, Gret's story reflects something about Marlene's life.

Jeanine

Marlene interviews Jeanine for placement by Top Girls in act 1. She is engaged and is saving money to get married. Marlene is not supportive of Jeanine's ambitions to work in advertising or in a job that might have some travel, but she categorizes her according to what Marlene believes she will be able to accomplish.

Pope Joan

Pope Joan is one of Marlene's dinner party guests in act 1, scene 1, and the fourth to arrive. She is a woman from the ninth century who allegedly served as the pope from 854 to 856. Pope Joan is somewhat aloof, making relevant, intelligent declarations throughout the conversation. When the topic turns to religion, she cannot help but point out heresies—herself included—though she does not attempt to convert the others to her religion. Joan reveals some of her life. She began dressing as a boy at age twelve so she could continue to study; she lived the rest of her life as a man, though she had male lovers. Joan was eventually elected pope. She became pregnant by her chamberlain lover and delivered her baby during a papal procession. For this, Joan was stoned to death. At the end of the scene, Joan recites a passage in Latin. Like all the dinner guests, Joan's life and attitude reflects something about Marlene.

Joyce

Joyce is Marlene's elder sister and mother to Angie. Unlike her younger sister, Joyce stayed in the same area and social class she grew up in. Joyce is unambitious and unhappy. She was married to Frank, but she told him to leave three years previously because he was having affairs with other women. She supports herself and Angie by cleaning houses.

Because Joyce seemed to be unable to have children, she adopted Angie as an infant when Marlene decided to give her up. But Joyce soon got pregnant and miscarried the child because of the demands of raising Angie. Joyce resents both Angie and Marlene, in part because of her miscarriage. She calls Angie a lump and useless. Marlene is too ambitious and clever for Joyce.

Yet Joyce has pride. She will not take Marlene's money, and she does not cater to her crying. Joyce maintains her working class loyalty and stands her ground when Marlene starts to sing the praises of Margaret Thatcher. Despite such differences, Marlene and Joyce are very much alike. They both believe they are right and do what they must to survive in their different worlds.

Mrs. Kidd

Mrs. Kidd is the wife of Howard, the man who got passed over in favor of Marlene for the managing director position at Top Girls. In act 2, Mrs. Kidd comes to the office and tries to get Marlene to turn down the position. Mrs. Kidd hopes Marlene will understand how much it would hurt Howard's pride and livelihood. Marlene is not impressed by her pleas, and Mrs. Kidd leaves after insulting Marlene for being a hard, working woman.

Kit

Kit is the twelve-year-old best friend of Angie. Unlike Angie, Kit is clever and plans on being a nuclear physicist. The girls have been friends for years, though Kit gets annoyed by Angie's limitations. In some ways, Kit is a younger version of Marlene.

Louise

Louise is interviewed by Win for placement by Top Girls in act 2. Louise is a forty-six-year-old woman stuck in middle management who believes she has been overlooked for promotion and under-appreciated by her present firm. Win is not particularly supportive of Louise's desires to use her experience elsewhere and does not offer much hope for a better position. Like Marlene, Win categorizes Louise according to what she believes Louise will be able to accomplish.

Marlene

Marlene is the central character in *Top Girls*. She is a successful businesswoman who has recently been promoted to managing director of Top Girls, an employment agency. To celebrate, she has a dinner party at a restaurant with five guests, all of whom are women who are either dead or fictional characters from literature and paintings. Marlene's own life shares some parallels with these women.

Marlene's adult life has been focused on her career, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. She previously worked in the United States and has done well for herself. Marlene has little to no contact with her family. Her alcoholic father is dead, and her long-suffering mother is in some sort of home. Marlene does not get along with her sister Joyce, who has remained part of the working class and lives in the same neighborhood where they grew up.

Marlene let Joyce raise her daughter, Angie. Marlene became pregnant at age seventeen, and because the then-married Joyce did not have a child, she allowed her to adopt the baby. Marlene has as little respect and interest in Angie as Joyce does. Like the women she interviews at Top Girls, Marlene believes Angie's future is limited. Yet Marlene's own life is just as circumscribed, but in different ways. Her success has come at a high price, costing her both her empathy and her relationships.

Nell

Nell is one of the employees at the Top Girls employment agency. She is happy that Marlene got the promotion over Howard, but she has her own career ambitions and might want to find a job with better prospects. In the meantime, her boyfriend, Derek, has asked her to marry him, but she does not know if she will accept. Her career seems more important to her than the marriage. During the play, Nell conducts an interview

with Shona, whom Nell believes might be good for Top Girls. Nell is disappointed to learn that Shona has lied about everything on her application.

Lady Nijo

Lady Nijo is one of Marlene's dinner party guests in act 1, scene 1, and the second to arrive. She is a thirteenth-century Japanese courtesan to the Emperor of Japan. She later became a Buddhist monk. Like Isabella, Nijo is somewhat self-absorbed, though not to the same degree. Nijo tells the others about her life, including information about her father, her lovers, her four children (only one of whom she ever saw), symbolic clothing, and her time as a traveling monk. But she also listens respectfully to the stories of others and acknowledges her limitations. Nijo liked her silk clothing and easy life with the Emperor. By the end of the scene, Nijo is in tears. Like all the dinner guests, Nijo's life reflects something about Marlene's.

Patient Griselda

Patient Griselda is one of Marlene's dinner guests in act 1, scene 1, and the last to arrive. She is a fictional character, appearing in "The Clerk's Tale" in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, among other stories. As soon as she arrives, Marlene has Griselda tell her story. Griselda was a peasant girl who was asked to marry a local prince, but only if she would obey him without question. She agreed and bore him two children who were taken away from her while they were still infants. She did not question the decision. Her husband sent Griselda back home with nothing more than a slip to wear. She went without question. He sent for her to help him plan his second marriage to a young French girl. Griselda came back. At a pre-wedding feast, he revealed that the girl and her page/brother were their children and all these incidents were tests of her loyalty. Like all the dinner guests, Griselda's story reflects an aspect of Marlene's life.

Shona

Shona is interviewed by Nell for placement by the Top Girls agency in the second act. Shona tries to pass herself off as a twenty-nine-year-old woman with sales experience, which Nell believes at first. As the interview progresses, it becomes clear that Shona has been making up a story. She is really twenty-one and has no job experience. Shona is certain that she could handle high-profile jobs, but Nell does not believe her.

Win

Win is one of the employees at the Top Girls employment agency. Like Nell, she is glad that Marlene got the promotion over Howard, but she has her own career ambitions and might move on. She is relatively well educated and has previously lived in several different countries. Win spent the previous weekend with her married boyfriend at his

house, while his wife was out of town. During the course of the play, Win interviews Louise for a job; she shares Marlene's callous attitude toward Louise.

Themes

Choices and Consequences

Nearly every character in *Top Girls* has made or is in the process of making life-changing decisions with important consequences. The dinner party in act 1, scene 1 exemplifies this. Each of the historical figures has made a hard choice. For example, Pope Joan chose to live like a boy, and then a man, in public. When she became pregnant by her secret lover, the stoning death of her and her baby were consequences of her chosen life. Joyce chose to adopt Angie, which lead to a certain life path. Joyce believes that she miscarried her own child because of the demands of raising Angie.

Marlene also made several hard choices. She became a career woman who spent some time working in the States. Marlene is estranged from her family, including her biological daughter, Angie, and does not seem to have many close friends, female or male. Her dinner party in celebration of her promotion consists of women who are dead or do not really exist, not with friends or family. She has no love relationship. Marlene is very much alone because of her life choices. While her daughter Angie has already made two life choices— dropping out of school at the age of sixteen with no qualifications, and running away to London to live with her aunt/mother—the consequences of these actions in her life are unclear.

Success and Failure

Success is an important part of Marlene's life in *Top Girls*, defining who she is and whose company she enjoys. The dinner party is meant to celebrate her promotion to managing director as well as the successes of her guests. Joan became the pope. Isabella traveled the world. Gret fought the devils in hell. Griselda survived her husband's extraordinary tests of loyalty. Marlene sees these women as successful, though they are not in her real, everyday life. Marlene's personal life is a failure because of her success in business. She has no real friends in the play, and she has not seen her sister or biological daughter in seven years. At the dinner party, she moans at one point, "Oh God, why are we all so miserable?"

Yet, Marlene believes that Joyce is mostly a failure because she did not grow beyond her neighborhood; instead, she got married and raised a child. Joyce cleans houses for a living, and she is not impressed by Marlene's life. Joyce does not really see her world in the same terms of success or failure. She does what is necessary to survive and to rear Angie. However, both sisters agree that Angie has no chance of being a success in life. Angie has no education, no ambition, and is regarded as dumb. The best she might do is menial work and marry. While this describes Joyce's life, both Joyce and Marlene perceive that Angie might not be able to take care of herself. This would be the ultimate failure in their eyes. They agree that one should support oneself.

Class Conflict

Marlene and Joyce's differing definitions of success stem in part from a class conflict. Marlene has moved beyond her working-class roots to a middle-class life by education and persistence. She holds a management position in a demanding field, an employment agency. She even lived and worked in the United States for several years. Marlene supports the political agenda of Great Britain's female prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, even though she is perceived as anti-workingclass.

Joyce remains firmly working class, leading a life only slightly better than her parents. She works as a cleaning lady to support Angie. Unlike Joyce and Marlene's mother, who stayed with her alcoholic husband and had nothing, Joyce told her husband to leave when she could no longer take his controlling nature and numerous affairs. Joyce regards Thatcher as evil, comparing her to Adolf Hitler, for her attitudes towards working-class people. Joyce believes that Marlene thinks she is too good for her. Marlene says she does not like workingclass people, but she does not really include her sister as one of them. The pair never come to an understanding on class.

Sex Roles and Sexism

Throughout the text of *Top Girls* is an implicit discussion on what society expects women to be. Each of the guests at the dinner party defines womanhood in a particular era, either by what they are or by what they are not. Isabella, for example, could not live up to the standards of femininity defined by her sister, Hennie. Yet Isabella was a traveler who saw more of the world than most men. Marlene also breaks out of the traditional roles for women, by virtue of her career.

While Marlene has benefited economically from her career, her disregard for sex roles has its problems. She is not married, and it does not seem like she is in a long-term relationship. Joyce does not really like her. Mrs. Kidd, the wife of the man who was passed over for the promotion that Marlene got, begs her to not take it. Mrs. Kidd believes that the upset Howard should not have to work for a woman. Further, Mrs. Kidd hopes that Marlene will give up the promotion because Howard has to support his family. Mrs. Kidd calls Marlene "unnatural" for her uncompromising stand on the promotion and her attachment to her job. Marlene does not give in, but such sexism does not make her life and choices any easier.

Style

Setting

Top Girls is a feminist drama/fantasy set in contemporary times. The action is confined to two places in England, London and Suffolk. The realistic action takes place in two settings. One is the Top Girls employment agency, where Marlene works. There, potential clients are interviewed, and Angie shows up, hoping to stay with Marlene. The other is Joyce's home and backyard, where Marlene visits and Angie and Kit scheme. The fantasy dinner party that opens *Top Girls* also takes place in London. (In many productions, the restaurant is called La Prima Donna.) Though the dinner is clearly a fantasy because all the guests are dead or fictional, the setting is very real.

Fantasy versus Reality

In act 1, scene 1, Marlene hosts a dinner party with guests both long dead (Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, and Isabella Bird) and fictional (Dull Gret and Patient Griselda). While Marlene listens to and guides the conversation—injecting only bits about herself—these five women share their stories. The party is ostensibly to celebrate Marlene's promotion at work, but she intends it to be a celebration of all their successes. Though these women have each achieved something they are proud of, success has come at a large price in their lives. The dinner party itself shows the tensions between fantasy and reality because the guests are not "real" to the rest of the characters in *Top Girls*, only to Marlene. Yet the ideas and problems brought up by the fantasy women are very real. These issues echo in the plot and dialogue of the rest of the text, adding another dimension to the tension between fantasy and reality.

Time

Top Girls is not a linear play, but one in which time is used in an unusual fashion. The last scene of the play, act 2, scene 2, is the only part that takes place at a specific time in the story, about a year earlier than the other events. This flashback ties up some of the loose ends created by the story. The rest of the scenes, even the action within act 2, scene 1, do not have to take place in the order presented, though all are set in the present. The events are linked thematically, but not by a specific sequence of time. In addition, the idea of time is toyed with at the dinner party in act 1, scene 1. None of the guests can really exist at the same time, yet they share many of the same concerns.

Multiple Casting

Often when *Top Girls* is performed—including its premieres in England and the United States— several parts are played by the same actresses. Only the actress who plays Marlene, the central character in the play, has only one role. Thus guests at the dinner

party are played by actresses who also play contemporary characters. Such casting decisions create visual links between seemingly disparate women. In the original production, for example, the same actress played Dull Gret and Angie, implying that these characters might have something in common. Similarly, another actress took on the roles of Pope Joan and Louise, drawing another parallel. This casting technique further emphasizes how alike the concerns of the historical characters and contemporary characters really are.

Historical Context

In the early 1980s, Great Britain was ruled by women. Though Queen Elizabeth II was only a royal figurehead, real political power was held by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. A member of the Conservative Party, Thatcher had been elected on May 3, 1979, and proceeded to put her own stamp on British life over the next decade or so. She was reelected in 1983 and 1987, and held office until late 1990, when she received a vote of no confidence and was replaced by fellow Conservative John Major. Thatcher had been the longest serving prime minister in Great Britain since the nineteenth century.

To improve the British economy, Thatcher dismantled the socialist practices that were put in place in the post-World War II era. She privatized major industries, like coal mining and telecommunications, which had been run by the British government, and she cut down on the power of trade unions. Because Thatcher's revolution benefited the middle-and upper-classes and seemed to hurt the working-and lower-classes, she was very unpopular among the latter groups. Unemployment continued to rise, and by 1982, over three and a quarter million people were unemployed. With cuts in both welfare and other social programs, such people's lives were becoming much harder. Though the economy was strong and interest rates and inflation were down, real living standards had been falling slightly for several years; international trade was also down.

In 1982, Thatcher and the Conservative party had some popularity problems among the general population. National morale was not particularly high until the Falklands War broke out. The Falkland Islands were a British possession in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Argentina. The group of islands are small and only about 1,800 people were living there. The territory was at the center of a dispute between Argentina and Great Britain for a number of years, and the two countries were in negotiations over them. In the spring of 1982, Argentina became impatient and invaded the Falklands. Great Britain responded and reclaimed the islands before Argentina quickly surrendered. Though there were approximately 243 British casualties, the victory improved national moral and the repute of Thatcher and the Conservatives. The popularity of the Labour party went down.

Thatcher was but one symbol in the 1980s of powerful women. There was a concrete change in the position of working women. In Great Britain in the early 1980s, women made up forty percent of the labor force, and over sixty percent of women aged twenty to sixty-four were working. Marriage rates fell in the 1980s, after having remained stable for many years. Before that decade nearly every adult woman was married at some point. Those that did marry gave up working after having a child, although sometimes they went back to work after their children went to school or reached adulthood. Most women who worked were employed in poorly paid white collar, service, and industrial occupations. Approximately seventy-five percent of women did personal services work, clerical work, retail work, or health, education, or welfare work. The number of professional women was still small, but more women were becoming lawyers than ever before. These professional women often had equal pay for equal work, but working

class women did not. Despite the success of Thatcher, many British women were anti-Conservative, though they did not necessarily support Labour either. To these women, Thatcher may have shared their gender, but her political prominence did not necessarily make her their heroine.

Critical Overview

Most critics agree that *Top Girls* is an intricate play; generally, they find much to praise in its themes, attitudes, and text. The play's depiction of women and feminism is particularly interesting to critics. Writing about the original London production, Bryan Robertson of *The Spectator* argued, "her play is brilliantly conceived with considerable wit to illuminate the underlying deep human seriousness of her theme. The play is feminist, all right, but it is an entertaining, sometimes painful and often funny play and not a mere tract." Expanding on this idea, Benedict Nightingale of the *New Statesman* wrote, "What use is female emancipation, Churchill asks, if it transforms the clever women into predators and does nothing for the stupid, weak and helpless? Does freedom, and feminism, consist of aggressively adopting the very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex?"

Writing about the same production, John Russell Taylor of *Plays & Players* is one of several critics over the years who believed that the rest of *Top Girls* did not live up to the promise of the dinner party scene. He found the play disjointed, arguing that "the pieces in the puzzle remain determinedly separate, never quite adding up to more than, well, so many fascinating pieces in a fascinating puzzle."

When *Top Girls* opened in the United States a short time later, a few critics were dismissive of the play and Churchill's potential appeal to American audiences. Calling the play "confused," Douglas Watt of the *Daily News* proclaimed, "Churchill can write touchingly and with a good ear for everyday speech about middle-class Londoners today. But while concern for ugly ducklings may be universal . . . *Top Girls* is a genre piece likely to arouse even less interest here than Alan Ayckbourn's equally tricky, but infinitely more amusing, works about the English middle class."

Edith Oliver of the *New Yorker* was perplexed by certain aspects of the play. She wrote "*Top Girls* . . . is witty and original, with considerable dramatized feeling, yet somehow never got to me, and I was never certain whether she was making one point with the whole play or a lot of points in its separate segments." Later in her review, Oliver emphasized that "[d]espite my admiration of Miss Churchill's ingenuity, I was disappointed and at times puzzled—never quite certain, for example, whether the historical characters of the first scene were meant to be the prototypes of modern characters. . . ."

A majority of American critics commented on the uniqueness of certain aspects of *Top Girls*, but they were most concerned with its feminist theme and social meanings. For example, John Beaufort of the *Christian Science Monitor* called *Top Girls* "a theatrical oddity in which the long view of what has been happening to womankind's 'top girls' combines with a sharp look at contemporary women achievers and a compassionate glance at the plight of an underclass underachiever who will never know the meaning of room at the top. Apart from one cheap shock effect, Miss Churchill has written a thoughtful and imaginative theater piece."

Along similar lines, T. E. Kalem of *Time* asks in his review, "Is the future to be divided between a smart, scrambling upper class of no-holds-barred individualists and a permanent underclass of poor souls who are unfit for the survival of the fittest?" An unnamed reviewer in *Variety* added, "If it's about male manipulation, *Top Girls* also pointedly involves the conditioned mentality of the sisterhood itself, with its inherited sense of role in a masculine or at least male-dominated world. The play seems to be saying that women historically have had themselves as well as sexist pigs for enemies." John Simon of *New York* believes the ideas in *Top Girls* have universal applicability. "This is not easy theater, but funny, fiercely serious, and greatly worth thinking about. Its aporias [insoluble contradictions] are not only pertinent to women, they also concern the entire, always incomplete, human condition."

Top Girls has continued to be performed regularly over the years. Most critics believe the play has withstood the test of time, despite specific references to British prime minster Margaret Thatcher and attitudes specific to the early 1980s. Of a 1991 revival in London, Paul Taylor in *The Independent* argued, "What continues to distinguish *Top Girls* is its cool, objective manner. The scenes in the job agency are almost too cleverly efficient in the way they expose the heartlessness the women have had to assume along with their crisp power-outfits. Churchill permits you to identify with the tricky plight of these characters but she does not ask you to like them." Similarly, Alastair Macaulay of the *Financial Times* believes, "Both as theatre and as politics, *Top Girls* is exciting and irritating. The dialectic of its final scene, between the Thatcherite Marlene and her socialist sister Joyce rings true as you listen. The terms in which the sisters argue about Thatcherite politics have not dated."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Petrusso discusses the importance of the character of Angie in Top Girls, and her role in the construction and development of the central character in the play, Marlene.

Many critics who have commented on Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* have focused their praise on the interesting characters and complexities of the scene that opens the play, act 1, scene 1's dinner party. The party is hosted by *Top Girl*'s central character, Marlene, and is attended by five guests, all obscure figures from history, literature, and art. Ostensibly, the party is to celebrate the success of Marlene, who has recently been promoted to managing director of Top Girls employment agency. The scene also defines many of the play's themes and dramatic tensions. There are a number of critics who share the opinion of Lianne Stevens of the *Los Angeles Times*. Reviewing a 1986 production of *Top Girls* in San Diego, California, Stevens writes, "outstanding performances . . . cannot rectify the main defect in Churchill's play: Nothing that comes after is as interesting as having dinner with Pope Joan, Dull Gret, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda and Isabella Bird."

There are, in fact, several aspects of the rest of *Top Girls* that are as interesting, mostly because of what has been laid out in the dinner party scene. One is the character of Angie, Marlene's sixteen-year-old daughter, whom she allowed her sister Joyce to adopt at birth. Angie plays as pivotal a role in the play as any of the dinner party guests. While there is no doubt that Marlene is at the center of *Top Girls*, and that her character presents hard and conflicted ideas about women, success, power, and employment in the early 1980s, Angie and the dinner guests help to define Marlene as much as Marlene's own actions and comments do. However, the dinner guests were chosen by Marlene, while Angie was an accident Marlene has chosen to have very little contact with and is dismissive of.

Each of the dinner guests is an adult woman, though they are fantastic characters who do not really exist in the modern world inhabited by Marlene and the rest of the characters in the play. Marlene turns to them, not to any of the "real" people depicted in the play, when she wants to celebrate her promotion. While the guests are successful in their own, though not always obvious, ways, their success has come at a price. Lady Nijo suffered many degradations including not being allowed to raise her own children. Marlene is deeply troubled by the story of Patient Griselda, who was humiliated by her husband as a test of her loyalty to him, mostly because she was of a lower class. To get an education, Pope Joan led a life of deception as a male. Though she later became pope, it was her womanhood—her ability to get pregnant and give birth to a child at an inopportune moment—that led to the murder which ended her life.

Marlene's choice of guests reveals much about her. First, she does not have anyone in her real life to share her promotion with, suggesting an alienation from real women. Second, the loss of her child still weighs on her, either in her conscious, subconscious, or both. Lady Nijo, Pope Joan, and Patient Griselda all suffer the loss of children. Only

Joan is rather indifferent to the death of her infant. Marlene inquires about Dull Gret's children, clearly expressing her interest in the subject. Marlene's question after the one to Gret is rhetorical: "Oh God, why are we all so miserable?" There is a link between unhappiness and the idea of children and loss. Third, Marlene has no real interest in her own daughter, Angie, though they have more in common than Marlene does with her chosen guests.

To understand the importance of Angie, Marlene's character must be better understood. Marlene grew up in an unstable home. Her father worked in the fields, and had a problem with alcohol. Her mother suffered at the hands of her husband, often going hungry and being beaten. Her sister Joyce was older, and did not share either Marlene's need to escape or her intelligence. Despite her background, Marlene managed to create a good life for herself by working hard and apparently acquiring a decent education. She even lived in the United States for several years. The only flaw, the only thing that could have held her back, was when Marlene got pregnant at the age of seventeen. The situation was stressful, and Marlene was in denial for part of the pregnancy. Rather than allow Marlene to give the baby up to strangers, Joyce insisted on adopting Angie, in part because she had no children of her own. This is a long-standing point of contention between the sisters, though Joyce makes it clear that she would not have approved of any choice Marlene made in the situation except to have had an abortion early on or raise the child herself and not have tried to have a better life. Angie and related petty jealousies are at the heart of their conflict and thus at the center of *Top Girls*.

Yet, Angie is a reviled character. Everyone around Angie dismisses her and believes she has no future. Joyce, her adopted mother, calls her "a big lump." She believes Angie will have a hard time getting a job and her best bet in life is to get married, though she cannot imagine who would marry her. Joyce does admit at one point, "She's clever in her own way." Labeling her "thick," Marlene, Angie's birth mother, tells one of her coworkers, "She's not going to make it." She believes Angie's future career will be as a "Packer in Tesco," nothing as accomplished as working at the employment agency run by Marlene. Kit, her only friend and a twelve-year-old, says to Angie at one point, "Stupid f—ing cow, I hate you." She later tells Angie that she is not sure she even likes her. Kit amends that attitude by telling Joyce "I love Angie." The way those around Angie talk about her, it seems like she is useless and incompetent. Joyce especially seems to hammer this idea home directly to Angie. Angie is definitely immature. She talks about being able to move objects with her thoughts, hearing a long-dead kitten in the backyard, and has only one friend, Kit, who is four years younger than her. She has ended her education in remedial classes at the age of sixteen.

Yet Angie accomplishes much over the course of *Top Girls*, more than expected considering how she is talked about. Angie has her own equivalent of the dinner party in act 1, scene 3. She and Kit hide in a shelter that they probably made in Joyce's backyard. Kit, however, is a real person, unlike the unreal guests at Marlene's. Angie and Kit have a real, if tense, friendship. They make tentative plans to go to the movies. Angie expresses her frustrations to Kit, saying she wants to kill her mother. She tells Kit about her secret, that she believes Marlene is her mother. Angie also says that she will

go to London to see her aunt. Kit does not really believe her, though, underscoring that Angie is constantly underestimated by those around her.

Another success of Angie's is going to London from Suffolk on the bus, and finding her way to Marlene's work place in act 2, scene 1. Joyce and Kit do not think Angie could do such a thing on her own. But Angie wants to escape her life with Joyce and become a success. To that end, she goes to her aunt/mother and hopes to stay with her. Angie has the gumption to ask her aunt for help. She will even sleep on the floor of Marlene's home to have this different, better life, like her aunt/mother. It also creates a situation where Marlene gets her child back, a key point brought up in the dinner party. Angie wants to be with Marlene, to be Marlene, and does what she can to make that happen. Angie wants to be a top girl.

Angie's first success, though the last in the play since it takes place in act 2, scene 2, is getting Marlene to visit her in the first place. The last scene takes place a year before the rest of the *Top Girls*. Angie lied to Marlene to get her to visit her and Joyce in Suffolk. She has not seen her aunt/mother since her ninth birthday party. Angie knows that Marlene has had good jobs and has lived in America, and she admires her tremendously. Angie appreciates that Marlene has escaped their neighborhood and become successful, just as Marlene admired that about her fantasy dinner guests. Angie may not have the education or the intelligence that Marlene has, but she wants to do something like what Marlene has done. In this scene, Marlene reveals the key to her success. She proclaims, "I'm not clever, just pushy." Angie has shown that she can be pushy as well over the course of the play, implying that she might have a better future than anyone imagined.

In writing about a 1998 production of *Top Girls* in Los Angeles, California, Don Shirley of the *Los Angeles Times* argues, "Churchill painted a stark picture of Margaret Thatcher's Britain as a place where women could end up in either a cushy but heartless career or a dreary life in domestic servitude. This may sound broadly feminist, but the play finally emerges as a more specific attack on Thatcherite insensitivities towards the girls who aren't on 'top.'" Shirley includes Angie as one who is not on top, but does not see that she could be. Angie is a younger—perhaps dumber but no less ambitious—Marlene.

Source: Annette Petrusso, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay on Caryl Churchill's Top Girls, *author Jasbir Jain discusses how Churchill writes a feminist world to create an emotional space which develops a "collective description" of the characters' experience as women.*

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1983) and Charlotte Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should* (1987) are plays with an all women cast. Men, though present in the stories, are absent from the stage. They occupy emotional space but not physical space. At the very outset there is a defining of space, a creation of a feminist world. Keatley deliberately kept the men offstage to provide a space for the women to interact among themselves, "to show the way women use language, silence and subtext when alone together"; Churchill apparently does it for the purposes of sharing, for as Adrienne Rich has pointed out that unless women are prepared to share their "private and sometimes painful personal experience" it may not be possible to create a "collective description" of what is truly a woman's world. In both plays women from different generations and backgrounds meet together to share and to interact but with two major differences. Keatley's characters in the child-scenes are child characters and represent the same lineage whereas Churchill's characters represent several centuries, from the ninth to the present and have altogether different backgrounds.

The moment women are placed centre-stage they begin to interact and introspect, to analyze and to criticize; they cease to look at themselves through the male gaze, instead they begin to problematize their conflicts and the involuntary processes of their bodies. By defining space in female terms, women are transformed from objects into subjects and their passive acceptance of gendered roles is turned into an analysis of socially imposed codes of behaviour.

Plays by women need not be feminist, just as plays about women are not always so. But plays which concern themselves with women as subjects and explore their emotional realities acquire a feminist perspective. The sixties and the seventies witnessed the rise of women's theatre groups and collectives and a consciousness about women's roles. This was the beginning of a feminist theatre with, as already stated, overtly political aims. Women through exploring and talking about their experiences opened out their role confines, created female traditions and entered areas hitherto forbidden to them. Several all-women plays were also written. Megan Terry's *Calm Down, Mother* (1965) was a transformation exercise for women and hailed by Helene Keyssar as the first real feminist play, while her later *Babes in the Bighouse* (1974) was about women prisoners and closed spaces where violence became a natural inhabitant. Eve Merriam's *Out of Our Fathers' House* (1975) was a projection of the struggles of exceptional women, while Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977) examined the role conflicts in a lighter vein. Maria Irene Fornes's *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) is located in the thirties and is a powerful statement about the violence implicit in heterosexual relationships; it is as Schuler has pointed out "impossible to ignore that explicit critique of patriarchy" (226) present in the play. Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, coming out the same year as *Top Girls* (1983), is a

tense kitchen drama about a mother and a daughter with the daughter at the end committing suicide behind a locked door.

Plays with an all-women cast make a specific statement even before they put this female space to different and individual use. They discard supportive roles for women and provide them with the freedom to relate directly to each other rather than through sons and husbands, "Language, space and the body are loci for the woman playwright to dramatically challenge the images of women determined in dominant discourse" (Hart), Memory, history, the past are evoked for different reasons. Time too becomes an important factor, often being projected non-chronologically.

Both *Top Girls* and *My Mother* create hypothetical situations which are historically not possible but are rendered so spatially and proceed to become emotional questionings. Both are 3-act plays but while Churchill after an initial juxtaposition of the past and the present moves on, Keatley keeps on coming back to the childhood scene which is a conjunction of 1905, 1941, 1961 and 1979.

Top Girls in the first act evokes the past, somewhat like Eve Merriam's *Out of Our Fathers' House* where six women are presented together in a "hypothetical conversation". They act out both for themselves and each other the stories of their lives. It is a journey into selfhood, and at each step they need reassurance from their own selves. They belong to the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, Caryl Churchill, however, builds on a wider canvas and the dramatic purpose of the bringing together of six women from different backgrounds and periods is very different. The first act of *Top Girls* is in the nature of a prologue where Marlene, a top executive in an employment agency is hosting a dinner for five other women, three of whom are from the pages of history, and two from the world of male imagination. Pope Joan, a ninth century Pope who achieved this through cross-gendering, Lady Nijo an emperor's concubine and later a Buddhist nun, and Isabella Bird, a nineteenth century explorer are the three 'real' women. Dull Gret, a woman from Breughel's 16th century painting and Patient Griselda from the pages of Petrarch, Boccaccio and Chaucer are the two others (Note the words "dull" and "patient").

Each one of them—except Griselda—has in some way violated the social code as imposed upon them. Joan learnt Latin, ran away from home disguised as a boy and later became a pope. But yielding to passion, she conceives and is detected during childbirth. Male priests have fathered children, but she has never learnt to understand or live with her body, thus alienated from this most fundamental space she might own, she pays for it with death. Lady Nijo on the other hand accepts the code but renders it hollow by creating space for herself. Handed over to the Emperor as his concubine, she takes lovers to fulfill her emotional needs. Out of favour with the Emperor she takes holy orders as directed by her father, but instead of being confined in a convent, she walks the breadth and length of Japan. But she does this at the price of motherhood. Isabella Bird also has to sacrifice marriage and family life in search of adventure. Because she is a woman, she finds it difficult to accept the idea of living for herself alone and therefore occupies herself with good causes.

As contrasted with these women from real life, who have individually made space for themselves, questioned patriarchal structures like religion, ownership, love and motherhood, the two women from the world of imagination are limited in their projections. Griselda's life reads like a fairytale—a peasant woman married into the aristocracy, and children whom she had given up for dead restored to her later. The price of her marriage is unquestioning obedience to her husband's command which is first the taking away of her son and her daughter and later being turned out of her house. Griselda does not question her husband's right over her, nor does she resist his orders. Her case, like Nijo's, is one where motherhood has been reduced to an "institution" under male control (Rich). Dull Gret is also single minded like Griselda. If for Griselda it is surrender, for Gret it is anger.

These five women have got together to celebrate Marlene's success and as they share experiences they question patriarchal structures either directly like Joan and Isabelle, or obliquely like Nijo, or silently through victimization like Griselda. Travel is a major theme for Joan, Nijo and Isabelle. They travel in their different dresses, Joan in her papal robes, Nijo in her silkgowns and later her nun's habit, and Isabella in her full blue trousers and great brass spurs. (Dress also specifies space. Masculine dress does not constrain the women's private space, though, in the long run, there is no social recognition of that space.) Travel opens out new worlds and spaces. Their coming together in the first act provides "a dramatic genealogy of Marlene's historical community" (Keyssar).

The second act is the in-between act with 3 scenes. The first and the third are located in Marlene's office, the second in Joyce, her sister's, backyard. The office scenes have two interviews inbuilt into them, one with Jeanine and the other with Louise, Marlene's two clients; a competitive scene between Nell and Win and Marlene's interactions with Angie and with Mrs. Kidd. The themes of these two scenes are a replay of the themes introduced in Act One—Jeanine who is torn between marriage and a career, Louise who at the end of twenty years finds herself sidetracked by younger men, Nell and Win who wish to go places both literally and figuratively but Marlene has occupied the place at the top and Mrs. Kidd who has come to plead for her husband who has been superseded by Marlene. Mrs. Kidd tells Marlene:

"What's it going to do to him working for a woman? I think if it was a man he'd get over it as something normal. . . . It's me that bears the brunt. . . . I put him first every inch of the way. . . . It had crossed my mind if you were unavailable after all for some reason, he would be the natural second choice I think, don't you?" (58-59)

In her view Marlene is abnormal in her determination to be at the top and she'll end up lonely and miserable.

The backdrop of the office room is confined and provides limited space where competition and aggression and violation of territorial rights go hand in hand. The middle scene sandwiched between these two office scenes is in a backyard in a "shelter made of junk" by children. It is a hiding place, away from the taboos and restrictions of the adult world. Kit and Angie talk about running away from home, they talk about travel,

about the reality of their menstrual blood which flows from hidden spaces and their love-hate relationship to the adult world. Later Kit seeks shelter from rain within the precincts of her friend's house while Angie herself is left outside with a feeling of rejection.

The third act moves backwards in time. It takes place a year earlier than the second act. It is a confrontation scene between Marlene and her sister Joyce. They open out their past, the suppressed, sibling rivalry, Marlene's need to escape from her background, Joyce's support, the birth of Marlene's daughter Angie, and her adoption by Joyce, Joyce's miscarriage, and her separation from her husband Frank. Women sacrifice their motherhood for a career; but at times they also have to sacrifice their marriage for their motherhood. Joyce is denied space within her marriage while Marlene is aware that men want her to turn into "the little woman" which she is not prepared to do. In all this it is Angie who feels confused and dispossessed.

Keatley's play is also a three-act play with the first act having ten scenes and moving between 1905 and 1979. The second act is one uninterrupted scene located in 1982, and the third act is placed in 1987 diving back, towards the end, to 1923. There are five child-scenes spread over the play-Act I sc. 1, sc. 3 and sc. 8, Act III sc.3 and sc.6 which act like a conjunction of events, like a voice from the past, like an abandonment of the chronological process. The movement of the play can be seen from the graph. The conjunction scene is shown as a circle with four different time streams flowing together.

Covering four generations, it covers several sets of relationships. Space is used very consciously, and scene shifts are indicated not by sets but with the help of lights as Keatley has stated in her "Introduction" to the Methuen edition of her play. her stage directions specifically mention "no sofas" primarily because it is so easy to slip into comfortable positions once the sofas are there. It is so important to render the women vulnerable, to make them appear "awkward" or uncomfortable." Interestingly enough, it was also a conscious decision not to locate any of the scenes in a kitchen which is considered domestic space; instead the locales are houses, living rooms, gardens, backyards, a hospital room and Margaret's office, places which are gender-neutral or strongly affected by male environment. The recurring child scenes where Doris aged 5, Margaret and Jackie both aged 9, and Rosie aged 8 meet are located in a wasteground, "an uncompromisingly real place", beyond the reach of adults and beyond male vision. The wasteground is unpatterned and uncontrolled, closer to nature and reflective of the unconscious; it goes to show that girls are not "born good" and that little girls are not made of sugar and spice and all things nice. They experience rivalry and hatred and harbour murderous intentions, eager to get rid of the goodness of the female tradition.

The five child scenes are played by adult characters dressed up in childhood clothes emphasizing the use of body language. This also underlines the continuity of the unconscious well into adult life. Their attitudes are an indication of the direction their adult lives will take. The child scenes introduce the main themes of the play—"sex, death, gender, courtship, destiny and loneliness", they also contrast with the world of masks, lies and fibs of the adult world.

Keatley views her play as structured along emotional chronology—the past (Act I), the present (Act II) and the future (Act III). It is possible to view the structure somewhat differently—anxieties of growing up (Act I) widowhood and loss (Act II) loneliness, separation and death (Act III). The lives of the women are narratives of female growth and loss; the men—Jack, Ken, Graham, Simon—remain outside, mowing the lawn, honking the horn, or present at the death bed. Yet the choices women face are centred around men—marriage, family, motherhood. Doris gives up working when she gets married, Margaret decides not to have children because she wants to work. When she wants to better her qualifications, her marriage breaks up. Jackie goes ahead and has a child without marriage, but finding it difficult to cope with the child singlehandedly passes her on to her mother. Margaret who has never acknowledged her body dies of stomach cancer and Jackie who takes to art, finds herself trapped in masculine roles and her grandfather's inheritance while Doris who had given her all in marriage ends up with a feeling of having been betrayed. Even the piano she had bought with her own earning is bequeathed to her by her dead husband. Life is a game of solitaire, but one doesn't find the solution to it all by oneself. There are no solutions. There is no space for meeting the conflicting claims.

The central act, Act II, is in many ways a very stark act. The house with its sense of closure, the furniture covered with sheets, the presence of the past in this house of death—they are indicative of Doris's unfulfilled sexuality and Jackie's lost female inheritance which bypasses her to be given to Rosie.

Space is used yet in another way. Suky, the doll which resurfaces as a comforter for three generations is mutilated, rejected, discarded and hidden in dustbins and urns. The background song "Suky Take It Off Again" has sexual implications, the rejection of the doll is the rejection of roles which may appear to be soft. Another song "All You Need is Love" a song escapist in intention contrasts with real life choices where the accent is on facing reality, the hard, cruel choices, and playing solitaire by oneself. Keatley uses the earth as a concrete sense of space:

Earth is the base element of the play. I think the stage floor the key to the design—grass—a worn rug, a stone backyard. It is only when characters touch earth that they make contact with their true feelings and powers. All child scenes take place on bare earth. On her birthday, Rosie buries Margaret's doll in the soil. When Doris and Margaret finally kneel together with their hands in the soil, planting geranium seedlings, they speak their real feelings. There are key moments of contact with the earth throughout the play.

Standing barefeet is a literal enactment of "earthing" one self. Characters in both the plays stress the act of running or walking barefoot whether it be Nijo or Patient Griselda.

Both Churchill and Keatley use an all-women cast to problematize the gender issues, and to project the realistic aspirations of women. Through the use of space, through juxtapositions, closing-ins and opening-outs they also project a need for a new understanding of space, a shifting and loosening of boundaries, of creating more space and moving out of territorial claims. In fact their use of space challenges the very

structures of 'reality' that have kept women behind scenes (Hart). They move away from naturalistic structures and spaces towards magic and fantasy, mixing history and fiction, in order to fathom the unconscious and realize a woman's self.

Source: Jasbir Jain, "Feminist Drama: The Politics of the Self: Churchill and Keatley," in *Women's Writing: Text and Context*, edited by Jasbir Jain, Rawat Publications, 1996 pp. 274-87.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay on Caryl Churchill's Top Girls, *author Joseph Marohl discusses how Churchill creates her characters and dramas with "deliberate confusion . . . and playfulness" to examine difficult social and emotional concepts of gender and history, effectively de-centering gender as the primary dramatic focal point.*

For a decade now, deliberate confusion of dramatic roles and playfulness about otherwise serious concepts of gender and history have distinguished Caryl Churchill's plays from the work of mainstream playwrights in Great Britain and the United States. For instance, six performers in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* play twenty-four different *dramatis personae* with individual role assignments which vary from scene to scene and are unrelated to the performers' actual sexes. In the finale of *Vinegar Tom*, her "sequel" to *Light Shining*, two female performers portray two seventeenth-century theologians in the top hat and tails of music hall entertainers, singing with great irony the song "Evil Women." In a prefatory note to *Traps*, Churchill describes the play as an "impossible object," like an Escher drawing: "In the play, the time, the place, the characters' motives and relationships cannot all be reconciled—they can happen on stage, but there is no other reality for them. . . . The characters can be thought of as living many of their possibilities at once." The cast of seven performers in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill's first *bona-fide* commercial hit, play thirteen roles of varying age, gender, and race. In Act One, a white performer plays a black servant, a male performer plays the role of a woman, a female performer plays a boy, and a small dummy represents an infant girl. Act Two brings a degree of naturalism as women play women and men play men, with the exception of Cathy, a five-year-old girl played by a man. A stage note explains that "Act One takes place in a British colony in Africa in Victorian times. Act Two takes place in London in 1979. But for the characters it is twenty-five years later." Only three characters appear in both acts, and in all three instances the actors portraying them in the second act are not the same persons portraying them in the first. In *Top Girls*, an all-female cast of seven play a total of sixteen different characters, five of whom do not exist in the present. Even more recently, in *Fen*, five women and one man play twenty-two characters in an ambiguous setting which is simultaneously interior and exterior: in Annie Smart's 1983 stage design, "a field in a room."

Multiple casting and transvestite role-playing, which modern directors of the 1940s and 1950s practiced deliberately in several experimental productions of Shakespeare and other standard dramatists, reflect the many possibilities inherent in the real world and subvert conventional ideas about the individuality or integrity of character. The theatrical inventiveness of Churchill's comedies suggests, in particular, that the individual self, as the audience recognizes it, is an ideological construct and the "real world," the world as it is recast by the performers, klieg lights, and chicken wire on the stage, consists of people and events which are individual only in so far as they are rhetorically defined in contrast to others. Her plays conceive character and event as paradoxes. People in her plays are not whole, though sometimes they are ignorant of their own fragmentation; they exist only in tension with their environment (time and space), the other people in the environment, and with the "others" who they themselves used to be at an earlier age

(their former "selves"). Churchill describes the condition more vividly in dramatic terms in the closing image of *Cloud Nine*, when a character in Act Two confronts the version of herself from Act One: "Betty *and* Betty *embrace*."

In performance, the plays assume obvious political importance, espousing the social concerns of contemporary feminism: gender stereotyping, the division of labor according to sex, the proprietary family, the oppression of sexual variety through compulsory heterosexuality, class struggle, ageism, and ethnocentrism. The dramatic events raise the audience's consciousness about social principles through the actions depicted and, more importantly, through the actual events of the performance: woman playing man, man playing woman, one person playing two (or more) persons, two persons playing one, the deconstruction of history and geography (and the related unities of time, place, and action) in order to dramatize the cyclical progress of political and social events in history. What the audience experiences during the performance, then, is defamiliarization of the ordinary (alienation effect) and the subversion of positive ideologues about gender, social hierarchies, and chronology. The comedies are parodic enactments and satires of prevalent, middle-class belief-systems and values, i.e., mythologies.

In *Top Girls*, the one continuous character, Marlene, embodies the characteristics of the popular myth of career woman as castrating female and barren mother. The play uses the myth in order to undermine it, to supplant radical and bourgeois feminist styles with a socially conscious feminism, to "trick" the audience into condemning the "feminist hero" for, in the end, practicing a too-conventional role in the existing power structure. In this, the play succeeds brilliantly and unconsciously. The purpose of the present reading is to discover the political practice of the play as it works through the performance, particularly of the first scene, but a summary of the play's successive parts is necessary first.

Top Girls begins at a restaurant, with a dinner party celebrating the protagonist Marlene's promotion to managing director of the "Top Girls" Employment Agency. Joining her at the party are five ghost characters drawn from history, painting, and fiction: the nineteenth-century Scottish lady-traveler Isabella Bird; the thirteenth-century Japanese courtesanturned-nun Lady Nijo; Dull Gret, whom Bruegel pictured storming hell in apron and armor; the legendary Pope Joan, who, disguised as a man, headed the Church in the ninth century; and Patient Griselda, ironically arriving late and last, the incredibly long-suffering hero of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale. The group ostensibly represents women of outstanding courage and achievement, but the dialogue, often cast as a series of overlapping narrative monologues, reveals pointed differences in ideology and practice. The scene is unique in that it is the only scene in which the play's seven actors appear together and the only scene which does not portray a naturalistic event. It is also the longest scene of the play. The women playing the ghost characters and the waitress appear in subsequent scenes as Marlene's clients, fellow workers, sister, and daughter.

Immediately following the dinner party scene is a brief scene at the employment agency, where Marlene interviews a secretary who aspires to a better position with a new company. There follows a long scene at Marlene's sister Joyce's back yard, where

Marlene's sixteen-year-old daughter Angie, whom Joyce has raised as her own daughter, and Angie's younger friend Kit discuss violence on television, money, matricide, death in general, and menstruation, with Angie announcing at the end her intent to visit Marlene in London. The scene sets up the argument for the play's final scene, in which Marlene and Joyce quarrel about politics and family. More important, the scene reveals the complex disturbed psychology of the slow-witted Angie, whose sex, class, appearance, and low intelligence present a multiple threat to her eventual employability and welfare. The girl's resolution to travel to London to her successful "aunt" hints of Sophoclean tragedy. But her threats of matricide and her Oedipal attachment to Marlene do not effect catastrophe or catharsis in the end; Churchill's play is neither tragic nor obvious. The tragic implications of the scene are not, however, wasted, for, as subsequent events prove, Angie, like Oedipus or Antigone, is a victim of history and fate.

Act Two opens at an office of the "Top Girls" Employment Agency. In the first scene, Win and Nell, two employment agents with the firm, arrive for work and discuss Marlene's promotion, aware that now, as one of them remarks, "There's not a lot of room upward." To which the other one responds, "Marlene's filled it up." Both women agree, nevertheless, that they had rather see a woman promoted than Howard Kidd, a male employee at the agency. Between interviews conducted by Win and Nell, Marlene receives two unexpected visitors at work: Angie, whose surprise visit is treated less than enthusiastically by her mother, and Mrs Kidd, Howard's wife, who asks Marlene to turn down the promotion so that her husband will not be reduced to "working for a woman." The scene ends with news that Howard is in the hospital after a heart attack. The women in the office greet the news with deadpan irony, remarking, "Lucky he didn't get the job if that's what his health's like." Marlene then turns towards her daughter, who has fallen asleep at Win's desk, and prophesies: "She's not going to make it." The line is the end of the story but not the end of the play.

The last scene occurs one year before the scenes preceding it in the play. Once again, the scene is Joyce's house, the kitchen this time. The use of flashback allows the audience to observe a number of changes that will occur over the year in Marlene's character. In the last scene, Marlene, drunk and guiltily maudlin, argues that Angie will "be all right" someday. She regards her career advancement as beneficial to women everywhere and herself as an independent, self-made person, in the same mold as Margaret Thatcher, much to the annoyance of her sister, who reminds her that she could have accomplished nothing had not Joyce been willing years before to take the burden of Angie off her hands. Marlene asserts her belief in middle-class individualism; she is, she says, "an original," a supporter of Ronald Reagan and a "free world." Joyce, whose politics are Marxist and pro-Labour, criticizes her successful sister's priggishness and egotism. She reminds Marlene about her parents, common workers who lived wasted lives and died without happiness or meaningful employment, and about their daughter Angie, who will also be a victim of monetarism and class prejudice. Nevertheless, Marlene persists blindly to endorse a system that values profits over the needs of people, and in the end she seems to accept that Angie, Joyce, and her mother are reasonable sacrifices to make in order to realize her own success in the business world. Abandoned by Joyce, Marlene sits alone in the kitchen until Angie stumbles in,

half-awake after a nightmare, and utters the last line of the play, the single word "Frightening," an unknowing indictment of her mother's self-interested individualism or perhaps an apprehension of her own miserable future.

Taken as a whole, the play demonstrates several larger formal devices which appear immediately to be significant. The central image of the story related to Marlene is the employment agency, a company which locates meaningful and profitable work for its clients. Employment is likewise the central action of the play. All the characters are involved in the assessment of their own work and the division of labor in general: Marlene's promotion to managing director, Angie's unsuitability for the work force, Joyce's unpaid labor as wife and mother, and, of course, the employees and clients of the agency. Work, promotion, money, and success are topics of conversation among the characters throughout the play. The three interviews conducted in turn by Marlene, Win, and Nell in the course of the performance do not, however, indicate that much real change is possible for the status of women in the existing labor system. For Jeanine, the secretary looking for "better prospects" in Act One, Marlene is able to suggest only other secretarial positions. Jeanine wants more money and prestige, a job like Marlene's, for instance, but Marlene urges her to lower her sights. In the end, Marlene convinces Jeanine to interview for a secretarial position with a lampshade company, which pays no better than the job she already has. Marlene attempts to make the new job more enticing by assuring the client that "the job's going to grow with the concern and then you'll be in at the top with new girls coming in underneath you." In a small firm operated by a man and his two sons, Jeanine's chances for a real promotion to the "top" are practically non-existent; her best bets are longevity and the chance someday to manage new girls in even more subordinate positions. Louise, an older client looking for a change from her middle-management position of twenty years, succeeds only in stirring up the ire of Win, her interviewer. Louise complains that newer male employees move up the ranks much more speedily than her, but admits that she has difficulty with other female employees. Win develops an instant dislike for the client, who in some respects represents her own limitations in advancing at "Top Girls." She tells Louise that in most situations she will be forced into competition with younger men and encourages her to accept a position with a cosmetics company, a field that is "easier for a woman," but probably with a reduction in salary. The most pathetic case of all, however, is Shona, whom Nell interviews. She aspires to employment in a "top field" such as computers but seems willing to settle for a lesser position at the "Top Girls" agency. For all her ambition and energy, Shona cannot conceal the disadvantages of her class: poor education, an unrealistic and naive concept of the business world, and lack of connections or experience. She fails in her attempt to bluff Nell into placing her in a position with management status. Together, the three interviews challenge the idea of individual achievement, so important in Marlene's ideology and in the ideology of the English middle-classes who deny the existence of class. The three interviews depict the world of business as a vertical progress from bottom to top, hence "Top Girls," which, intentionally or not, affirms the class distinctions which Marlene ignores: "I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes." The changes Jeanine, Louise, and Shona attempt to make in their social situations, in which the "Top Girls" agency professes to give assistance, prove to be impossible within the establishment. Despite all the talk of advancement, *Top Girls* dramatizes the economic stasis of women

in business and, more important, the impossibility of genuine social reform of any kind within a system maintaining vertical class distinctions.

The same circular, self-consuming logic can be traced in other parts of the play. The audience's attention is drawn towards a particular line of discourse only to see it totter and collapse anticlimactically later on, its premises shattered. The play moves backwards, negating its "arguments" as it proceeds. It begins in a place of consumption (a restaurant) and ends in a place of production (a kitchen). It begins with a celebration for a promotion and ends anti-chronologically with a drunken reunion which occurred one year before the promotion. The progress of the principal character Marlene proves to be illusory, and, in the end, she is no more morally advanced than the other characters and seems unusually dependent upon the sacrifices of others. Marlene's solicitousness about Angie in Act Two, Scene Two, which initially resembles "womb envy" (before the audience is aware that Angie is Marlene's daughter), ends up being little more than feelings of guilt for having abandoned her, years before. Contrary to one's usual sense of dramatic cause and effect, Marlene's guilty conscience is not redemptive; she repeats the abandonment of her daughter at the end of the scene and resumes her original course. The first scene, moreover, celebrates a promotion which the audience comes to realize was achieved at the high cost of the displacement of a number of other women of equal worth. In the end, Marlene lacks the transcendent quality of heroism the audience had come to expect of her at the beginning. Neither is she as reprehensible as her antagonists Mrs Kidd and Joyce (both played by the same actor) would have the audience believe. Marlene, too, is a victim of the hierarchy in which she operates. Even though *Top Girls* lacks faith in individualism as a vehicle for social reform, it is not entirely pessimistic in its outlook. Its faith resides in the revolutionary processes of history, which a theatrical performance can duplicate.

The most obvious device of the play, that the performers are all women, allows the drama to take a number of directions which would otherwise have been impossible. Playwright and theater analyst Micheline Wandor says that the "single-gendered play may be 'unrealistic' in the sense that we all inhabit a world which consists of men and women, but it does provide an imaginative opportunity to explore the nature of the gendered perspective (male or female) without the complexities and displacements of the 'mixed' play." Ironically, by the exclusion of active male characters, *Top Girls* manages to escape the pitfall of sexism, that is, allowing the audience to mistake the class struggle which is the basis of the dramatic plot for a "battle of the sexes," which is exactly the mistake Marlene, Win, Nell, Mrs Kidd, and Angie make, Joyce being exceptional. The action of the play indicates that the female perspective is capable, too, of drawing class distinctions and enforcing a patriarch-like matriarchy based on tyranny and division. The issue of plural feminisms as opposed to homogeneous (i.e., authoritarian) Feminism emerges in the play through the demonstration of differences of class and history among members of the same sex, a demonstration which begins in the opening scene.

Before moving to a more particular reading of the play, it is important to recognize the multiple natures of the women in the play. They are first of all, obviously, real women—actors performing roles. They are also female characters—fictions and *dramatis*

personae. On yet another level, they enact roles of gender—cultural codes by which "female/ feminine" defines itself as different from "male/ masculine" codes. The absence of male characters on stage diminishes the obvious importance of this third level of significance, even though it plays a major part in the discourse of some of the characters. The play in performance de-realizes the women in two ways: one, by being "framed" or abstracted by the theatrical event, their sex becomes a signifier within the dramatic discourse; and two, by performing assigned roles in the drama, their characters contribute to the dramatic discourse through action and dialogue. Thus, one can call *Top Girls* a "women's play" because all of its actors and characters are women, and, at least initially, gender appears to be the dramatic focal point. Gender, however, is de-centered as the real subject of the play almost as soon as the performance begins. The first scene, in which women of different historical periods and different cultures convene to celebrate Marlene's promotion, dramatizes the lack of unity among persons of the same sex, effected by the lack of ideological unity. The six women at the dinner party represent diverse cultural attitudes towards class, religion, family, ethics, and gender; gender is given only an equal footing with other matters of cultural identity. Apart from its definition in the context of a specific culture, male or female gender does not exist. Only by the reformation of entire social systems, then, can gender roles be changed (or dispensed with) and authentic liberation of the sexes occur. Marlene's bourgeois style of feminism is proved in the course of the play to be culturally conditioned, for her success does not really challenge patriarchal authority but appropriates it, conforming, as it does, to the existing hierarchy. Joyce's argument with Marlene in the last scene makes this criticism explicit:

Marlene: And for the country, come to that. Get the economy back on its feet and whoosh. She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job. / She just needs to hang in there. This country

Joyce: You voted for them, did you?

Marlene: needs to stop whining. / Monetarism is not stupid.

Joyce: Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

Marlene: It takes time, determination. No more slop. / And

Joyce: Well I think they're filthy bastards.

Marlene: who's got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico. Aces.

Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

Joyce: What good's first woman if it's her? I suppose you'd have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great adventures.

Marlene: Bosses still walking on the workers' faces? Still Dadda's little parrot?

Haven't you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.

Joyce: I am looking at you.

It is our cultural prejudice, perhaps, that women should be political only about "women's issues," and *Top Girls* uses the prejudice against its audience by deceptively foregrounding gender in order to displace it with Joyce's class-conscious politics in the last scene. Marlene's mistaken concept of female homogeneity in the first scenes, then, parallels the mistake the audience makes about the play's message: to overestimate the importance of sex in feminist politics.

The writing of the French semiotician Julia Kristeva has done much to demonstrate how the opposition of male and female, upon which much of Western thought rides, is constructed by the social hierarchy which it supports. It is ideologically circular; patriarchy invents a myth to justify and perpetuate its own existence. A concept of feminism, like Marlene's, which defines itself in the context of a polarity of the sexes (i.e., female *versus* male/male *versus* female) cannot transcend the inherently man-centered or phallocentric assumptions of the ruling power system. (The problem is portrayed imaginatively in the "Top Girls" Employment Agency, which cannot place women into high levels of corporations which are designed especially to exclude women.) *Top Girls* circumvents the cultural polarity with its single sex cast. The dramatic conflict arises not out of a battle of the sexes but out of class struggle as it persists through many generations of history. The first scene functions as the medium whereby certain lines are drawn so that the subsequent political discourse will be clear and understandable.

The play opens with a simple and familiar theatrical image, a table set for six. Marlene and the waitress enter or are discovered as the lights go up. They are costumed in familiar contemporary dress befitting their status and occupation. Enter Isabella Bird in Victorian blouse and skirt. Immediately, Isabella's appearance estranges the setting. As each successive character enters in costume (Lady Nijo in kimono and geta, Dull Gret in apron and armor, Pope Joan in cassock and cope, and later Patient Griselda in medieval dress), the audience becomes aware, perhaps only dimly, of the process of history the costumes represents. Given the new context, what Marlene and the waitress wear is peculiarly historical and cultural, too. Modern dress is another form of period costume. The visual lesson of the opening scene, if taken, is to recognize the cultural relativity of certain norms.

Little is learned about Marlene in the first scene except that she has received a promotion at the employment agency where she works. Her function at the beginning is to serve as interviewer and interlocutor for the five ghost characters. Each of the characters delivers a personal narrative which, like her costume, distinguishes her from the others in the group by identifying her with the ideology of her culture. Each woman, moreover, has a distinctive manner of speaking appropriate to her class, the more extreme examples being Isabella's chatty and anecdotal monologues and Gret's monosyllabic grunts. Despite Marlene's frequent affirmation of a unity based on gender, the ghost characters do not discover much common ground among themselves. For Isabella, the others seem to lack civilization and education. Nijo perceives the others as barbarians, and Joan sees them as heretics and pagans. In fact, the common

denominator of the group, besides sex, is zealous regard for their distinct cultural identities. Only Marlene perceives herself primarily as an individual apart and as a woman; the others view themselves as members of other collective enterprises: for Gret, it is a battle with her townspeople against the devils; for Griselda, it is her marriage to the Marquis; for Joan, it is the Church of Rome; for Nijo, it is her father's household and the Emperor's court; and for Isabella, it is the British Empire. Only Marlene feels a bond with the others based on sexual identity. Only she senses an allegiance to a subculture contradistinctive to the dominant culture in which she lives.

Parallels of situation do exist between the ghost characters' narratives, but the differences are more significant. Most of the women have survived tragic love affairs with weaker men. At one point, Joan asks rather unemotionally, "Have we all got dead lovers?" Nijo lost her lover, the poet-priest Ariake, before she bore their son. Isabella's American lover, the mountain man Jim Nugent, died of a gun-shot wound to the head. In later life, Isabella married John Bishop, because of his resemblance and devotion to her beloved sister Hennie, but he died shortly after the marriage. Joan's lover died in the midst of a debate with her over the theology of John the Scot.

Their narratives reveal also that many of them have borne children. Gret had ten children, whom either war or pestilence killed. Nijo gave birth to children by the Emperor and her lovers Akebono and Ariake. Griselda bore the Marquis a daughter and a son, which he removed from her in order to test her allegiance to him. Pope Joan narrates the grotesque nativity of her baby in the middle of a papal procession and their joint executions at the hands of the Roman cardinals. Only Isabella is childless, which she compensated for, she claims, by a fondness for horses. Marlene does not mention her daughter.

All the women left home, several at an early age, but for different purposes. Isabella traveled the world in search of adventure and a variety of experiences. Nijo wandered as a vagabond nun in Japan in obedience to her father's wishes and in penance for losing the Emperor's favor. At age twelve, Joan went with her comrade and lover to Athens to study theology. Gret made an epic descent into hell to avenge the death of her family and to rob the devil's storehouses. And Griselda was carried away, in fairytale fashion, to marry the Marquis, Walter.

Although, as Marlene says of them, the ghost characters are women distinguished by their courage and accomplishments, they have made obvious and often extreme concessions to their various patriarchies, against which they utter no word of condemnation or complaint. In order to study science and philosophy in the library, Joan disguised herself as a boy and continued to pass for male for the rest of her life. She moved to Italy because Italian men were beardless and became Pope after Pope Leo died. So strong was her identification with the male sex that she was unable to interpret obvious signs that she was pregnant, which failure led to her downfall and death. By way of explanation, she says she "wasn't used to having a woman's body." There is a hint of irony, perhaps, when later in the play Louise (whom the same actor plays) remarks during her interview with Win, "I don't care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work." What is more remarkable is Joan's lack of outrage

against the vicious hegemony of the mancentered government of the Church. She even joins in the condemnation of herself and her sex, saying, "I'm a heresy myself" and "I shouldn't have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope."

Griselda submitted to paternal oppression in a different fashion. As part of a marriage contract, she agreed to obey her husband unconditionally. She then "patiently" allowed her husband to separate her from her own daughter and son and later to send her back barefoot to her father's house so that he could marry another woman. At the end of the story, the Marquis revealed that all this was only a test of her love and loyalty towards him, welcomed her back to his house, and reunited her with their children. All the women, except Nijo, seem shocked at the Marquis's tyrannical treatment of her, but like Joan, Griselda defends the hand that oppresses her. Explaining her own reluctance to interfere when the daughter was taken from her, ostensibly to be killed, she says, "It was Walter's child to do what he liked with."

Nijo's accomplishments in life were the result of strict adherence to the wishes first of her father and then of the Emperor of Japan. In every respect, she judges herself and the other women at the dinner party according to man-imposed standards, especially those of her father, even her decision to wander Japan as a penitent nun:

Nijo: Oh, my father was a very religious man. Just before he died he said to me,

'Serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders.'

Marlene: But he meant stay in a convent, not go wandering round the country.

Nijo: Priests were often vagrants, so why not a nun? You think I shouldn't? / I still did what my father wanted.

Isabella Bird's concern to be known as a "lady," despite her wanderlust and sense of adventure, is a milder, less obvious form of submission to male authority. Only Gret, who remains silent for most of the scene, gives less evidence of paternal domination. Isabella is less successful in her acquiescence to the standards nineteenth-century English society had set down for women, but her spirit was nevertheless willing. "I tried to do what my father wanted," she laments shortly after Nijo's speech above. And later in response to Griselda's strange tale of marital perseverance, she says, "I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn't seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn't have wanted to go abroad while I was married." Of all the characters present at the party, Isabella most closely resembles Marlene, an effect, no doubt, of their relative closeness in history and culture.

All the women at the dinner party are able to detect areas of intolerance and sexual tyranny in the cultures of the other women present; their blind spots are the inequities of their own cultures. Joan expresses shock and disgust at Griselda's servile obedience of the Marquis: "I never obeyed anyone. They all obeyed me"; but she does not comprehend how her own denial of her sex was also a concession to anti-feminist hegemony. Isabella decries the "superstition" of the Church during Joan's lifetime, but she is ignorant that the Victorian woman's obsession with being a proper lady was

another form of female subjugation. Marlene does not approve of Nijo's acquiescence to her rape in the Emperor's palace, but later in the play she encourages a client to adapt herself to a certain professional image to please male employers. Only near the end of the scene, after the women have begun to be drunkenly boisterous, do some of them guardedly criticize their cultures. "How can people live in this dim pale island and wear our hideous clothes?" Isabella wonders. "I cannot and will not live the life of a lady." Nijo complains about the Emperor's granting permission to his attendants to flog his concubines. Patient Griselda ventures to comment aloud, "I do think—I do wonder—it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to." Marlene's awakening comes much later, when she sees her daughter sleeping in the office and acknowledges, after everything, very little has really changed in the world: "She's not going to make it."

The first scene prepares the audience to perceive the play's subsequent scenes in the light of culturally-conditioned ideology. Like the ghost characters, Marlene has accomplished much in her life, and like them too, she has done so by making concessions to a phallocentric system oppressive to women. Although she expresses disapproval of the extreme, vicious acts of Griselda's Marquis, for instance, or the more intolerant doctrines of the medieval Church, she often praises the ghost characters for their pragmatic manipulation of the patriarchy to further their own ends, a compliment which, needless to say, baffles its recipients. Unwilling to be tyrannized herself, Marlene has joined the powers-that-be and, like Pope Joan, seeks to be obeyed rather than to obey. Nijo perceptively uncovers the secret significance of the promotion to managing director when she adds the phrase "Over all the women you work with. And the men," to Marlene's new title. Marlene's advancement helps no one but herself, however much she would like to believe in a right-wing feminism, and, as the following scenes reveal, she endorses a hierarchical system oppressive to the less fortunate women and men in her society.

Gender fails to be a rallying point in Act One, Scene One, because it is a signifier distinctive to the ideologies which encode it. The conceptions of gender differ culturally and historically as do the costumes. When Marlene proposes a toast "to you all," Isabella responds, "To yourself surely, we're here to celebrate your success." Pleased at the compliment to her promotion, Marlene nevertheless attempts to turn around Isabella's toast, "To Marlene," by adding, "And all of us." She says, "*We've all* come a long way. *To our* courage and the way *we* changed *our* lives and *our* extraordinary achievements" (italics mine). Marlene wants her promotion to be a sign of progress for women collectively, but the others perceive her success as peculiarly Marlene's own. Because of her blindness to class and ideology, Marlene persists in her naive belief that what she individually accomplishes for herself will automatically redound to the common good. Her separation from her sister Joyce in the last scene duplicates her separation from the five ghost characters in the first. In the quarrel which marks the end of the drama, the use of pronouns to demarcate the characters' opposing points of view becomes an explicit element of the discourse:

Marlene: *Them, them. / Us and them?*

Joyce: And *you're one of them.*

Marlene: And *you*'re *us*, wonderful *us*, and Angie's us / and Mum and Dad's us.

Joyce: Yes, that's right, and *you're them*. (italics mine)

Whereas the cultural divisions of the dinner party scene are somewhat blurred by the amicable situation, the bluntness of the sibling quarrel at the end of the play effectively splits Marlene and Joyce into separate classes, in spite of apparent shared features such as sex, family, and a common interest in the well-being of their daughter Angie. Gender fails to be a rallying point in Act Two, Scene Two, because Joyce, unlike Marlene, does not see the perpetuation of class differences within a hegemonic patriarchy (or matriarchy) as an acceptable feminist model for society. Joyce's argumentative point, which in effect is the political statement of the play, is that Marlene has misperceived the lines of conflict. Inadvertently, Marlene has become "them," the tyrants, even as she endeavors, on the basis of gender, to identify herself with "us" (a sisterhood of all women) in the first and last scenes.

The play in performance moves the audience from the apparent dichotomy of "female/male," which Marlene's discourse asserts, to the underlying dichotomy of "oppressor/oppressed" which is the effect of phallocentric hierarchism and which operates outside of the classifications of sex and gender. Within the society of the play, which includes only women, hegemony continues to exist even as women gain token power within the system. Given the context of the whole play, the expression "top girls" becomes, of course, ironic in as much as it implies a middle and a bottom, that is, hierarchy and class tyranny. The drama which the process of scenes enacts is the decentering of Marlene as "top girl" and the deconstruction of the ideology encoding the expression.

Churchill's comedy is disloyal to the historical process of civilization it chronicles in the opening scene. The apparent feminist front at the dinner party proves to be neither unified nor really feminist in any social or political sense. The five women present are as unconscious of Marlene's concept of sisterhood as they are of her concept of the individual. In their own ways, they endorse the several tyrannies under which they lived: Joan, Isabella, and Marlene by emulating the oppressor; Nijo and Griselda by conceding to him. Dull Gret's naive assault upon hell and its he-devils in an attempt to steal infernal wealth parodies radical and bourgeois forms of feminism, which either reverse or capitalize on existing inequalities rather than remove them. In Gret's army, the women-invaders stop to gather the money that the "big devil" sh—s upon their heads and bludgeon the "little devils, our size," an action which offers the satisfaction of victimization to those who themselves once suffered as victims. The ideology of these actions is not explicitly challenged until Joyce pronounces her judgment on it in the final scene: "Nothing's changed for most people / has it?" Marlene's feminism, defined by paternal models for dominating the weak, fails to envision "alternative, non-oppressive ways of living." It is the presence of "stupid, lazy, and frightened" Angie, however, who disturbs Marlene's ideology from the beginning. Angie, whose presence once posed a threat to Marlene's career, threatens at the end her sense of moral equilibrium—Marlene's world cannot account for or accommodate her. The world continuing to be what it is, Angie, like most women, can never be a "top girl."

Source: Joseph Marohl, "De-realised Women: Performance and Identity in *Top Girls*," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 30, No. 3, September 1987, pp. 376-88.

Topics for Further Study

Research one of the five guests from history, literature, and art that come to Marlene's dinner party in act 1, scene 1 of *Top Girls*. Compare and contrast their lives to Marlene's life, focusing on issues of gender and success.

Explore the psychological aspects of the complex relationship between Marlene, Joyce, and Angie. How could Marlene, Joyce, and Angie have avoided their sad situation?

Research the state of the women's movement in Great Britain in the 1980s. Should Marlene be considered a feminist? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast the public perception of Great Britain's prime minister in 1982, Margaret Thatcher, with Marlene. How were successful women viewed by society in this time period?

Compare and Contrast

1982: Great Britain is led by a female Conservative prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, who was regarded as harsh.

Today: Great Britain is ruled by a male Labour prime minister, Tony Blair, who is regarded as personable.

1982: Great Britain goes to war with Argentina over possession of the Falkland Islands and wins.

Today: The Falkland Islands are still a British protectorate, but self-governing. The citizens have been under constant British military protection ever since the war.

1982: A "have-it-all" concept of life is common for women in the United States and Great Britain. Many strive for wealth, a successful career, and a perfect family.

Today: While material and personal success are still important, a more realistic tone predominates as the difficulties of trying to balance it all are realized.

1982: The feminist movement is floundering in Great Britain and the United States. The agenda of many feminist organizations has little to do with the reality of the lives of ordinary women. In the United States, this trend is symbolized by the failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution.

Today: In a post-feminist society, women's organizations regroup to address concerns of women of different classes. In 1998 in the United States, the National Council of Women's Organizations (representing six million women) drafts potential legislation for the National Women's Equality Act, which calls for the end of sex discrimination.

What Do I Read Next?

Cloud 9 is a play by Churchill written in 1979. Like *Top Girls*, this play is experimental in form and characterizations and includes feminist themes.

Skirmishes, a drama written by Catherine Hayes in 1982, also concerns two sisters conflicted over family matters.

Steaming is a feminist play by Nell Dunn written in 1981. It is from the same era as *Top Girls*, and has themes similar to *Top Girls*.

Ugly Rumors, a drama about Margaret Thatcher and other British prime ministers, was written by Tariq Ali and Howard Bronton in 1998. The play concerns the differences in the interactions between Thatcher and male prime ministers.

Objections to Sex and Violence is a play by Churchill first produced in 1975. At the center of the drama is a tense relationship between two very different sisters.

The Feminine Mystique, written by Betty Friedan and originally published in 1963, was one of the first important books addressing the issues of equality for women. Since its first printing, Friedan's book has inspired and encouraged women as they have sought to establish careers, widen their presence in the business world, and create a fulfilling home life. The reissued edition, published in 1984, features a new introduction and speaks to topics that are of particular interest to women today, including health insurance, welfare reform, sexual harassment and discrimination, the growing presence of women in sports, and the decreasing wage gap between men and women.

Further Study

Ashton, Elaine, *Caryl Churchill*, Northcote House, 1997.

This is a critical study of the whole of Churchill's catalog, including *Top Girls*.

Bruley, Sue, *Women in Britain Since 1900*, Macmillan, 1999.

This social history of British women includes information about the 1980s.

Gilmour, Ian, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, Simon & Schuster, 1992.

This is an economic and political history of the Great Britain that *Top Girls* is set in.

Kritzer, Amelia Howe, *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment*, Macmillan, 1991.

This book is a critical overview of and commentary on Churchill's work, including *Top Girls*, radio plays, and television plays.

Thompson, Juliet S. and Wayne C. Thompson, eds., *Margaret Thatcher: Prime Minister Indomitable*, Westview Press, 1994.

This collection of essays considers the whole of Thatcher's life and political career.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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