

Top Girls

Caryl Churchill

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- ***Top Girls*** is a 1982 play by Caryl Churchill.
- It is about a woman named Marlene, a career-driven woman who is all about woman success in business. As the play unfolds we find Marlene has left her 'poor' life, and illegitimate child with her sister Joyce, in order to tread the path to 'success'.
- The play is contemporary and examines
- the role of women in society and
- what being a successful woman means.

Themes

- The play is set in the Britain of the early 1980s and inspect the matter of career oriented women bent on success initially using 'historical' characters to explore different aspects of women's 'social achievement'.
- Churchill has stated that the play was inspired by her conversations with American feminists: it comments on the contrast between
- American feminism, which celebrates individualistic women who acquire power and wealth, and British socialist feminism, which involves collective group gain.

- In addition, there is also a commentary on [Margaret Thatcher](#), the then Prime Minister, who celebrated personal achievement and believed in free-market capitalism ([Thatcherism](#)).
- Marlene the tough career woman is portrayed as soulless, exploiting other women and suppressing her own caring side in the cause of success

- The play argues against the style of feminism that simply turns women into new patriarchs and argues for a feminism where women's instinct to care for the weak and downtrodden is more prominent.
- The play questions whether it is possible for women in society to combine a successful career with a thriving family life.

Style

- The play is famous for its dreamlike opening sequence in which Marlene meets famous women from history.
- All of these characters behave like a gang of city career women out on the town and get increasingly drunk and weepy, as it is revealed that each has suffered in similar ways.

- The stories of the historical women parallel the characters in the modern-day story.
- For example, Bird, like Marlene, got to where she was by leaving her sister to deal with family matters.
- Dull Gret's monosyllabic inarticulacy is comparable to Angie's. Some of these parallels are emphasised by the actors doubling the roles of the historical and modern characters.

- The structure of the play is unconventional (non-linear). In Act I, scene 1, Marlene is depicted as a successful businesswoman, and all her guests from different ages celebrate her promotion in the 'Top Girls' employment agency.

- In the next scene we jump to the present day (early 1980s) where we see Marlene at work in the surprisingly masculine world , in which the ladies of 'Top Girls' must be tough and insensitive in order to compete with men
- In the same act, the audience sees Angie's angry, helpless psyche and her loveless relationship with Joyce, whom the girl hates and dreams of killing.
- Only in the final scene, which takes place a year before the office scenes, does the audience hear that Marlene, not Joyce, is Angie's mother. This notion, as well as the political quarrel between the sisters shifts the emphasis of the play and formulates new questions.

Plot synopsis

- The play opens in a restaurant, where Marlene is waiting for some friends to arrive. She is throwing a dinner party to celebrate her promotion at the Top Girls employment agency where she works.
- As the women arrive and start the meal, they begin to talk about their lives and what they did.
- Each of her guests is a historical, fictional or mythical woman who faced adversity and suffered bitterly to attain her goals.

- Lady Nijo recalls how she came to meet the ex-Emperor of Japan, and her encounter with him. While the rest of the women understand the encounter as rape, she explains that she saw it as her destiny: the purpose for which she was brought up

- Within the context of Pope Joan's narrative, the women discuss religion.
- At this point the waitress, who punctuates the scene with interruptions, has already brought the starter and is preparing to serve the main courses.
- All the women except Marlene discuss their dead lovers. They also recall the children that they bore and subsequently lost. Nijo's baby was of royal blood, so he couldn't be seen with her.

- Pope Joan (woman disguised as man) was stoned to death when it was discovered that she had given birth and therefore was a female and committed heresy.
- Griselda was told that her two children had been killed, in a cruel test of her loyalty to her husband. After dessert, the women sit drinking brandy, unconsciously imitating their male counterparts.

- In Act Two, Scene One, Marlene is at the agency where she works, interviewing a girl named Jeanine.
- Marlene takes a fancy to her even though she seems lost and helpless. She doesn't know what type of job she wants—only that she wants to travel and be with her husband.

- Scene Two begins with two girls, Angie and Kit, playing in Angie's backyard.
- Angie is harsh and quarrelsome with both her friend and her mother, Joyce. She and Kit fight and Angie says she is going to kill her mother. Kit doesn't believe her, and they start to talk about sex.
- Angie accuses Kit's mother of sleeping around, but it becomes apparent that neither of them know what they are talking about; Kit is only 12 and Angie is quite immature for her sixteen years.

- In the third scene, the action returns to the "Top Girls" employment agency, where Nell and Win are sharing the latest office gossip, until Marlene arrives.
- Win meets Louise, a client who after carefully working for many years at the same firm is deciding to quit. She slowly opens up to Win, describing how she had dedicated her life to her job, working evenings at the expense of her social life, without reward.
- She has found herself at 46, with no husband or life outside of work, in a position where she trains men who are consistently promoted over her.

- The action then switches to Marlene's office where Angie arrives, having taken the bus from Joyce's house in the country. She is shy and awkward and her presence is clearly an unwelcome surprise to Marlene, who nevertheless offers to let Angie stay at her place overnight.

- They are interrupted by Mrs. Kidd, the wife of Howard, who was passed up for promotion in favor of Marlene. Mrs. Kidd tells Marlene how much the job means to her husband, how devastated he is, and questions whether she should be doing a 'man's job'. It becomes clear that she is asking Marlene to step down and let her husband have the job instead, which Marlene firmly declines to do.

- Meanwhile, Shona arrives in Nell's office looking for job opportunities. At first Nell is impressed by her surprisingly accomplished resume, but quickly figures out that Shona is underaged.
- At the same time, Angie is having a conversation with Win about Angie's aunt and Win's life, but falls asleep in the middle of Win's story.
- Nell comes in with the news that Howard has had a heart attack. Marlene is informed but is untroubled, and Nell responds "Lucky he didn't get the job if that's what his health's like".

- The final act (3) takes place a year earlier in Joyce's kitchen. Marlene, Joyce and Angie share stories with each other. Angie is very happy that her aunt (Marlene) is there, since she looks up to her and thinks that she is wonderful.
- Shortly before Angie goes to bed, Marlene pulls a bottle of whiskey out of her bag to drink with Joyce. As they drink, they discuss what is to become of Angie.
- With brutal honesty, Joyce tells Marlene that Angie is neither particularly bright nor talented and it is unlikely that she will ever make anything of herself

- Marlene tries to brush this off, saying that Joyce is just running Angie down, as this sober reality contradicts Marlene's conservative mentality.
- It is revealed that Angie is actually Marlene's daughter, whom she abandoned to Joyce's care, possibly causing Joyce to lose the child she was carrying from the stress.