

# Top girls by caryl churchill essay



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Top Girls by Caryl Churchill dramatises contemporary life in 1980s Britain depicting a time of change and shifting priorities and expectations as far as women were concerned within society. The period was characterised by Britain's first female Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Yet unlike the country's political agenda, Theatre was not driven by a female force. Women's Theatre was marginal and even Churchill recognised that her 'whole concept of what plays might be' was 'from plays written by men' (p. xxii, TG).

It is from this position that I shall consider the ways in which the play challenges traditional uses of language and structure. It is important to note however that plays in having no narrator cannot strictly be read as a stand alone text; it is more complex than this involving other factors such as performance and theatre presentation (sets, costumes and stage directions). In considering these factors ('dramaturgy' p181 L; G) it shall enable us to draw meaning from conceptual, visual and to a lesser degree performance issues in relation to the question of language and play structure of Top Girls.

Plays were traditionally divided into five Acts, and would adhere to the classical model – exposition, climax and denouement – including conventions attributed by Aristotle such as: anagnorisis (recognition or discovery by character) and peripeteia (reversal of fortunes). By comparison Top Girls has an episodically form of three Acts, abandoning a forward moving plot and realist conventions of time and place. There is no exposition at the beginning of Churchill's play. In Act One Marlene's fantasy dinner party (akin to The Mad Hatters Tea Party) introduces characters that are not seen or mentioned again in the play.

The structure is fragmented and the location of the action changes from one scene to the next with little connection (restaurant, employment agency, Joyce's backyard). However, each location depicted by Churchill whether imaginary or realistic relays a space in which women express themselves. Churchill further challenges traditional play structure through the absence of climax. Angie never discovers the truth of her parentage (anagnorisis) and none of the characters experience a reversal of fortunes (peripeteia). Instead Churchill presents the reader/audience with a subconscious dilemma.

Is Marlene a bad mother for abandoning her child for her career or is her position endemic of the difficulties faced by all women combining motherhood and career? In this sense the play is ironic. Whereas as the opening Act may lead us to believe the play was intended as a celebration of women's achievements, the action that follows presents the dire consequences (primarily de-feminisation) of women operating in a man's world. The final Act is based in the past (one year earlier) and therefore the end of the play is not aligned with the end of the action it claims to represent.

There is no resolution, with Churchill replacing traditional denouement with open-endedness. In *Top Girls* Churchill undoubtedly challenged the 'maleness' (p. xxii, TG) of traditional play structure through juxtaposition of contrasting scenes, themes and characters. This non-linear structure was interpreted by the French theorist Helen Cixous as being 'the rhythm of women's lives' (p233 L; G), representing the conflicting roles affecting women – daughter, wife, mother and breadwinner.

Just as there is no solution for the difficulties experienced by the women at Marlene's dinner party, at the end of the play there is still no solution allowing women to have it all. The central theme of Top Girls and thus its structure is based on these themes which Benedict Nightingale reflects in a quote from the New Statesman 1982 p. xxxv TG. Instead we are invited to reflect on the advantages of 'female emancipation... if it transforms the clever women into predators and does nothing for the stupid, weak and helpless? (p. xxxv, TG) {Include what rest of what quote says but without using quote directly}

In appreciating the play's structure I would now like to consider the idea that Top Girls is a play which explicitly concentrates on language use by women, through the medium of dialogue except in occasional cases such as character description and stage directions. Structure intertwines with Churchill's use of language, performing a key role ensuring that any reading of the play's text evokes understanding as well as action imagined within ones mind. We thus rely on the text to produce semiotics within situations in which we are devoid of performance mediums such as prosody, sound effects, facial expressions and gestures.

Moreover Churchill not only produces semiotic visual images within ones minds eye but also incorporates literary concepts within dialogues showing themes of support, conflict, power, gender and codes of communication known as Social linguistic theory. The doubling of characters not liked by Churchill she did not want any linkage between characters although this does happen as in the case of Gret and Angie. Each location depicted in Top

Girls whether imaginary or realistic relays a space in which women express themselves.

Act 1 sees women imagined in modern surroundings speaking modern English which to some would not have been their natural tongue. However they all form a bond with Marlene through sisterhood of sharing past experiences and hardships. Note dialect of woman's voices in book act one unlike telly performance. If we begin with Churchill's very deliberate description of her opening characters, we are introduced to their positioning within social class and background, covering a cross section of society which is consolidated through each of their usage of language showing them to be individual and dramatically interesting.

Their dramatic function is to partly represent that their different personalities ensure that no straight forward definition of what a woman is can be made and that a woman is ultimately complex and beyond real definition. They thus represent a woman's psyche and in turn that of the play's main character Marlene. If we take Gret for example her description of being dressed in an apron and armour has the dual function of suggesting domesticity and warrior attributes.

Indeed Churchill further places Gret specifically through her protracted speech within Act one, in relaying her use of course monosyllabic language and table manners showing her to be of lower class status, which interestingly is extenuated within the BBC TV play in giving her a northern spoken accent, this vernacular of language is used ' as a reflection of class and a statement identity' (p185 canon). This as we already seen in previous

studies on *The Color Purple* in Celie's character reflecting her black southern American working class background. Possible mention Joyce and Angie's too as coming from the wash and its relation to accent and class). Act 1 unrealistic in nature, is cleverly manipulated by Churchill in showing naturalistic women's overlapping dialogue, which at the time was not only ground breaking within the realms of drama it also confirmed later observations by linguist Jennifer Coates (p19-23 Canon) in viewing the overlaps in dialogue not as interruptions or intrusive but as something that women engage in within same sex conversation to facilitate solidarity and female friendship.

Moreover the story like narration (Story telling not visible in transcription as mentioned above) attached to each character is in accordance with observations by another linguist Bruner in its use to convey social and moral values which in this case are an important part of the narrator's personal identity such as the snobbery of Griselda's comment ' I'd rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village', Ninjo's comments about importance attached to clothes and looking good and view of children ' he didn't make you get married in your own clothes? That would be perverse. ' And also her further comment on Griselda's first baby being a girl ' even so it's hard when they it away. Did you see it at all? ' (View of society preferring a boy over girl seen through the reference of the baby being referred to as an ' it'). Also Marlene's retrospective hypocrisy/ dramatic irony (vip) of the comment towards Griselda ' But you let him take? You didn't struggle' which later is what she done with her own child Angie in leaving her with her sister Joyce.

Joan's story likewise in using pregnant pauses to shows shock and also that towards Griselda speak volumes as to the women's responses one uttering horror the other disgust. Also the Pope being sick goes against the idea of diegetic space in showing the audience. Thus opening scene provides ' climaxes of horror and dismay, humour and celebration' (p. vii book). These stories of shared experience of child bearing, oppression and rejection of domesticity leading to escape through travel links into two traditional views of women the first of entrapment (birdcage) and the second of quilting (p252 L; G).

The dialogue thus acting as a quilt formed by their stories forming a bond against male oppressive treatment and patriarchal views, signified by the women's position around the dinner table. Also note treatment of waitress no voice sub serviant. In act 2 a return to a realistic set of modern women shown in an office depicting a time of change and shifting priorities and expectations as far as women are concerned within 1980's society. The office women have achieved relative success and independence within a system created by men they appear however male like in their disdain for men (bullshitters) and indeed women.

In adopting and applying the ideas of hierarchal power they are going against the idea that these are the things that every women hate about men. Also their office banter similar to men's portray the ideas commented on by Hartmann's quote about patriarchy ' a set of social relations between men, which have a material base and which though hierarchal, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women (p. xxvii book). This portrayed by Churchill employing the traditional <https://assignbuster.com/top-girls-by-caryl-churchill-essay/>

use of stichomythia which we should note is used commonly throughout the play to produce different outcomes.

Within the office scene interview of Jeanine we see a subversion of gender and power rules through Marlene's use of language in adopting the idea of the dominance-deference theory which is more common place within male and female conversation and not same sex. Through the text we see Marlene adopting a dismissive male persona specifically linked to authority and power ignoring Jeanine's actual needs and wishes by dominating the conversation topic with interruptions and offering no sort of feedback or support instead using just one word answers to some of Jeanine's replies: To? Friendly? , Prospects? ,(P32 book). Jeanine on the other hand adheres to ideas suggested by such linguists as Robin Labov (p19-23Canon), that women are brought up to occupy a less powerful position in society and show deference through being hesitant in conversation with men (in this case Marlene).

They ask tag questions (don't you think? ), more direct polite forms (could you possibly? ), intensifiers (really? ) and generally a weaker vocabulary (oh dear? . This is seen in Jeanine's polite response of ' had I better not? ' and the hesitation in ' yes I know, I don't really..... I just mean'. The outcome leaves Jeanine being railroaded into attending interviewing for jobs she doesn't particularly want. In scene 2 Joyce's back yard through Churchill's description in the stage directions the idea of parental authority is portrayed, in being told that Joyce's house is upstage while Angie and Kits den is down stage.



Also her description implying the girls are squashed together within the den is used to signify their solidarity against this ideal. This is similar to the play *Trifles* by lala in response to male adversaries and which works upon the upstairs-downstairs theory in which Mrs Hale and Mrs Peters described as being in the kitchen (traditional Victorian realm of women) move closer to each other to show solidarity and support against male questioning (p201 or 362 L&G).

Also linked within the scene is Churchill's use of language code for the children's speech recognising their insecurities, range of reference (is this simple speech) and repetition of personal pronouns ' I', ' you' and ' we'. Note shocking description of Angie tasting Kit's menstrual blood, going against idea of diegetic space. The ideas of codes of speech are furthered in other scenes by Marlene such as her operating between two codes in language: use of office banter and domestic intimacy with her sister Marlene.

Act two scene three Employment agency Mrs Kidd domestic housewife (housework not like office work) suffering at hands of husband because he thought he should have been in charge cannot work for a woman calls Marlene to stand down (in not getting what she wanted calls Marlene a ' normal', a ' ball breaker' and insisting she will end up ' miserable and lonely'). The conflict of Marlene with Mrs Kidd is two different women one career driven the other a domestic house wife challenging the roles of women in society.

Shows complete fragmentation of what is important to both women, also note naming conventions of Marlene as working class and Rosemary (Kidd)

as middleclass and also Mrs Kidd (only married women within play) and her defence of patriarchal ideas of domestic family life (children, mother, wife and nurturer). Marlene reverts to the male persona like in interview scene calls Howard a 'shit' and eventually tells Mrs Kidd to 'piss off'. intonation imagined because of argument) Mrs Kidd probably not use to this sort of direct language against her! Act 3 moves the feminist theme of the play into the realms of contemporary politics. Joyce talking in kitchen women's normal place as perceived in male views particularly in Victorian times such as again in the same scene mentioned earlier in trifles. Act 3 set in kitchen echoes of the upstairs-downstairs scenario.

The overlapping dialogue different from opening scene involving socio-political views of society, Marlene an executive and Conservative thinking Maggie's a Top Girl because she would give her a job, similar to Nell's initial observations of Nell on Shona before interviewing her and finding she is a fake and Joyce Labour suffering the burden of struggling with 4 jobs bringing up Angie on her own with her husband having cheated on her entrapment (birdcage) in a depressed rundown council house.

Unusual ending to play ending on one word 'frightening'. Bring in point about intonation and stress in essay anywhere else and particularly in relation to 'no pet sorry' and how this was said differently in the 1982 and 1991 versions of the play (p249 L; G). Conclusion if we consider that the last scene offers up no denouement to the play, we can in fact say this mirrors the whole play in that there is no solution proffered for the difficulties experienced for women in whatever chose of life they choose to take.

Whether like depicted within this 1980's play they choose a career and no family or accept being a housewife there is no escape from male oppressiveness and patriarchal views in society. Women's Theatre a minority Vagina Monologues No woman playwright included in Benedict Nightingales's An Introduction to 50 Modern Plays Churchill defied traditions and challenged established models

Churchill's experimentation into the dramatic form, challenges established models, creating a female aesthetic Socio-political not tragedy or comedy . are usually devoid of a narrative voice and therefore should not be read as stand-alone text . Consideration of other ' dramaturgy' (p181, L; G) factors such enable us to draw meaning from conceptual, visual and to a lesser degree performance issues which also need to be examined in our study of Churchill's use of language and structure.