

# Top girls

Literature



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Churchill uses many effective methods throughout the play to create dramatic effects and to convey the issues concerned. Some characteristic methods of the whole play are evident in the passage, whilst there are also techniques that are not used here but can be found elsewhere. Churchill's chosen methods and concerns chosen can have a hugely dramatic effect on an audience, involving and manipulating their emotions through her subtle techniques. One of the methods of this passage that is characteristic of the play, is the continuity of the characters' personalities.

Each character speaks in a particular manner using specific language, which reflects their usually very contrasting contexts and agendas. For example Marlene, the modern day character, says; 'Oh Joan, thank God, we can order. ' This is typical of Marlene's language; a more casual tone with a less severe view on blasphemy, perhaps more common of the ever decreasingly religious, modern society. We see this informal use of swearing in this passage as well; 'Oh God, why are we all so miserable? However, here we see another characteristic of Marlene's personality; her inquisitive nature, which emphasises her role as 'hostess', which is frequent throughout Act I.

Other questions Marlene asks are; 'They rerouted it specially? ' and 'How many children did you have, Gret? ' Churchill emphasises Marlene's welcoming character by the scripting of these questions, showing that she is less self-orientated than the other characters seem to be, and more interested in what the other characters have to say.

Another character, whose personality is revealed to the audience throughout the Act as a dramatic effect, is Nijo. Apart from short exclamations in

surprise at Joan's story of the pierced chair ('On their hands and knees! ' and 'why couldn't he just pull up his robe? '), she talks about little else but herself; 'I never saw my third child after he was born.. I didn't want to see anyone, I stayed alone in the hills'. The repetition of the first person, and the length in her descriptive speeches, both in this passage and in others in Act 1, emphasise Nijo's self-interest.

Not only what she says, but the way she responds to the other characters, is important as their comments are often simply ignored with comments that revert back to herself, through Churchill's use of overlapping dialogue. Isabella finishes a speech with; 'If a stranger led her she reared up like a bronco' and Nijo reverts back to her own story on the matter; 'I never saw my third child after he was born. ' This use of overlapping dialogue is used throughout the play and highlights the disinterest of what one character is saying causing another character, sometimes two characters, to say their own thoughts.

It is therefore particularly characteristic of Nijo and Isabella in Act I, although we see Marlene also do it in Act II when she takes control of an interview. Isabella is similar to Nijo and also tends to talk a lot about herself; 'Birdie was my favourite. A little Indian bay mare I rode in the Rocky Mountains'. Even though they do respond to Joan's story, they seem to fail to realise that, although they may have many interesting experiences to share, as do the others. Building the nature of the characters creates a more intense and realistic experience for the audience.

As the personalities of the characters become more identifiable, and as the scene develops, the dialogue between the contrasting personalities of the characters interacts more effectively, having a more theatrical effect on the audience. The effect of the overlapping dialogue on the audience is that they feel very much distanced from the characters as it becomes difficult to side with anyone in particular, the interest constantly flickering from one character to the next. Indeed various other techniques are used in conjunction with the development of the distinct characters and the overlapping dialogue.

The pace of dialogue often increases and decreases accordingly to which character is speaking, which allows the momentary relief of tension or indeed the building of it. For example, Gret rarely uses more than monosyllabic words as answers or interjections; 'Ten' and 'Balls! ' These break the flow of a swifter passage, as slightly longer speeches tend to accumulate pace, or are sometimes the climaxes of short passages. This also happens where after one of Nijo's long speeches, which is followed by Marlene's short question; 'How many children did you have, Gret? ', Gret interrupts the pace with an abrupt, one-worded answer; 'Ten'.

The effect of this, as with, 'Balls! ' would most likely be humorous due to both the subject matter, and perhaps also due to the change in pace. The dramatic purpose would also be to draw attention to the other characters on stage after a fairly lengthy speech of a serious subject matter by Nijo, and therefore also to relieve tension lightening the atmosphere. This is a common technique used by Churchill in 'Top Girls' but is particularly effective and frequent with Gret because of her monosyllabic tendency. In this case, <https://assignbuster.com/top-girls/>

the fact that they have all had a fair amount of wine to drink by this stage makes the effect yet more amusing.

Only a few lines before this passage, are the stage directions, 'They all laugh' and soon after, 'They are quite drunk. They get the giggles', so the actors would be performing accordingly, thus making the audience aware of their states. The stage directions in other ways can have an important effect on the audience. For example, the waitress enters to clear the plates. The role of the waitress is important as it creates yet more interest theatrically and adds movement to the stage, which, otherwise, apart from the entrance of each character, there is little.

The idea that they are in a restaurant is maintained in this way, as she is a constant reminder. The fact that there is little interaction like 'please' or 'thank you' also highlights the fact that many of the characters come from an aristocracy and are used to being served. This gives the audience a slightly deeper insight to their backgrounds. Stage directions for entrances of characters are important as they create reactions in the other characters, or indeed do not. It is in this passage that this is obvious as Griselda arrives unnoticed. It is only after they finish the conversation that Marlene notices her.

Although it could just be that the characters are very involved in the humorous discussion that is happening, it is more likely that Churchill specifically chooses this moment for Griselda's entrance so that the audience wonder who she is and her significance. In other passages, first impressions of characters are made on both their appearance and by what they first say,

for example the more elaborate entrances of and reactions to Joan and Gret, but here the audience has a short time, (if they do notice her at all) to make an initial judgement.

Another form of humour apart from Gret's monosyllabic utterances and the characters' drunken giggles and 'chat' is bathos. This is where the character quickly diverge from an elevated discussion to a more mundane subject matter. It is used in other passages of the play, for example, Nijo says, 'he would have gone straight to heaven' and then says 'Waldorf salad' immediately afterwards to the waitress. Here, the discussion goes from Isabella's rather serious speech on charity, including; 'I talked and talked about how the East was corrupt and vicious' and Marlene lightens the atmosphere by saying 'Oh God, why are we all so miserable? .

The discussion then quickly develops to the humorous subject of the 'pierced chair' and this is continued. Churchill's use of bathos would be for two purposes. Firstly, it relieves tension where it has been building for a while, and secondly, it is a form of humour and is therefore supposed to be amusing. In the case of the former example, the 'Waldorf salad' is also a technique that Churchill uses throughout Act I. As each character orders their food, whilst maintaining the setting of a restaurant, the choice reflects their background and character.

For example, Gret opts for the simple, peasant food, 'soup' and Marlene chooses a 'rare steak', reflecting the masculine power in her position in her agency. This technique helps to develop the personalities of the characters for the audience and is also probably rather amusing. The main methods

used in this passage, including; contrasting characters and the development of them, overlapping dialogue, variation of pace, effects of the stage directions and humour, all of which have various dramatic effects on the audience, are all found elsewhere in the play and are therefore very characteristic of the play.

Each situation is unique of course, with various techniques overlapping, resulting in a different effect for the audience every time. This is what keeps the play interesting and ensures the audience are well entertained. In terms of characteristic concerns of the play, not many of the key themes are represented here. One theme, which is not found anywhere else in the play, is the media pressure to be slim. This arises when the characters talk about puddings. Griselda says that she never eats pudding, which the audience is not sure the reasoning for as it is only the third time she has spoken.

However, we see the modern perspective of Marlene who immediately assumes the worst; 'I hope you're not anorexic. We're having pudding, I am, and getting nice and fat'. She emphasises the fact that she too, is going to indulge in pudding, which only points out the fact that she is very aware of her weight even more. It is in some ways linked to the theme of rebellion as she is rebelling against the pressure of society and that they should all do this together. Griselda indeed agrees to join them, as she feels less guilty if she is not the only one; 'Oh if everyone is, I don't mind'.

However, after having been accused of having an eating disorder, it seems to the audience that she most likely also feels she has little choice. The effect on the audience of this is that it is a reminder of the context Marlene is

from and indeed the similar context the modern audience is from. Women in the audience are probably also all too aware of similar situations amongst women, where one does not want to be seen to give in to the pressure.

Secondly, the theme of achievement in terms of being a 'Top Girl', is evident in this passage, mainly in Isabella's speech about being charitable.

She states how she felt this pressure to be self-sacrificial and compares how some men she knew, had been; 'I felt I had so much to atone for. Hennie and John were so good. ' Each character implies what they feel are the characteristics that make a 'Top Girl', someone that they try themselves to be and here, Isabella, daughter of an English clergyman, clearly sees this as her priority. 'So I hurled myself into committees, I nursed... I lectured... I wore myself out with good causes. ' This also shows the theme of how one can take this ambition too far and indeed 'wear oneself out'.

Marlene says in response to Isabella's speech; 'Oh God, why are we all so miserable? ' and the answer that the audience might have would be because these ambitious women become depressed trying to live up to a role model kind of woman that they aspire to be. The audience might feel admiration for Isabella here and for characters elsewhere speak of their achievements, whilst also degrees of sympathy as they feel under pressure to do so much with their lives. Indeed, they may even feel moved to be charitable or do something else that is referred to, themselves as the pressure continues throughout the play as a key theme.

The final main theme that is addressed in the passage is motherhood, one that is discussed in depth in other parts of Act I. The characters each talk



about their children in very different ways, reflecting their contexts. Nijo explains how she saw her daughter only once, and the thing she mentions is her clothes, showing how materialistic she is. She then talks about how the child was simply taken away, which in most of the other characters' contexts would seem totally bizarre. This also highlights the theme of how women were treated differently by men throughout history, often very badly.

So whilst giving the audience many issues to think about, the background and attitudes of the different women are also developed, perhaps sometimes due to this, even creating sympathy for some of the more oppressed characters. Several key themes of the play, all of which probably make the audience think, are addressed within this passage. They are characteristic of the play as they are addressed elsewhere, although here we learn particularly about Nijo in terms of motherhood, Isabella and her aspirations and successes at her idea of a 'Top Girl' and Marlene's awareness of media pressure.