

Top Girls: Act 1 Scene 1

"We were just talking about learning Latin and being clever girls."

Top Girls opens in a restaurant, where Marlene is hosting a dinner to celebrate her promotion to managing director of the Top Girls Employment Agency. As curtain rises, she is on stage waiting for the others to arrive and orders a bottle of wine. One by one, her guests arrive, and it soon becomes clear this is no ordinary dinner party. Marlene's guests are all women from different periods in history, some real people, others fictional characters. The audience might wonder if the scene is a dream sequence, or that the figures are representations of Marlene's psyche. For the five guests, however, each from different countries and eras, the dinner party seems to be a normal social event. The conversation is lively, the wine flows freely, and the guests sometimes laugh and sometimes clash, as party guests often do.

The dialogue is largely composed of the women telling each other stories of events from their lives, interspersed with questions and comments as they listen to each other. The topics of conversation are of interest to women throughout history: they talk about sex, marriage, lovers, childbirth, motherhood. But they also reveal insight into the darker realities that women must face: rape, sexual abuse, inequality, control and coercion, infant mortality, and death. The celebratory atmosphere is frequently dampened by descriptions of trauma, and by the end of the night, the party somewhat falls apart as Marlene and some of the others drink too much to cope with what they are hearing.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. Which guest arrives first?

- (a) Isabella Bird
- (b) Lady Nijo
- (c) Dull Gret
- (d) Pope Joan

2. Who is NOT one of the guests at the party?

- (a) Patient Griselda
- (b) Dull Gret
- (c) Pope Joan
- (d) Wendy Gao

3. How old was Lady Nijo when she became the Emperor of Japan's courtesan?

- (a) Twelve
- (b) Fourteen
- (c) Eighteen
- (d) Twenty One

4. Which character pretended to be a man?

- (a) Marlene
- (b) Dull Gret
- (c) Pope Joan
- (d) The waitress

5. Which guest was the oldest when she finally married?

- (a) Patient Griselda
- (b) Isabella Bird
- (c) Dull Gret
- (d) Lady Nijo

6. How many children did Dull Gret have?

- (a) Two
- (b) Five
- (c) Eight
- (d) Ten

7. What is Patient Griselda's husband's name?

- (a) Walter
- (b) Enrico
- (c) Thomas
- (d) Davit

8. What happens to Pope Joan at the end of her story?

- (a) She retires to the country
- (b) She is canonised
- (c) She is stoned to death
- (d) She is exiled

9. How many courses do the women order from the waitress?

- (a) Two
- (b) Three
- (c) Four
- (d) Five

10. Who is sick at the end of the scene?

- (a) Marlene
- (b) Pope Joan
- (c) Dull Gret
- (d) Isabella Bird

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Think about the title of the play: *Top Girls*. Do you think this phrase applies to the women in the scene? Why / why not?
2. Some of the women come across as very strong, able, or independent. Yet their successes often come at a price. Choose two women and note down in what ways they have achieved – and what was the cost of this achievement:
3. While there are no men on stage, nevertheless men have played an important role in the lives of the women. Each woman's life demonstrates strategies for existing in a male-dominated world. Choose two women – what strategies did they use in their lives?
4. Patient Griselda's story seems to be more 'fairy tale' than the others. In what ways does her story stand out as somewhat different?
5. What is Marlene's contribution to the scene? She doesn't seem to say very much – why? What is your impression at the end of the scene. Was the party a success, do you think?

Important Theme: *tough choices – or no choice at all*

“How else could I have left the court if I wasn’t a nun?”

The full range of women’s stories is on display in *Top Girls* as the play opens on Marlene’s metaphysical fantasy dinner, which can be interpreted as a kind of dream-sequence. Churchill uses the play’s opening scene to demonstrate the range, vitality, and necessity of women’s stories. As she showcases women’s stories, both fictional and nonfictional, Churchill argues that, in a world controlled by the patriarchy, sharing stories is perhaps the greatest currency women have. As Marlene’s guests, real and fictional, share the tales of their lives and bond over their shared pain, Churchill highlights the eerie coincidences between their lives, and asks her audience to consider how women can possibly thrive in such a cruel world.

As an example of a similarity between stories, each of the historical figures at the party has had to make a tough choice. For example, Pope Joan chose to live like a man to the extent that she basically forgot what it is like to be a woman. She says she did not speak to another woman since she was twelve years old and, even when she falls pregnant, she admits that she *“didn’t know what was happening”*. Isabella Bird chose to travel, separating herself from the world of men as much as possible. Yet she was never able to fully shed her feelings of guilt over this choice, saying *“whenever I came back to England I felt I had so much to atone for.”* You might debate whether Patient Griselda makes a ‘choice’ to suffocate her own desires to please her husband, or whether she ever had any choice at all. Perhaps, of all the women at the table, Lady Nijo has the least agency over her life. She was given to the Emperor willingly by her own father, subjected to physical abuse, had successive children taken away from her and was eventually cast out with nowhere to go. She became a nun – but was this really a choice?

Activity

Divide the five guests invited to Marlene’s dinner amongst the class. Each small group should work on one character; reread her story, collect ideas about her contribution to the party and to the emerging themes of the play. Research her background and origin.

When you are ready, create a profile of the character, including a summary of the woman’s story, and notes under headings such as: **Choice, Marriage, Motherhood, Patriarchy**, or similar. Include one or two key quotations for each woman. Then, arrange your designs around a ‘dinner table’ and review your work as a class.



Drama Study: *overlapping dialogue*

"Nijo: I vowed to copy five Mahayana sutras. / Do you know how..."

Marlene: I don't think religious beliefs are something we have in common."

The first-act dinner party is strange and seems out of place compared to the rest of the play, but Caryl Churchill's postmodern style was still new and developing when she wrote *Top Girls*. Churchill wants to experiment with form and structure of drama playscripts: for example, she ignores the passing of time and space between scenes and arranges loosely connected vignettes out of chronological order. Nowhere is her spirit of experimentation more evident than in the opening scene which is fantastical in nature. It's possible to interpret the dinner party as Marlene's fantasy (in reality, she is probably drinking alone to 'celebrate' her promotion) or to consider how each of these women's stories have an 'echo' in Marlene's own life. For the guests, though, the dinner seems natural and they attend as friends gathering at a 'normal' social event. They drink, order food, tell stories, sometimes bicker, and often talk over each other as they carry on overlapping conversations.

In fact, the way Churchill employs overlapping and interrupted dialogue is probably the defining stylistic feature not only of Scene One but the play as a whole. It's not written in a traditional style (one character waiting for another to finish before taking her turn) but with clearly defined moments where one character speaks over another. Occasionally someone will respond to a comment by one character and direct a question or comment to another – all in the same breath! This might make for a confusion reading (or listening) experience, but it also creates a very 'real' sense of interaction between a group of people. Moreover, this technique might help express the idea that the stories of the different women overlap and coincide in many ways, or that the women, in one way or another, are all facets of Marlene's own personality.

Analytical Writing Practice

What was your experience as you read or listened to the play being performed? What was the effect of hearing so much overlapping or interrupted dialogue? Did it make the conversations hard to follow? Do you think this technique adds a touch of realism to the fantastical opening scene? Additionally, were there any moments where you found certain, specific interruptions to be more meaningful than others? Were there any points of high tension and disagreement? Or – conversely – were you aware of any moments where the women did *not* interrupt or speak over one another? In the context of the scene as a whole, was this moment particularly powerful? What might the technique of overlapping dialogue be suggesting about the nature of female allyship in the play?

Write an analytical paragraph about Churchill's use of overlapping dialogue in the first scene of the play. You might consider a moment of tension, a meaningful interruption, a suggestion of agreement or disagreement, or any idea that you have discovered and/or discussed in your reading of Act 1 Scene 1.
