

In the Office: Interviews

“So you won’t tell them you’re getting married?”

Act Two is set in the Top Girls Employment Agency offices in London. The scene is interspersed with three interviews led by the Top Girls staff, Marlene, Win, and Nell, giving us a glimpse of both the agency’s own values and contradictions as well as the culture of work that all the girls are trying to enter. Louise has been working in the same office for over twenty years and wants a change as she doesn’t feel she is appreciated enough. Shona is currently working as a salesperson but wants higher status. She exaggerates her resume and Nell realises that she actually doesn’t have any experience.

Jeanine is interviewed by ‘top girl’ Marlene herself. Unfortunately, Jeanine’s CV is not up to Marlene’s liking: her typing skills are mediocre and she left school before she turned eighteen. Nevertheless, she wants a job with more pay and prospects for promotion, and maybe one that might allow her to travel one day. Jeanine reveals she is trying to save money for a wedding, which prompts Marlene to ask whether she will leave her new job to start a family. In fact, Marlene frequently comments on Jeanine’s resume and suggests she should limit her ambitions. The scene ends with Jeanine asking if Marlene believes in her.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What qualifications does Jeanine present?

- (a) O levels
- (b) IB Diploma
- (c) TOEFL
- (d) B-Tec

2. What are ‘speeds’?

- (a) University degrees
- (b) First aid certificates
- (c) Typing skills
- (d) Short-term boyfriends

3. Who is NOT mentioned as a colleague in Jeanine’s current office?

- (a) Mr Ashford
- (b) Mrs Nanquette
- (c) Mr Philby
- (d) Miss Lewis

4. What kind of company does Jeanine want to be placed in?

- (a) Clothing
- (b) Advertising
- (c) Education
- (d) Medical

5. What is Marlene’s ‘first choice’ for Jeanine?

- (a) Lampshades
- (b) Automotive
- (c) Travel and tourism
- (d) Knitwear

6. Who does Win interview?

- (a) Louise
- (b) Claire
- (c) Tracy
- (d) Emma

7. What advice does Win give this person?

- (a) Better to update your qualifications first
- (b) Make sure you dress to impress
- (c) You shouldn’t talk too much at an interview
- (d) Confirm what your salary expectations are

8. How much does this person earn in her current position?

- (a) Hundred
- (b) Six thousand
- (c) Nine thousand
- (d) Twelve thousand

9. How old does Shona say she is?

- (a) Twenty-one
- (b) Twenty-five
- (c) Twenty-nine
- (d) Thirty-three

10. How old is Shona really?

- (a) Twenty-one
- (b) Twenty-five
- (c) Twenty-nine
- (d) Thirty-three

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Jeanine represents the 'constrained young woman'. What constrains her? Are these things internal or external to Jeanine?
2. Louise and Shona are written to be fairly contrasting characters: in what ways can they be seen as opposites?
3. Look at how Marlene, Win, and Nell guide the interviews. Are they supportive of the women and progressive in their values? What do the interviews reveal about the ideology of the agency?
4. What do the interviews reveal about the culture of work that the women are trying to enter into or progress through?
5. What do these interviews reveal about the theme of feminism, or adjacent themes such as women in the workplace or female allyship?

Important Context: *British Second Wave Feminism*

"The personal is political."



Image source: dilbert.com

Women have been advocating for equal rights throughout human history, but British feminism as an organized protest movement began in the late 19th century (co-incidentally, feminism in the US occurred in the same time frame). The period that historians label 'first-wave feminism' was focused on taking apart the strict gender roles that had been codified into law, relegating women to the private domestic sphere and to a prescribed social role of the 'Angel in the House.' First-wave feminism focused on winning the right to vote (achieved in the US in 1920 and in the UK in 1928) and to work outside the home. These victories allowed women (at least white, middle-class women) to move into the public sphere. First wave feminism didn't disappear after suffrage; Feminists continued to fight for legal and social justice with a lot of success, although two world wars and the global effect of the Great Depression in the US tends to overshadow history in the first half of the twentieth century.

Therefore, 'second-wave feminism' began in the 1960s. The central tenet of second-wave feminism is that *'the personal is political.'* This means that all issues - even those that feel like individual issues, such as domestic abuse - are a result of systems created by the patriarchy. According to second wave feminists, even just feeling trapped by a deep dissatisfaction with one's life can't be separated from the need for political change. Feminist philosophers (such as Simone de Beauvoir who wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949) argued that gender itself is a social construct and women should band together in sisterhood. Second wave feminists took on issues such as sexual freedom (the contraceptive pill was available from 1961) along with social freedom. They fought for abortion rights, equal pay, and the right to own property.

Notable moments in British second wave feminism include: the Abortion Act passed in 1967; laws against sex discrimination in the workplace passed in 1975; employment protection for pregnant women (also passed in 1975) and the right for victims of domestic abuse to be protected by court orders won in 1976. Additionally, the movement gained publicity through acts of protest, a famous example being at the 1970 Miss World pageant (where contestants were pelted with flour bombs) that called attention to the objectification of women and increasingly untenable beauty standards in society and the media. Yet, despite noteworthy successes, the fight for gender equality in Britain and around the world is far from over. Women continue to suffer from discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, domestic abuse, and more.

Activity

Use the internet (or resources on your class blog) to find information about contemporary issues in British or Global Feminism. How far have societies come since the start of British second wave feminism in the 1960s and since the play was written in 1982? Topics you might research include, but are not limited to:

- Equal pay
- Workplace rights and protections
- The 'glass ceiling'
- Reproductive and abortion rights
- Divorce rights
- Domestic abuse
- Beauty standards
- Girl's education