

Top Girls: Back Home

"I think the eighties are going to be stupendous."

The final act of *Top Girls* takes place back in Joyce's home, one year earlier. After six years away, travelling and working in America, Marlene comes to visit Joyce and Angie. At first their interactions are polite but guarded. Angie idolises Marlene, seeing her as successful and glamorous. But Joyce is resentful of her sister's success.

Later, after Angie has gone to bed, tensions boil over into outright argument. Marlene is a Thatcherite, and believes in the power of hard work, competition, and individuality, following the idea that anyone can get to the top if they are determined enough. Joyce criticizes this view, pointing out structural inequalities that trap people like her in working class poverty. The play ends with the family fractured: Joyce goes upstairs; Marlene sleeps on the sofa; Angie wakes up in the night. The audience is left with the knowledge that Marlene's success has not just come at a personal cost, but a profound social one as well.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What present does Marlene NOT bring for Angie?

- (a) Chocolates
- (b) A PlayStation
- (c) A new dress
- (d) Perfume

2. Why didn't Joyce know Marlene was visiting?

- (a) Angie had called her in secret
- (b) Marlene just dropped by unannounced
- (c) Joyce had forgotten
- (d) Kit arranged it as a surprise

3. Marlene says: 'I'm not clever, just...?'

- (a) Lucky
- (b) Tough
- (c) Funny
- (d) Pushy

4. Marlene wrote a postcard to Angie about driving to a new job... where?

- (a) Los Angeles
- (b) New York
- (c) Sydney
- (d) Toronto

5. Who lives in Ipswich?

- (a) Marlene and Joyce's father
- (b) Marlene and Joyce's mother
- (c) Howard and Rosemary Kidd
- (d) Kit's family

6. How old was Marlene when she got pregnant?

- (a) Sixteen
- (b) Seventeen
- (c) Eighteen
- (d) Nineteen

7. Joyce is separated (or divorced) from her partner. What's his name?

- (a) Kingsley
- (b) John
- (c) Roger
- (d) Frank

8. Which politician does Marlene admire?

- (a) Winston Churchill
- (b) Edward Heath
- (c) Margaret Thatcher
- (d) Theresa May

9. What description of working class people does Marlene NOT give?

- (a) Lazy
- (b) Stupid
- (c) Cowardly
- (d) Frightened

10. What is the last word of the play?

- (a) Frightened
- (b) Nightmare
- (c) Success
- (d) Bed

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What is causing tension between Marlene, Joyce, and Angie at the start of this scene? How is it expressed on stage?
2. What makes the revelation about Angie's true parentage such a crucial part of the play? How does it connect to the themes and ideas brought up in acts 1 and/or 2?
3. What are Marlene and Joyce's political and ideological beliefs? How do they reveal a class divide?
4. What are your feelings towards Marlene (or the arguments she makes) at the end of the play? Is there any justification for her viewpoint or is she being entirely selfish?
5. How does the end of the play suggest Angie's future will be bleak? Has the play helped you appreciate the limits of 'top girl' feminism in any way?

Important Character: *Marlene*

"Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes."



Katherine Kingsley plays Marlene at the National Theatre in 2019

The main character of *Top Girls*, Marlene has just been promoted to managing director of the Top Girls Employment Agency in London. To celebrate she convenes a dinner party at a fashionable and expensive restaurant. But rather than inviting friends and family, Marlene's guests are women from the pages of history, art, and fiction. This unusual beginning gives the first clue as to the secrets of Marlene's success – she doesn't invite friends and family because she's cut off any social ties that might hold her back.

As the play unfolds, Marlene is shown to be streetwise, smart, and savvy. She's got a quick wit, sharp tongue, and she's not afraid of putting people in their place. She's had corporate success, and no doubt she's going to enjoy the financial success that comes with her promotion. Written in the early years of Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister of England, Marlene stands as a symbol that it is possible for women to get to the top.

However, Marlene's success has not come without cost. For all her smarts, it's clear that her sense of empathy and emotional range has atrophied. Having to conform to what others expect of her, she's toughened up and eliminated any personal traits seen as weak or burdensome. She shirks her family obligations and is unable to see the world around her in anything other than corporate, hierarchical, dog-eat-dog terms. When Angie arrives, brimming with teenage angst and in dire need of support, Marlene dismisses her quite brutally.

Feminism has come a long way since the early years of the 20th century; Marlene's rise tells us that some barriers can be broken. Yet her story also shows us the compromises required from women to succeed in a male-dominated, competitive system. Marlene's success is paid for by her family, from whom she detaches. And it comes at the expense of other women from all different walks of life whose lives have been impacted by inequality. Finally, Churchill poses the questions of whether advancement means progress – and asks whether progress is possible if it means leaving others behind.

Activity

Create a character profile of Marlene, including quotations to support the ideas in this explainer, or any other ideas about her character that you have discussed over the course of reading *Top Girls*.
