

**STUDY  
REVISE** **AND**  
for AS/A-level

# Top Girls

by Caryl Churchill

- ▼ Written by experienced teachers and examiners
- ▼ Learn how to respond critically to your text
- ▼ In-depth analysis of all aspects of the text

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# Key elements



This guide is designed to help you raise your achievement in your examination response to *Top Girls*. It is intended for you to use throughout your AS/A-level English literature course. It will help you when you are studying the play for the first time and also during your revision.

The following features have been used throughout this guide to help you focus your understanding of the play:

## Context

**Context** boxes give contextual evidence that relates directly to particular aspects of the text.

## Build critical skills

Broaden your thinking about the text by answering the questions in the **Build critical skills** boxes. These help you to consider your own opinions in order to develop your skills of criticism and analysis.

## CRITICAL VIEW

**Critical view** boxes highlight a particular critical viewpoint that is relevant to an aspect of the main text. This allows you to develop the higher-level skills needed to come up with your own interpretation of a text.

## TASK

**Tasks** are short and focused. They allow you to engage directly with a particular aspect of the text.

## Taking it further

**Taking it further** boxes suggest and provide further background or illuminating parallels to the text.

## Top ten quotation

A cross-reference to **Top ten quotations** (see pages 88–93 of this guide), where each quotation is accompanied by a commentary that shows why it is important.

**Top ten quotation**



# Using this guide

## Why read this guide?

The purpose of this AS/A-level Study and Revise guide is to enable you to organise your thoughts and responses to the text, to deepen your understanding of key features and aspects, and to help you to address the particular requirements of examination questions so you can obtain the best possible grade.

Note that teachers and examiners are seeking evidence of an informed personal response to the text above all else. A guide such as this can help you understand the text and form your own opinions, and it can suggest areas to think about, but it cannot replace your own ideas and responses as an informed and autonomous reader.

Line references in this guide refer to the 2012 Bloomsbury edition of the text.

## How to make the most of this guide

You may find it useful to read sections of this guide when you need them, rather than reading them from start to finish. For example, you may find it helpful to read the 'Contexts' section before you start reading the text, or to read the 'Scene summaries and commentaries' section in conjunction with the text – whether to back up your reading of it at school or college, or to help you revise. The sections relating to the Assessment Objectives will be especially useful in the weeks leading up to the exam.

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# Writer's methods: Form, structure and language



## Target your thinking

- How do events in the play follow a 'narrative arc'? (AO2)
- How does Churchill use various devices of play writing and staging to tell her story? (AO2)
- How does the language and of the play reflect its characterisation and themes? (AO2)

### Context

'Breaking the fourth wall' is a theatre term meaning that actors speak directly out to the audience and acknowledge their existence. This never happens in *Top Girls*.

## Where is the author?

In prose fiction (novels and short stories) the author can speak directly to the readers. They can adopt an omniscient position to the action: they do not have to describe the world of the story and events of the plot solely from the point of view of any one character. Playwrights cannot do this: apart from stage directions and descriptions of set, every word they write is in the voice of their characters as they speak to one another. Playwrights have to deliver their ideas through the characters they create.

It is obviously too simple (in any play) to create one character that represents what the author believes in or supports, then have another character who holds opposing opinions and who is in some way 'defeated' by the power of the character who espouses the author's point of view, and so on. The way ideas are delivered via characters needs to be more subtle and nuanced than that. *Top Girls* is especially complex in this respect because, as we have discussed elsewhere in this guide (especially in the 'Themes' chapter) Churchill does not want to suggest that one way of women behaving and looking at the world is right and another is wrong. Churchill explores several linked themes in the play and does not come to a clear conclusion.

## Language and identity

Language connects deeply to personal and collective identity in *Top Girls*. It is a play with a very wide range of characters from different eras, different contemporary social and economic situations and backgrounds. These differences are all revealed through the way they talk.

In Act One, Churchill explores the relationship between who someone is and how they speak, or how they reveal their identity through their speech, through an experimental and surrealist technique. The dinner party is the least natural part of the play. (It simply could not happen in reality.) Each woman speaks to some degree in the idiom of her particular historical era, but their speeches

overlap, emphasising their common experiences. Nijo speaks formally and carefully throughout most of the act, reflecting the restrained and ritualised court world in which she lived for so many years. Gret speaks in short, blunt phrases, conveying the idea that as an uneducated Flemish peasant she rarely engaged in extended and involved conversation. Joan comes across as quite modern in her way of speaking, perhaps reflecting her ambition and self-motivation that modern women like Marlene would recognise. However, when she is miserably drunk, remembering how her life ended in tragedy, she recites the Latin liturgy she would have intoned as a Pope. However, it is also the case that the voices of these characters are, with the possible exception of Isabella, all completely created by Churchill. How historical characters speak is an issue that requires a creative input from all playwrights. Usually they create a voice for a character based on the literature of the period that the character inhabits – if indeed there is any literature. Various creative conventions have come into being: no one actually knows how kings and nobles actually spoke to one another 500 years ago when they were not making pronouncements that someone was writing down.

In Acts Two and Three, Churchill uses language as an indicator of class status and social differentiation. Nell, Win and Marlene speak in a casual, jargon-heavy manner that places them inside an elite and competitive circle of professional women. Joyce and Angie use caustic, curse-laden language that marks them as working class. Angie's simple vocabulary, however, also carries an emotional intensity and directness that recalls Dull Gret's speech in Act One. Mrs Kidd begins by using a mode of speech almost overwhelmed by politeness, until she fails to get what she wants when she becomes somewhat ineffectually aggressive.

## Overlapping dialogue

At key moments throughout the play Churchill directs the actors to speak across one another. She is very specific about where interruptions start and where the speaker continues their line. In Act One especially it can seem on first reading as if the characters are all so eager to talk, so engrossed in what they are saying and not listening to anyone else, that their lines overlap to reflect this. In fact, if you study these moments of overlapping speech, the women are actually following the thread of one character's story, and the interrupters are – to some degree – actually supporting what the original speaker is saying. They never move to an entirely different topic nor contradict the speaker they interrupt or even ask them to stop talking. This device is used to try to convey a sense of how people talk in real life: they do not take turns as actors do delivering conventional dialogue on stage. The problem with using overlapping speech is that it can be hard for the audience to follow what everyone is saying. For this reason the device is not used very much in playwriting, although Churchill has used it extensively in other plays. The use of overlapping dialogue has been singled out for criticism in one or more reviews of every production of the play.

### Context

Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia* (1993) has characters who speak in a highly stylised way to give the sense of how people in an aristocratic household might have spoken in 1810.

### Context

Actor Tom Hulce played Mozart in the 1984 film of Peter Shaffer's stage play *Amadeus* and was criticised for delivering his lines in his American accent, not English. Mozart spoke German, not English!

**CRITICAL VIEW**

*Sunday Telegraph* critic Francis King said of the 1982 production that 'many of the passages are unintelligible because of the author's direction in the text that they should be spoken simultaneously'.

**TASK**

Read Act One: do all the women have comic lines? Collect and list examples.

**Context**

It is a general rule of playwriting that you can take an audience from laughter to tears, comedy to tragedy, as happens with Joan on page 17, but not the other way round.

It can be harder to make sense of the thread of these moments of overlapping lines when you read them on the page than when you see and hear them on stage. In performance, characters can turn to someone they are replying to, then go back to another character who may have started speaking. Seeing how actors are directed to deliver these lines in performance makes them easier to understand.

**Humour**

Act One is largely composed of characters recounting terrible stories, although it does end with Gret's great battle with evil and Isabella's proud boast that her vigour in later life (when she was 70) was 'marvellous while it lasted' (p.32). Marlene manages to create some moments of humour, usually picked up by the audience rather than the guests, mainly by commenting on stories set in remote historical periods with the attitude of a modern, slightly cynical woman. For example, when Joan is describing the chair with a hole in it that future pontiffs had to sit in after being elected Pope (to be inspected to make sure they were male), Marlene says with a hint of lewdness 'You could have made all your chamberlains sit in it' (p.21). This humour is added to by one of Gret's blunt, perfectly timed interjections: 'Big one, small one.'

It may seem that having moments where the audience is laughing takes away from the emotional and dramatic impact of the stories. In fact, Churchill is creating contrast so that we do not feel this act is unrelentingly grim. If it were, the impact of the stories being told would be lessened. We are steered towards moments of laughter among the many horrors that the women have endured. A key example of this use of contrast is on page 18 where Joan is recounting giving birth while leading a holy parade as the Pope. Stage directions twice indicate that all the women are laughing, but 'they stop laughing' when Joan describes how a scene of farce turned to one of barbarity as she was dragged out of town and stoned to death (p.19).

**Asking questions**

In the three interviews in Act Two, Scene Two, Churchill uses rapid, multiple questions from Marlene, Win and Nell to establish the type of person each of the women they interview is. Marlene asks Jeanine 16 questions, Win asks Louise 10 questions and Nell asks Shona 20. Such a level of enquiry is believable: the agency is busy and staff need to find out about candidates rapidly. This also has the effect of introducing a lot of detail about each of the three candidates in a very few lines. Furthermore, the questions they ask and the way they ask them add to our understanding of Marlene, Win and Nell. For example, brisk and professional Marlene is trying to school the somewhat innocent and inexperienced Jeanine in how to interview for a job when she says:

**Marlene** No kids for a bit?

**Jeanine** Oh no, not kids, not yet.

**Marlene** So you won't tell them you're getting married.

(Act Two, Scene Two, pp.53–4)

## Exiting a scene (or act)

It is a rule of playwriting that when a scene or act ends and we move to a new location and almost always jump forward (by hours or days) in time, the audience feels, as the new scene opens, that this is the only logical place where the story could take them next. The playwright sets up hints as the first scene ends about what might happen next. This can be as simple as a character saying, 'I'm going to bed, see you at breakfast', or 'If only I had gone with John to Rome, I would be sitting with him in a café right now, drinking espresso', and then as the lights come up on the next scene we see the breakfast table or John in a pavement café in Rome. However, such is the surreal, non-naturalistic nature of Act One of *Top Girls*, that when Act Two starts we really have no clear idea where the story might be taking us. This sense of dislocation occurs even more strongly at the end of Act Two because of the jump back in time for Act Three.

## Does the ending work?

It could be argued that the poignant moment of Angie's vulnerability that closes the play loses its power to make us contemplate, as we exit the theatre, her uncertain future in a world shaped by radical individualism and Thatcherite policies because we have already twice seen Angie a year later in Act Two. However, if the last thing we see in the performance of play of Angie is, half asleep and afraid, then the power of Churchill's obviously intensely felt sympathy for people unable to survive a harshly individualist society is stronger. Instead of seeing Angie more or less getting by a year after the final act, we might imagine a far worse future where she struggles with everything in her isolated and impoverished home with an increasingly hard-pressed and unsupported Joyce. True, she does make it to London at the chronological endpoint of the play, but there she is dismissed by Marlene's harsh appraisal of her daughter's chances of any sort of decent future.

## What's my motivation?

When actors rehearse how to play their character, they use a standard list of questions that they imagine their character asking and answering every time they enter a scene. The questions are designed to help them find the motivations and emotional mood of their character in every scene. It can be very helpful to apply these questions to key characters, particularly when beginning to study

characterisation and the ways in which characters' relationships are presented in the play.

Here are the questions with the answers that an actor playing Mrs Kidd might give:

**1 Who am I?**

I am Mrs Kidd, a housewife and mother.

**2 Where am I?**

I am in the place where my husband works, that I never usually visit. I am in the office of the woman who is – indirectly – making my life hell. 'Indirectly' is important, I do not see this woman as an enemy, my husband is as much to blame for this situation.

**3 When is it?**

It is the middle of a working day and I know that everyone is busy and I am taking up their time. I am out of my comfort zone.

**4 Where have I just come from?**

I have come from 'my' world of the home.

**5 What do I want?**

I want to persuade this woman (Marlene) to do an extraordinarily generous thing: give up her new promotion.

**6 Why do I want it?**

I want my husband to be happy again and/or, my husband is making home life hell and I want to try to put a stop to his bad humour.

**7 Why do I want it now?**

Because home life is so awful and because once Marlene is in the new job she will be less likely to give it up.

**8 What will happen if I don't get it now?**

My husband will continue being awful, and he may have a heart attack. My life will continue to be hell.

**9 How will I get what I want by doing what?**

I really don't know, but I think I will try to appeal to Marlene 'woman to woman'.

**10 What must I overcome?**

Marlene! She is a career woman who has just gained a promotion and she is very unlikely to give it up, but I am desperate.

You can use these questions to analyse the appearance of any character in any scene in this (or indeed in any other) play and discover more about their motivations and their inner emotional states.

## Subtext

Every line in a well-written play is often doing several things at once: developing the plot and revealing something about the speaker's motives and his or her relationships with other characters, for example. Being able to explain the multiple purposes of a line in simple statements when writing about the play

### TASK

Write short responses to these 10 questions for Jeanine, Louise and Shona. Use your imagination if there are questions you can't specifically answer with evidence from the text. Then write a critical evaluation of each character and their actions based on the answers 'they' gave to the questions.

is important. The key to brevity and clarity is an understanding of how to use literary terms and concepts. For example, being able to identify and describe the author's use of 'subtext' in a line.

**Subtext** is the unspoken thoughts and motives of characters, what they think and feel at any moment but are not actually revealing. In well-written dialogue, subtext does not actually become spoken except in moments of extreme tension and conflict. At other times, it colours the dialogue. It adds another layer of meaning to what is being said. Characters do not generally say directly how they feel or what is driving them to say something, but we can infer their feelings and motivation from what they chose to say, who they say it to and how they say it. For example, Marlene's question during Jeanine's interview in Act Two, 'Does your fiancé want to travel?' seems on the surface to be a straightforward request for information, but there is a deeper layer of meaning. The subtext of Marlene's question is to do with what she is thinking. Marlene has reached a point where she is only prepared to offer Jeanine openings in very dull-sounding knitwear and lampshade making companies. She does not consider Jeanine has the drive to be a 'top girl' in a more exciting company. Marlene sees, or at least suspects, that Jeanine is not prepared to give up the conventional married woman's future of a home and children for professional ambitions. She has already found out that Jeanine is planning to get married. By reminding Jeanine of her future husband and his potential needs and wishes in this line, she is delivering subtext that could be summed up as 'Remember you are getting married and will probably not be in a position to go away from your husband when a company wants you to travel.' Marlene is guessing that the kind of man a woman like Jeanine plans to marry is not going to want to travel to places dictated by the needs of his wife's job, or be happy to be left at home if she goes alone.

## Stage time versus real time

Most plays run for between 90 minutes and 3 hours in real time, but the events that unfold on stage can, in the world of the play, take place over days, months or even years. Playwrights use all sorts of techniques to convey a sense of time passing more quickly than it actually is. Consider the action of Act One. Played on stage, it runs for around 30 minutes, but it presents a whole evening of perhaps several hours in the restaurant. As the women talk, three courses are served and cleared away. If this happened in reality, there would be little conversation because they would have no time to eat their food! The first course is ordered on page 5, has been cooked bought to the table on page 7 and has been eaten and is cleared on page 9. The real time that it takes for actors to deliver four pages of text is probably no more than 6 minutes!

Furthermore, the emotional pitch of the evening, and the increasing drunkenness of some characters, notably Joan, grows much more quickly than it would in reality, where there would be much more 'small talk' around the table

### Build critical skills

Read the conversation between Win and Nell in Act Two, Scene Two (pp.46–52). Write notes on the subtext that lies beneath what each of them says. Is there any difference between what each is thinking but not saying?

### Context

When playwrights want characters to express thoughts and feelings directly and in detail, they often create a situation where they can deliver a monologue.

and everything would take longer to unfold. Introductions for example are perfunctory, characters dive straight into their stories to keep the flow of the scene going. For example, when Lady Nijo arrives:

**Marlene** I think a drink anyway. What a week.

*The Waitress pours wine.*

**Nijo** It was always the men who used to get so drunk. I'd be one of the maidens, passing the sake.

(Act One, p.2)

Nijo is immediately referencing her subservient role to men in the court. Churchill is a very skilled writer: she makes us feel that all the guests are relaxed and chatting freely, but in fact she is being very, very economical with their lines. They only speak about things that are essential to the flow of the story. No one spends a couple of minutes asking anyone else how they travelled to the restaurant for example! Yet the action seems to flow naturally, and we have a sense, at the end of the act, they have been at the table for a long evening.

### Build critical skills

For what reasons do you think Churchill chose to have a powerful and independent main character such as Marlene, instead of a woman personally fighting oppression and disadvantage?

## Absent males

There are no male characters in the play but the negative influence of several hang over the action. Their unseen presence is a key element of the way Churchill presents her themes. It is not that men and male influence is unimportant to the play; what men have done to women is a constant driver for the motives for most characters. However, Churchill wanted to look at the impact of, and reactions against, male oppression and institutional patriarchy in a dramatic world where women could be seen operating without the presence and influence of men.

There are the men who oppressed or even dealt violence to Nijo, Joan and Griselda: the male courtiers and nobles at the Emperor's court who used Nijo as a prostitute, the male clergy who either actually stoned Joan to death or encouraged the people of Rome to do so, and Griselda's husband who inflicted decades of mental cruelty on his wife. The review of history that we take away from Act One is of women constantly fighting against individual male tormentors and institutionalised patriarchal oppression for not just equality and fair treatment, but for their freedom and even their very existence.

In the present-day action of the play (Acts Two and Three) there are fewer male oppressors casting a dark shadow over the female characters, and their power is less extreme and violent, but their background presence is still important. Win and Nell talk dismissively of Howard: they regard him as loud, typically male and no great asset to the agency. The implication is that they see him as part of an old, male-controlled professional world that is disappearing from their offices. The appearance of Mrs Kidd telling Marlene that her husband is making life

hell at home by including her in the invective he is pouring out against women adds to our negative image of this apparently foul-tempered man who expects promotion over women candidates simply because he is male. When the 'top girls' learn he has had a heart attack, Win 'deals' with the news in one and a half lines, blaming his smoking and butter intake and perfunctorily noting that they must send flowers. None of the women expresses any sympathy or shock. They have no reason to mourn his absence from their working lives. Some expression of sympathy might be seen as the expected default feminine reaction to such news, but not from these self-described 'tough birds'.

Win and Nell mention several men in Act Two, Scene One from their private lives. They are dismissive of men who they see as casual boyfriends, and appear quite happy for them to know that they see other men. We sense that not taking men and the things they offer seriously is an ongoing feature of Win and Nell reporting their lives to one another. As 'top girls' they are not going to let men affect their personal aims and compromise their freedoms. On stage, Win and Nell (and of course Marlene) should appear as well-groomed and powerful women, attractive to men and well aware that they are. They can pick and choose who to date. The men who are 'lucky enough' to spend time with them are not therefore oppressors or negative influences, they are merely trivial and dis-empowered whenever one of these women sweeps into, or more likely out of, their lives. This of course might not really be the case in the 'off stage' lives of these female characters, but it is how they present themselves in the female dominated world of the Top Girls Employment Agency.

The men who suddenly turn up on Joyce's doorstep when they know she has been abandoned by her husband are a further example of feckless and, in Joyce's eyes, useless and undesirable men. Men who serve no purpose in women's lives is a powerful strand running through the play. Marlene tells Joyce 'oh there's always men' in her life but that 'they can't take the day to day' (pp.92–3). This is not apparently said with regret; it seems that Marlene just does not have any expectations of, or emotional need for, male companions.

In Act Three, there are two further absent males who cast a dark shadow of male oppression over the action of the play and over the lives of the two main characters, Marlene and Joyce. Joyce's husband has left her in poverty: we cannot imagine he is paying maintenance to support if not Joyce then at least Angie. Finally, Marlene describes their now-deceased father as a violent and feckless drunk: he was one of the main reasons that Marlene left home and never returned. It is also worth noting that Marlene makes no mention of Angie's father; whoever he was she does not feel any need to talk about him when speaking about her past.

## Context

Men still run many companies who make or sell products for women. Even in 2016, the UK women's clothing chains Dorothy Perkins, Evans, Miss Selfridge, Topshop and Wallis are all owned by one man!

Men who serve no purpose in women's lives is a powerful strand running through the play.