



CONTEMPORARY THEATRE IN ENGLISH

WORKSHEET 4 – CARYL CHURCHILL'S *TOP GIRLS* (1982)

Preliminaries

1. What is your general reaction to the play? Did you like/dislike it? Why, in each case? Try to articulate your thoughts while looking for an answer and be as explicit as possible.
2. Is *Top Girls* a naturalistic/social-realist play? Which of the paradigms studied would best define the play?
3. Is *Top Girls* a feminist play? What is the play's take on the role of women in society? Does it celebrate wholeheartedly the presence of women in positions of power?
4. How can the discussion on bourgeois/liberal feminism vs. materialist/socialist feminism be applied to *Top Girls*? You can check Sophie Bush's "Commentary" to the Methuen Student Edition of the play (2018), or any other articles on the course reading list.
5. Name some other of the most immediate socio-political contexts to the play. Read Bill Naismith's "Commentary" to the Methuen Student Edition (1991) and enumerate them. You can also find the chronology by John Bull (1994) useful.
6. What was the Welfare State, when was it created in Britain and what were its main characteristics and implications?
7. The figure of Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism are perhaps the most important political issues the play responds/alludes to. Who was Mrs. Thatcher, what were the main characteristics of Thatcherism, and in what way did it react to the values of the Welfare State?
8. What are the implications in the use of the title?

Dramaturgical Strategies

1. Caryl Churchill was first included in the group of political/'socialist' playwrights writing in Britain, even though she soon developed her own style and gradually shifted away from the kind of social realism that those playwrights adhered to. In terms of formal experimentation, which elements would you identify as being particularly relevant in *Top Girls*, and why?
2. How is the play structured? How does the specific dramatic shape used contribute to the creation of meaning? Read the two possible endings, watch them in the Open University

filmed version of the play (1991, 2006), directed by Max Stafford-Clark, and discuss their implications.

3. Analyse the use of time in *Top Girls*. Is it formally experimental? Why (not)? Do you agree with R. Darren Gobert when, in his book *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (2014), he describes it as a “fractured temporality” (p. 4) that rejects “a teleological structure” (p. 13)?

4. Identify each of the women in act I and enumerate their main accomplishments and vicissitudes. What do they have in common? Do they ultimately manage to create a sense of community?

5. Why do you think Churchill makes use of women from different time periods and backgrounds in act I and what is achieved by that mixture? At the level of character construction, what is the effect created by that?

6. How can the ending of act I be read? How significant is Dull Gret’s speech in the light of the whole play?

7. One of the most experimental elements in the play is the use of language. Describe how it is used in *Top Girls* and consider its effects and possible implications. In what way/s does overlapping dialogue contribute to the establishment of a successful communication between the women?

8. Watch the restaurant scene in the Open University filmed version and discuss the specific choices made. Does the end of the scene adequately convey the main concerns of the play?

9. What is the effect created by the juxtaposition of the different characters and moments in the office scenes? What groupings between the characters can be established?

10. Analyse the moment in the office scenes when Angie visits Marlene and discuss its socio-political implications, bearing also in mind Marlene’s words later on when Angie has fallen asleep. Watch the Open University filmed version and discuss its particular effects.

11. Watch Marlene’s interview with Jeanine in the Open University filmed version and analyse it in terms of language, body language and stage picture. How does it convey the main concerns of the play? On the whole, what strands of thought can be found in the interview scenes?

12. What is the effect of act III? How does the confrontation between Marlene and Joyce shed light on the play’s main concerns? Read it and identify each sister’s main ideological positioning. Then watch the Open University filmed version and discuss the choices made, paying particular attention to the effect created by the use of language, body language and stage picture.

13. How can the end of the play be read? In the light of the whole play, how can Angie’s final words be understood?

14. Discuss the use of the stage picture, describing its most defining elements and assessing its implications.
15. What kind of analysis is suggested through the combination of the historical, professional and domestic spheres?
16. In production, the play makes use of doubling and trebling of roles, with the sole exception of the character of Marlene, who is played by the same actor throughout. What do you think is the purpose of this strategy and what effect does it have on the spectator?
17. How are men depicted in the play and how can such a depiction be read?
18. Discuss Elaine Aston's distinction between 'inter' and 'intra-sexual' oppression in her book *Caryl Churchill* (1997). How are they present in the play? Do you agree with her description of Angie as "the key site of intrasexual oppression" (p. 41)? In this respect, how does the play present the plight of the dispossessed?
19. Do you agree with Sue-Ellen Case that the play presents women with the choice of the "relative economic poverty of child-rearing" or the "emotional alienation of success within the structures of capitalism" (*Feminism and Theatre*, 1988, p. 87)? Or with what Amelia Kritzer describes as an "ethic of caring" versus an "ethic of competition" (*The Plays of Caryl Churchill*, 1991, p. 141)? How does the play represent this?
20. In her book *Caryl Churchill* (p. 40), Aston has discussed how "[c]ritics have sometimes questioned the ideological purpose of Marlene, or *Top Girls* in general, asking whether to read Marlene and the play as a celebration of women's achievements or a critique of bourgeois feminism?" Bearing this quote in mind, what would be your own reading of the play?
21. Discuss the presence of Thatcherism in the play and the particular way in which the Open University filmed version alludes to it.
22. German playwright Bertolt Brecht has been credited as having greatly influenced contemporary British theatre. Find out about the main characteristics of his notion of 'Epic Theatre' and of some of his techniques, such as the A-effect and Historicisation. Then discuss the Brechtian influence on the play.
23. Read Sharon Ammen's article "Feminist Vision and Audience Response: Tracing the Absent Utopia in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*" (1996) and answer the survey at the end. How did your answers fit with the general response to the survey? What conclusions can you draw from that?
24. Does the play offer any envisioning of a possible way forward for feminism/women in contemporary societies? Where would that be found?

Reference List

- Ammen, S. (1996). Feminist Vision and Audience Response: Tracing the Absent Utopia in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. *Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies* 7(1), 86-102.
- Aston, E. (1997). *Caryl Churchill* (pp. 38-45 & 112-113). Plymouth: Northcote House.
- Bull, J. (1994). *Stage Right: Crisis and Recovery in British Contemporary Mainstream Theatre* (pp. vii-xx). Basingstoke and London: Macmillan.
- Bush, S. (2018). Commentary. In C. Churchill, *Top Girls* (pp. 1-46). London: Methuen Student Edition.
- Case, S.E. (1988). *Feminism and Theatre*. London: Macmillan.
- Gobert, R.D. (2014). *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Kritzer, A.H. (1991). *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment*. London: Macmillan.
- Naismith, B. (1991). Commentary. In C. Churchill, *Top Girls* (pp. xxi-liii). London: Methuen Student Edition.

Visual Material

- Stafford-Clark, M. [Director]. (2006). *Top Girls*. In *Approaching Literature: Top Girls, by Caryl Churchill*. Milton Keynes: Open University, BBC.