Top Girls

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CARYL CHURCHILL

Caryl Churchill was born in London, England, but from the age of ten was raised in Montreal, Quebec. Churchill returned to England to attend Lady Margaret Hall, a women's college at Oxford University. There, Churchill began writing plays, and had several performed by Oxford students. After graduation, Churchill married, and began writing short radio dramas for BBC radio while she raised her children. In the 1970s, Churchill began receiving larger attention for her work; she was appointed resident dramatist at the prestigious and experimental Royal Court Theatre in 1974, and her 1979 play, *Cloud 9*, received international acclaim. *Top Girls*, *Serious Money*, and *The Skriker* followed, and each play earned Churchill success on the global stage. Her plays use hyperrealism or surrealism to explore issues of class, gender, political corruption, and environmental destruction. Her more recent work, since the year 2000, has focused on the ways humans communicate and self-identify. In 2010, Churchill was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame; she is known the world over as one of the most prolific and intriguing contemporary playwrights in the industry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Top Girls premiered in 1982—Margaret Thatcher, the controversial but commanding Prime Minister of England from 1979 to 1990, was at the height of her power, and her economic policies intended to quell unemployment rates and jolt the UK out of a long period of recession were being instituted. By 1982, Thatcher's policies seemed to be working—though her doctrine of individualism and her discouragement of citizens to rely on their government for aid alienated and enraged many. *Top Girls* is in many ways a reaction to state-sanctioned values of individualism nationalism, and economic isolation from the rest of Europe; Churchill's central character, Marlene, has become so focused on competing in a male-dominated world that requires her to look out only for herself, that she has sacrificed basic human empathy and shirked her duties to her family, her fellow women, and indeed her own moral growth.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Top Girls features several female historical and folkloric figures whose writings about their own lives—or whose stories, told by others—have enjoyed greater prominence due to Churchill's careful attention to them. *The Confessions of Lady Nijo*, the translated version of Nijo's memoir *Towazugatari* ("An Unasked-for Tale"), has survived through the ages from roughly 1307 to the present day. Though sections are believed to be missing, Nijo's story lives on, and tells of her childhood, her time at court, and her later travels as a Buddhist nun. Churchill herself cites Pat Barr's *A Curious Life for a Lady*, a biography of Isabella Bird, as instrumental in the writing of *Top Girls*, and Bird's own works, including *The Englishwoman in America*, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, and *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: Travels of a Lady in the Interior of Japan*, tell of Bird's exciting travels around the world. Sarah Kane's controversial play *Blasted*, which premiered at the Royal Court theatre in 1995, explores similar themes of misogyny, violence against women, and the effects of living within the patriarchy—its surrealist bent is a direct callback to theatrical modes explored and refined by Churchill herself over the course of the previous decade.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Top Girls*
- **When Written:** Early 1980s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** London, England
- **Climax:** Angie, who suspects that her Aunt Marlene, not her mother Joyce, is her true birth mother, travels to London to visit Marlene at the Top Girls employment agency. She watches as Marlene confronts the angry wife of a man at the agency who believes her husband should have received Marlene's most recent promotion.
- **Antagonist:** Angie

EXTRA CREDIT

Double Act. The roles played in the famous dinner party sequence which begins the play are nearly always doubled with the roles featured in the second half of the play, set in the "real" world of modern-day London. The doubling of roles often serves to point out similarities or differences between characters that might otherwise go overlooked; for example, high-profile productions of *Top Girls* have, in the past, doubled the roles of Dull Gret and Angie, highlighting the quiet fury and inarticulate nature of each, as well as Isabella Bird and Joyce, playing up the irony of Isabella's daring world travels contrasted against Joyce's interminable entrapment within her dull, working-class hometown.

PLOT SUMMARY

Marlene, a London businesswoman, hosts a dinner party at a nice restaurant to celebrate a recent promotion. Her guests are not friends, family members, or coworkers; however, they are women plucked from history, art, and myth. Among them are Isabella Bird, a nineteenth-century writer, explorer, and naturalist; Lady Nijo, a thirteenth-century concubine who became a wandering Buddhist nun after she fell out of favor at court; Dull Gret, the subject of a Flemish renaissance painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder; Pope Joan, a woman who disguised herself as a man and was appointed Pope in the Middle Ages; and Patient Griselda, a character from the stories of Boccaccio and Chaucer, whose obedience to her husband in the face of horrible mistreatment made her the stuff of legend. As the dinner party unfolds, the women eat ravenously, grow deeply intoxicated, and talk over one another as they share the stories of their often-painful lives. The women discuss motherhood, love, abuse, and disappointment, and as strikingly similar coincidences emerge, it becomes clear that all of these women's sufferings stem from the crushing violence of a life lived on the terms of the patriarchy.

The following Monday, Marlene is back at her job at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**, interviewing a woman named Jeanine who hopes to be placed in a job that will pay more money and offer more opportunity for advancement. When Jeanine reveals that she's saving money for a wedding, Marlene discourages her from sharing her plans with any prospective employers, as her preparation for a role as a wife and, ostensibly, a mother will hurt her chances of getting hired.

The action moves to the backyard of Marlene's sister Joyce, where Joyce's sixteen-year-old daughter, Angie, and Angie's twelve-year-old friend Kit play in a makeshift shelter assembled from junk. The girls bicker, insulting each other and calling each other names. Angie reveals a desire to kill her mother. Joyce comes out the yard and calls for the girls to come in for tea and biscuits; when they don't answer, she tells them to "stay [in the fort] and die." Joyce goes back inside the house, and Angie reveals that she is soon going to go to London to visit her aunt Marlene, whom she believes is her true mother. Joyce comes out and calls, once again, for the girls to come inside. Angie and Kit want to go to a movie, but Joyce insists Angie clean her room before going out. Angie goes inside and comes back in just a moment later in a fancy dress which is too small for her. She picks a brick up off of the ground and holds it. It begins to rain, and Joyce and Kit run inside to avoid getting wet. Kit calls for Angie to come inside—Angie reveals that she had put the dress on to kill her mother. Kit implies that Angie is too chicken to go through with it, and Angie puts the brick down.

Back at the Top Girls Employment Agency, two of Marlene's coworkers, Win and Nell, gossip about Marlene's recent promotion. Marlene has been promoted over a man named Howard Kidd—another prominent employee. When Marlene arrives in the office, the girls tease her about taking advantage of coming in late now that she's the boss, but then congratulate her on her success. Win interviews a woman named Louise, a woman in her forties who wants to move out of the job she's been at for twenty-one years in order to make her employers feel sorry for never having noticed her or promoted her for her hard work. Back in the main office, Angie arrives to visit Marlene. Marlene is surprised by Angie's presence, and asks if Angie is just visiting for the day, but Angie reveals that she has come to London to stay with Marlene indefinitely. When Marlene exhibits some uncertainty about housing Angie, Angie becomes upset, and asks if Marlene doesn't want her around; Marlene overcompensates and tells Angie that she can stay as long as she wants. A woman enters the office, looking for Marlene—she is Mrs. Kidd, Howard's wife, and she has come to ask Marlene to forfeit the promotion so that Howard, deeply distressed at having been overlooked, can claim it. Marlene refuses, and Mrs. Kidd calls Marlene a ballbreaker; she warns Marlene that she will wind up "miserable and lonely" before leaving in a huff. Marlene tells Angie she has to go take care of some business, and leaves Angie alone in her office. Nell interviews a young woman named Shona—it becomes clear over the course of the interview that Shona has lied about everything on her resume, and has never held a job in her life. Win and Angie get to talking—Angie asks for a job at Top Girls, and Win bores Angie with her long, dramatic life story until Angie falls asleep. Nell comes back into the main office with news that Howard has suffered a heart attack. Marlene returns to find Angie asleep. Win tells Marlene that Angie wants a job at the agency, but Marlene says that Angie won't ever be anything more than a bagger at a grocery store; she tells the other women flatly that Angie is "not going to make it."

The action transitions to Joyce's house, one year earlier. Angie has, unbeknownst to Joyce, summoned Marlene for a visit, and Marlene has arrived bearing numerous presents for both Angie and Joyce. Angie opens one of her parcels to find the fancy dress from the first act. She declares that she loves it, and runs to her room to put it on right away. Angie is clearly thrilled by Marlene's presence, but Joyce is less than happy to have her sister around. Marlene and Joyce begin drinking whiskey and catching up, but Angie is confused by Joyce and Marlene's shared memories and soon goes off to bed. Joyce tells Marlene that she is worried about Angie, who has been in remedial classes for two years. Marlene and Joyce begin discussing their mother, who is in a nursing home nearby—Marlene reveals that she went to visit her earlier in the day. This angers Joyce, who is upset that Marlene, after having left their hometown years ago, returns only every five or so years on a whim and has no real part in her own life, their mother's, or Angie's. Marlene defends herself for choosing to leave, but Joyce berates Marlene for having left her own daughter behind. Marlene claims that Joyce was all too happy to agree to raise Angie as her own after

Marlene had an unwanted pregnancy, but Joyce confides in Marlene that Angie has, in fact, been a burden. Marlene becomes upset, and Joyce comforts her; the two women switch the subject and begin discussing romance. Though Marlene has no love life to speak of, she is optimistic about her future, and believes that she is going to enjoy great personal and economic success in the coming years due to the recently-installed prime minister Margaret Thatcher's policies. Joyce and Marlene get into a political debate; Joyce is angry with Marlene for her fancy lifestyle and upper-middle-class aspirations, while Marlene looks down on Joyce for remaining stuck in a working-class town and never striving for more. Marlene tries to stop the argument and asks Joyce if they can still be friends in spite of their differing beliefs, but Joyce admits she doesn't think they can be. Joyce readies the sofa for Marlene to sleep on, and then heads to bed herself. As Marlene settles in on the couch, Angie comes downstairs in a daze, calling for her mother. Marlene tells Angie that her mother has gone to bed and asks Angie if she was having a nightmare; Angie only replies, over and over, "Frightening."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Marlene – The protagonist of the play, Marlene is a high-ranking official at the **Top Girls Employment Agency** in London, and, at the start of the action, has just received an important promotion. To celebrate, she convenes a dinner party at a chic London restaurant—but rather than inviting friends, family, or coworkers, Marlene is surrounded only by women plucked from history and legend alike. As the play unfolds, Marlene is shown to be an adroit, smart, cunning, and sharp-tongued woman, and a powerful individual at Top Girls. However, for all her financial and corporate success, Marlene's dark past constantly threatens to unseat her from all she has worked for. Marlene's sister Joyce has, for the last sixteen years, been raising Marlene's daughter, Angie, as her own. Now that Angie is coming into her own womanhood, she is full of rage, brimming with questions, and in dire need of guidance. Marlene's sense of empathy has atrophied, and she has so long shirked her duties to her daughter, her sister, her family, and herself that she is unable to view the world around her in terms of anything other than potential for the kind of success she has come to see as essential. Marlene has been making her way in a man's world, and has had to conform to the demands of the patriarchy and eliminate the traits seen as weak or burdensome in order to survive—as a result, Marlene has become financially successful, but morally, socially, and emotionally impoverished. Churchill uses Marlene as an indictment of Thatcherism and a cautionary tale as to the pitfalls of pursuing socioeconomic success to the exclusion of all of life's other offerings.

Isabella Bird – Isabella Bird is a real-life, nineteenth-century English explorer, writer, and naturalist. Isabella is the only character at the dinner party who never bore children, and the only character whose work was honored in her lifetime. Churchill no doubt includes Isabella as a dinner party guest for this very reason—she shows how motherhood has, unfortunately, been regarded throughout history as a burden and an albatross. Isabella, whose life featured instances of tragedy but little abuse or control at the hands of a man, is an optimistic and brash woman who always speaks her mind. Isabella spent her life navigating traditionally male spaces, and partaking of traditionally male pursuits—adventuring and exploring to her heart's content, and engaging with both nature and the written word free of constraint. Isabella was a success in her own right—and thus the reason Churchill "brings" Isabella to the dinner party is perhaps to show Marlene, and the audience as well, that true success is not always dictated by financial gain or corporate power.

Lady Nijo – Lady Nijo is a real-life, thirteenth-century concubine-turned-Buddhist-nun. Lady Nijo was raised from birth to live a life of sexual service to the Emperor—her own father gave her over to the Emperor, and instructed Nijo to become a nun if she ever fell out of favor at court. Over the years, Nijo faced sexual and psychological abuse, and had any female children she bore the Emperor ripped from her arms and taken away to be raised so that they could one day be sent to court as a concubine, just as Nijo herself was. When she did eventually fall from favor at court, she followed her father's advice and became a nun, roaming the countryside and at last experiencing life for herself. Nijo's tales of horrific treatment at the hands of the nobility reveal Churchill's skepticism towards the upper classes; moreover, Nijo's life, dictated at every turn by the wills and desires of patriarchal figures, is laid bare within the play in order to demonstrate the harmful effects of life under patriarchy.

Dull Gret – Dull Gret is the subject of *Dulle Griet*, a Flemish renaissance painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder. The painting depicts Gret—an older woman clad in long skirts and battle armor—leading a group of women to pillage Hell. The painting is meant to depict shrewish, demanding women in pursuit of their own greed—in including Gret in the dinner party, Churchill highlights the sexism inherent in this portrayal and yet also draws a subtle comparison between Gret's desire for power and riches, and Marlene's. Gret is a woman of few words, though she unleashes her experience towards the end of the dinner party in a long monologue; in it, she reveals that she and the other women in her village had watched their children die as casualties of war, and stormed Hell as a way to fight evil at its root.

Pope Joan – Pope Joan is a figure who, according to legend, disguised herself as a man in the Middle Ages and reigned as Pope for two years until her true identity was discovered. Pope Joan wanted power so badly that she renounced her

womanhood—not only did she hide the fact that she was a woman from her attendants and devotees, but she herself forgot her own womanhood, and did not realize that she had become pregnant as the result of an affair until she gave birth in the street one day during a religious procession. Joan and her child were immediately carried away and stoned to death. Joan lived her life in pursuit of the freedoms that could only be won through disguising her true gender, and her story calls into question what it means to renounce one's femininity in pursuit of more traditionally masculine privileges and powers. Joan's story echoes Marlene's own pursuit of power at the expense of her identity—not to mention of her own child.

Patient Griselda – Patient Griselda is a figure from European folklore, most famously featured in the tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer. A peasant of humble origins, Patient Griselda was selected to marry a handsome, wealthy, and powerful Marquis, who took her away from her family and introduced her to a life of luxury. Her new husband wanted to test her obedience, though, and so he took away both children she bore him—presumably to have them killed. In spite of this cruel treatment, Griselda stayed with her husband, and remained obedient to him. At last, he cast her out of the palace, naked and alone; Griselda bore this cruel humiliation, too, with grace. Eventually, her husband came back for her, and revealed that her children had been safe all along. Patient Griselda' story—in the hands of male writers—was used through the ages as a parable about the virtues of patience and women's obedience to their husbands; in *Top Girls*, Churchill points out the devastation, trauma, and pain Griselda suffered, all in service of a man and his riches.

Jeanine – Jeanine is a young woman who comes to the **Top Girls Employment Agency** for an interview with Marlene. Jeanine wants to make more money, as she is saving to get married and settle down, but Marlene discourages her from prioritizing family life over her work. Marlene also tells her that admitting to future employers that she plans to get married (and perhaps have children) will lower her chances of securing a job.

Joyce – Joyce is Marlene's sister and Angie's adoptive mother. Whereas Marlene is ambitious, self-serving, and cosmopolitan, Joyce is humble, giving, and rooted firmly in her small, working-class hometown. Joyce is not by any means happy about these differences between herself and her sister—she doesn't begrudge Marlene her success so much as she disagrees with the choices Marlene has made in pursuit of it. Joyce has, for the last sixteen years, been raising Marlene's child—and caring for their aging, ailing parents. Joyce, who did not possess her sister's ambitious drive or cutthroat approach to self-advancement, has been stuck with all of Marlene's shirked responsibilities, and has suffered greatly as a result. Churchill uses the character of Joyce to show the flip side of Thatcherism's effects; that is, to demonstrate that those left behind by individualistic ambition must bear the burdens sloughed off by the wealthy and powerful upper classes.

Angie – Joyce's sixteen-year-old adoptive daughter Angie is odd, quiet, and stunted. She is a lonely girl, whose only friend, Kit, is four years younger than her. Angie expresses a keen desire to kill her mother—but also admits to Kit that she knows that her true mother is Joyce's sister, Marlene. Angie dresses in clothes that are too small for her—notably, a fancy dress Marlene gave to Angie on a previous visit—and speaks in simple, clipped, occasionally disjointed sentences. Angie travels to London to see Marlene, longing to spend time with her aunt and confessing that the day of Marlene's last visit, one year earlier, was the best day of her whole life. Angie has a fear of being unwanted or rejected, which seems to stem from the fact that she has figured out the truth of her parentage. Angie's odd behavior, violent impulses, and fear of abandonment are symbolic of Churchill's own frustrations with the values of contemporary "feminism"—values which prize individualism, aloofness, and self-serving behavior over basic human empathy and care for others, which are, unfortunately, seen as weaknesses or burdens within a patriarchal society.

Kit – Kit is a twelve-year-old girl who is a friend and neighbor of Angie's. Though Kit is young, she is cruel and aggressive, and spars verbally and physically with Angie. Kit seems to feel coerced into her friendship with Angie, and tells Angie to her face that she is odd for wanting to hang out with someone four years her junior, and a bad influence to boot. Nevertheless, Kit seems to be very much in Angie's thrall, and when Joyce attempts to speak ill of Angie to Kit, Kit declares that she loves Angie.

Louise – Louise is a woman who comes for an interview at the **Top Girls Employment Agency** with Win. She is forty-six, and Win describes her age as a "handicap." Louise is frustrated in her current job, where she feels unappreciated and unrecognized despite the twenty-plus years she has put in there. She has watched young men whom she has personally trained go on to receive better jobs both at her own company and elsewhere, and is angry that she herself has been unable to advance.

Mrs. Kidd – Mrs. Kidd is the wife of Howard Kidd, a man who works at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**. Mrs. Kidd comes to visit Marlene to beg for Marlene to refuse the promotion she's recently earned, so that Howard can have it—Howard is deeply embarrassed and very angry that he has been passed over in favor of a woman. Mrs. Kidd herself is indignant that she has devoted her whole life to her husband in hopes of ensuring his economic success, only to have him lose out to a woman.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Nell – Nell is a young woman who works at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**. Gossipy and aspirational, Nell is happy

for Marlene's success, but nevertheless cannot stop plotting how she herself will manage to rise through the ranks of the corporate world.

Win – Win is a young woman who works at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**. She is having an affair with one of her superiors, Howard, and seems more amused by than jealous of Marlene's recent success at the agency.

Shona – Shona is a young woman who comes for an interview at the **Top Girls Employment Agency** with Nell and lies about almost everything on her resume, exaggerating her success and inflating her age in order to seem more worldly and successful.

Howard Kidd – Howard is Mrs. Kidd's husband. Marlene beats him out for a promotion at **Top Girls Employment Agency**, which shatters Howard's ego, as he can't imagine being second in command to a woman.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LIFE UNDER THE PATRIARCHY

Top Girls is an exploration of what it means to carve out a life within a patriarchal society. The dreamlike opening scene in which Marlene, a successful London businesswoman celebrating a recent promotion, hosts a dinner party whose guests include women from the Europe of the Middle Ages, nineteenth-century England, and thirteenth-century Japan, as well as women who are the subjects of famous paintings and stories composed by men, shows how patriarchy has affected—and often ruined—the lives of women throughout history. Caryl Churchill argues that patriarchal rule is so deeply ingrained that it is difficult to imagine a life outside of it, even in twentieth-century London. In showing the insidious ways in which patriarchy controls women's lives, Churchill suggests that women will never be truly liberated until they are freed from the confines of patriarchal society.

The women in the dinner party scene share their experiences of lives lived in service of men, and their stories demonstrate the negative effects of such an existence. Lady Nijo, a concubine-turned-Buddhist-nun who lived in thirteenth-century Japan, knew from childhood that she was being raised for the Emperor's service. Though the other women are horrified by how Nijo was treated in life—given to the Emperor willingly by her own father, subjected to physical and psychological abuse during her years at court, and eventually cast out with nowhere to go and nothing to do but become a nun—Nijo herself admits to having been brainwashed by her circumstances. She was conditioned to adhere to the whims of the men in her life, and saw no hope of escaping the bonds of patriarchy. Patient Griselda, a figure in a story from *The Canterbury Tales*, marries a man who wants to test her obedience to him. To do so, he takes away both of her children—presumably to have them killed—and then, after nearly two decades of marriage, divorces Griselda and sends her back to her parents' peasant cottage. He shows up some time later to retrieve her—their now nearly-grown children at his side—and congratulates her on passing his tests of obedience. Pope Joan, a woman who, according to legend, passed herself off as a man in order to rule as Pope in the Middle Ages, tells of how, after years of living as a man and enjoying the power afforded to her as a result, she had essentially forgotten she was a woman at all. When she became pregnant, she "didn't know what was happening"—she admits to not having spoken to another woman since the age of twelve. Joan wound up giving birth on the side of the road in the middle of a procession, and was then stoned to death by her cardinals for her deception. From Nijo, who was raised from birth to be a man's plaything, to Griselda, who suffocated her own needs in order to prove her obedience to her husband, to Joan, who willfully repressed her own womanhood in order to enjoy the privileges reserved for men, these women's stories demonstrate the claustrophobia of the patriarchy. Marlene could easily disregard their stories as irrelevant to her own experience—surely, as a modern businesswoman, Marlene would never be put in the positions these women have been forced to occupy. Marlene initially feels that due to her recent success she is exempt from the confines of the patriarchy—but hearing stories like Nijo's, Joan's, and Griselda's over the course of the first act allows her to see how patriarchy is still very much a force in her own life.

When Marlene returns to work at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**, she does not appear rattled by the events of the "dinner party"—but she soon learns that she is not exempt from the effects of the patriarchy either. The wife of a man at her firm comes into Marlene's office to beg Marlene to forfeit her promotion so that the man, Howard Kidd, can have it. Mrs. Kidd says she has had to "bear the brunt" of Howard's having been passed over. She has dedicated her life, she says, to putting him first "every inch of the way," and does not want to see him passed over so that a woman can attain more power at the firm. Mrs. Kidd's entreaty reveals a complicated psychology at work—Mrs. Kidd, whose life has been in service to her husband, feels that she should at least be able to reap the rewards of the success she has tried so hard to facilitate for him. In realizing that all her hard work and sacrifice has not paid off, she feels that she herself has failed. Rather than admit that her deference to patriarchal values has sidelined her life, she chooses to believe that other women's success is the true enemy.

When Marlene refuses to give up the job, Mrs. Kidd berates her being for a "ballbreaker" and holding an "[un]natural" position in society. Mrs. Kidd has clearly internalized this language—and the thought processes behind it—as a result of her belief that going with the flow of patriarchy, rather than rising up against it, would allow her to live the most comfortable life. In this scene, Churchill demonstrates how Marlene herself is not immune to the willful complicity in the patriarchy she saw on display at her "dinner party." Though she is separated in time from the other women, she still must contend with the struggles they faced, and as she realizes this, she sees that even succeeding in a man's world is not enough to liberate her from the constraints of the patriarchy.

The myriad tales Churchill presents in the play's opening scene demonstrate just how mind-numbing—and mind-warping—a life lived under the patriarchy can be. As Marlene brings the knowledge she has gleaned from this dreamlike assembly back into the "real" world, she finds that for all her "success," she has been playing a losing game all along. Though Marlene never fully reckons with the fact that her triumph in the corporate world cannot erase the fact of her womanhood—or the fact that she lives in a fundamentally patriarchal world—Churchill displays the insidious, creeping feeling of dread, fear, and insufficiency that such an existence creates, and argues that moving successfully within the patriarchy does not mean one has escaped its confines.

WOMEN'S STORIES

The full range of women's stories is on display in *Top Girls* as the play moves from the metaphysical world of power-hungry businesswoman Marlene's fantasies to her fast-paced corporate London life. Churchill uses the play's opening dinner-party sequence 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 them, suggesting that the only way for women to thrive in such a cruel world is to draw strength and wisdom from one another's stories.

Two of the stories Churchill focuses on in the dinner party scene are nonfiction—they are taken from women's own accounts of their lives. Churchill's choice to portray real-life women from history grants them the chance to impart the wisdom they have gained through their trials and tribulations. Isabella Bird, a real-life explorer, writer, and naturalist and the first woman to be elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, is the first "real" guest at Marlene's dinner party. Isabella is an anomaly in the play—she is the only woman who was never a mother, the only woman whose work was honored in her lifetime, and the only woman whose actual writing is used to inform her dialogue in the play. In including Isabella, Churchill shows how vital the validation of women's stories truly is. Because Isabella was able to be seen and heard in her lifetime, she was able to be free in ways that many of the other guests did not. Lady Nijo was a concubine-turned-Buddhist-nun who lived in thirteenth-century Japan. A life of sexual servitude to the Emperor is "what [she] was brought up for from a baby," and for a long time, this was the only course she ever believed her life would take. She reveals that later, when she eventually "fell out of favour" at court, she "had nothing" except her dead father's onetime advice to her, which was to join a convent if she found herself rejected by the Emperor. Despite her suffering, Nijo's writings lasted through the ages; Churchill includes Nijo as a testament to women's stories and their inherent worth, even though often they are marked by pain and suffering which many would rather look away from.

The rest of the guests' stories are fictional—their backstories are either drawn from legend or created by Churchill herself. Through her use of fictional characters alongside nonfictional ones, Churchill argues that the stories of women who have been flattened through one-dimensional portrayals (often at the hands of male artists and creators) are just as necessary as those which are "real." Pope Joan disguised herself as a man and ascended to the papacy in the Middle Ages. Though she reigned for only a couple of years, as she tells the story of her life to the other party guests, she reflects on how deep into the role she got—she nearly forgot that she was a woman, and did not realize that she had become pregnant until she went into labor in the middle of a religious procession. Joan gave birth in the street; her cardinals declared her "The Antichrist" before dragging her away and stoning her and her child to death. "If it hadn't been for the baby," she laments, she might have ruled into her old age. Joan, like Marlene, pursues success and power at all costs. Patient Griselda is a figure in European folklore—she most famously appears in stories by Boccaccio and Chaucer, who were, of course, both men. In allowing Patient Griselda the space to relay her story of having had her obedience tested in cruel ways by her wealthy husband, Churchill allows Griselda to have the abuse she suffered at the hands her husband and other men (such as those who use her story to extoll the virtues of patience and obedience) be validated by other women. Dull Gret—who appears in a painting by Flemish renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder—is, like Griselda, a subject of folklore. In the painting, she is shown leading an army of women to pillage Hell. Griet was a term used at the time to describe shrewish or cranky women. A Flemish proverb that states "She could plunder in front of hell and return unscathed" would have been known to the painting's viewers, and thus Griet would have been seen as a cartoonish rendering of a woman who'd shirked her place. In the play, Churchill allows Gret a moment of redemption and agency similar to Griselda's, giving her the chance to relay

things from her point of view and explain the anger and frustration that drove her mission. Marlene's story is also fictional, but Churchill uses it for different purposes than the other fictional women in the play. Marlene is depicted as a cold, self-absorbed businesswoman who is primarily interested in her own professional advancement. She abandoned her daughter, Angie, to her sister Joyce's care when the girl was still an infant, and has climbed tirelessly to a position of power at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**. Churchill uses Marlene as an indictment of Thatcherism—prizing of the individual's needs over the collective ones of society. In this sense, Marlene is being "used" by Churchill in the same way Gret and Griselda were used by the men who told their stories for them. Marlene is, at the end of the day, a plaything of Churchill's, but her narrative serves a clear purpose and is used in service of asking important questions—and thus it has just as much worth as any "real" woman's story.

The interplay between the real and the unreal within *Top Girls* is meant to call into question how women's stories have been erased throughout the ages, and to argue that every woman's story has worth and value. Churchill's use of women's stories—fictional and nonfictional—in exploring what contemporary feminism looks like demonstrates her faith in the universal "truth" of women's stories.

POWER, SUCCESS, AND INDIVIDUALISM

The character at the center of *Top Girls* is Marlene—a successful businesswoman whose hunger for power forms the framework for the play's action. As the drama unfolds, the audience begins to realize bit by bit just how much Marlene has sacrificed for her career. Set in the early 1980s, just a few years after the controversial Margaret Thatcher (who famously said that there was "no such thing" as society, only individual men and women who needed to "look to themselves first" rather than rely on the government for aid) had come to power as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, *Top Girls* reckons with the way that "Thatcherism" pits the individual against larger society. Through Marlene, Churchill examines what it means to have power and success—and what it means to devote one's whole life to getting them, ultimately suggesting that pursuit of shallow ideas of "success" rooted in financial or sociopolitical gain alone will always lead to disappointment.

Churchill uses Marlene's arc to call into question what "success" actually looks like. Marlene appears to be a successful woman; she is financially independent, powerful within her chosen profession, and free of any burdensome attachments that might hold her back from pursuing even loftier goals; and yet, she has failed in many fundamental ways. Marlene's success at her cutthroat employment agency—itself named **Top Girls**, an infantilizing name which implies that even if women make it to the "top" of the social or financial ladder, they are still just "girls"—has allowed Marlene to act as if she is above other people. She is condescending to the women she interviews for job placements, speaks cruelly of her niece Angie (who is actually her biological daughter), and looks down upon her sister Joyce, who has remained in the working-class neighborhood Marlene herself once called home. Marlene is cruel to others, forgetting always that she herself has been a victim of cruelty—namely, the cruel power structures which keep her from ever truly becoming a "Top Girl," and which have warped her mind, causing her to believe that financial success and social capitals are the only roads to fulfillment.

Marlene is an aloof character who rarely displays emotion or states her motivations outright. This trait itself can be seen as a casualty of her devotion to obtaining power and success at any cost. She has learned how to play the games that will allow her to climb the corporate ladder, and, as a result, she has sacrificed empathy, intuition, and investment in the lives of others; all stereotypically "feminine" traits which, in the male-oriented world of business, could have held her back from achieving the success she's won at the start of the play. She believes that success has required her to sacrifice empathy and softness, and in this way, she has failed to see how basic human goodness does not make one weak. Marlene's failure as a mother is explored most deeply in the play's final scene, which depicts a visit Marlene paid to her sister, Joyce, and her niece—who, again, is really her daughter—Angie. During the visit, Marlene and Joyce get into a vicious fight over Angie; Marlene defends her choice to give Angie up, claiming that since Joyce wanted a baby and Marlene wanted out of their working-class hometown, the arrangement made perfect sense. The sisters' agreement, though, only benefited Marlene—free from the burden of motherhood, Marlene was free to pursue success, power, and independence, while Joyce lingered in a loveless marriage, suffered a miscarriage of her own, and became the primary caregiver for her and Marlene's ailing parents. As the scene progresses, Joyce's misery calls into question whether Marlene's life is really a success at all—she has risen to power on the shoulders of other people, and has then alienated herself from those who helped her in the beginning. In this way, Marlene's life is a success on paper, but is actually a failure in other, perhaps greater ways.

Churchill is clearly in opposition to the effects of "Thatcherism" and pursuit of individual success at the expense of decency, goodness, and support of others. In creating a character who is so focused on her own success that she has become blind to the suffering not only of others, but of herself as well, Churchill uses Marlene to show how what some people see as "success" is actually, in a very real way, abject failure.

MOTHERHOOD

Top Girls features many different types of mothers, but Marlene is one of the only characters who sees

motherhood as an insufferable burden. The journeys to and through motherhood that Churchill explores are vastly different, and yet the story of Marlene—who asked her sister Joyce to raise her daughter, Angie, for her so that she could pursue a career—specifically suggests that in a world shaped by patriarchy, motherhood is most often framed as a burden that only holds women back. The women in the play have been so traumatized by patriarchal society that they are disconnected from motherhood as a joy or a privilege. As a result, their complicated relationships to motherhood often result in them shirking their roles as mothers or avoiding those roles altogether, often at a painful cost.

In the middle of the play, the audience is introduced to Angie—a strange, hateful sixteen-year-old who has come to realize that her Aunt Marlene is truly her mother, and now expresses a desire to kill the woman who has raised her from birth, her adoptive mother, Joyce. Angie's palpable sense of rejection—and otherworldly intuition—is thrust up against Marlene's desire to forget or ignore her role in Angie's life. Marlene's secret role as a mother informs some of the play's most dramatic moments and cements Churchill's argument that even modern women who are told they can "have it all" see motherhood as a burden best avoided. In Angie's first scene, she complains to her friend Kit about how greatly she dislikes her mother Joyce, but also reveals that she knows that Joyce is not her true mother—her "Aunty" Marlene is. Angie expresses her desire to kill her mother, but it is unclear which mother she wants to dispatch. In the second act, Angie travels to London on her own to visit Marlene, whom she hasn't seen in over a year. When Marlene shares the news that she's just been promoted within her office at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**, Angie reveals that she "knew [Marlene would] be in charge of everything"—when Marlene protests that she's not yet in charge of everything, Angie predicts that one day, she will be. Marlene offers Angie a place to stay, but when Angie picks up on Marlene's hesitation to shelter her indefinitely, Angie asks Marlene if she "want[s]" her. The day they spent together last year, Angie says, was the best day of Angie's whole life. This scene shows Angie—who, having figured out the truth of her parentage, feels abandoned and unwanted—struggling to understand the choices her true mother has made. On the one hand, she seems to admire Marlene, and has hopes that Marlene will continue to advance in the world she's chosen to devote herself to; on the other hand, Angie clearly has concerns about being "wanted" by Marlene, and wants to get her "aunt" to profess love and devotion to her. When Marlene is called away to take care of some work, Angie says that rather than going out sightseeing around London, she'd prefer to stay in the office—it is "where [she] most want[s] to be in the world." Though the office is "boring" according to Marlene, it is the only place Angie wants to be. This could be due to a combination of Angie's desire to emulate her biological mother and familiarize herself with the corporate world, or simply her need to be in proximity to Marlene, asserting her right to be recognized as Marlene's own daughter. After Angie falls asleep in the office, Marlene talks with her coworkers, Nell and Win, about the sleeping girl. Win tells Marlene that Angie has confessed she wants to work at Top Girls one day, but Marlene thinks Angie could only ever work a low-level job, such as packing groceries in a store. Marlene darkly predicts that Angie is "not going to make it." Marlene is assessing Angie not as a child—not even as *her* child—but in terms of how viable her corporate success is. Marlene, like Pope Joan from the dinner party, has distanced herself from the traditional responsibilities of femininity and motherhood—empathy, care, and devotion—and can now only see motherhood, and all of the duties accompanying it, as a burden.

In the play's final scene, Angie has summoned Marlene home without Joyce's knowledge or permission. Angie is delighted to see Marlene, whom she loves and misses, but Joyce is less than happy to see her sister. After Angie leaves the room, the two women begin fighting over the arrangement that has so deeply impacted each of their lives: the fact that Marlene, who wanted no part of motherhood as she felt it would bind her to an unremarkable, working-class life, had Joyce raise Angie as her own. Marlene can't understand how her sister has allowed herself to remain trapped in a poor town and a loveless marriage, while Joyce sees Marlene's desire for upward mobility as selfish and disgusting. As their class issues come to a head, it becomes apparent that the crux of their disagreement stems from their attitudes towards motherhood. When Joyce laments having had a miscarriage, Marlene practically brags about the two abortions she has had in the years since moving to London. Marlene sees any pain over lost children as "boring." This is no doubt a casualty of her desire for power and success at any cost, and the internalized misogyny that is the result of years spent attempting to navigate and succeed in a male-dominated world—a world in which motherhood was only ever presented as a hindrance to "real" success.

Churchill's argument that motherhood within a patriarchal world can only ever be a burden is a bleak one, and yet she does not shy away from using her characters to demonstrate just how cruelly the world has historically treated mothers. Angie's desire for vengeance against the two mothers who have seen her, in their own ways, as a burden is symbolic of Churchill's own despair over the fact that, in light of Thatcherism and patriarchal values, motherhood is often seen as something contemptible and burdensome rather than an expression of strength, devotion, and care.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TOP GIRLS EMPLOYMENT AGENCY

Marlene works for an employment agency called Top Girls, which slowly emerges as a symbol for the corruption and blind individualism of Thatcherism, as well as the rigged game of life under the patriarchy. The name of the agency, Top Girls, is cutesy and condescending. It points directly to the futility of trying to succeed as a woman in the cruel and misogynistic corporate world—even if a woman makes it to the pinnacle of her profession, she is only a "Top Girl." She is infantilized, patronized, and she will inevitably hit the glass ceiling—the unofficial but universally acknowledged barrier to advancement which women, minorities, and other marginalized groups unfortunately but inevitably face even in today's corporate world, and especially in the conservative, Thatcherist word of 1980s England.

The fact that Top Girls is an employment agency rather than a bank, a law firm, or a medical practice is also significant symbolically. The agency has ostensibly feminist goals and an apparent focus on women's achievements, as the whole point of Top Girls is to place women in the workforce. In oiling the wheels of capitalism and inserting more and more women into the workforce, where they will be pressured to prioritize labor over family, individualism over collectivism, and financial gain over emotional or moral improvement, Top Girls actually perpetuates the structures that allow women to be abused at worst and underestimated at best as they pursue success within the constricting, unfair confines of patriarchy and capitalism alike.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bloomsbury edition of *Top Girls* published in 1982.

Act One, Scene One Quotes

MARLENE: Magnificent all of you. We need some more wine, please, two bottles I think, Griselda isn't even here yet, and I want to drink a toast to you all.

ISABELLA: To yourself surely, we're here to celebrate your success.

NIJO: Yes, Marlene.

JOAN: Yes, what is it exactly, Marlene?

MARLENE: Well it's not Pope but it is managing director.

JOAN: And you find work for people.

MARLENE: Yes, an employment agency.

NIJO: Over all the women you work with. And the men.

ISABELLA: And very well deserved too. I'm sure it's just the beginning of something extraordinary.

MARLENE: Well it's worth a party.

ISABELLA: To Marlene.

MARLENE: And all of us.

JOAN: Marlene.

NIJO: Marlene.

GRET: Marlene.

MARLENE: We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements. (*They laugh and drink a toast.*)

Related Characters: Dull Gret, Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, Isabella Bird, Marlene (speaker), Patient Griselda

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In the play's opening scene, Marlene—who has just secured an important promotion at her place of business, the Top Girls Employment Agency—gathers a group together for a dinner party at a chic London restaurant. The guests are not friends, family, or coworkers, but rather female figures from history, myth, and art. As the dinner party progresses, the women clamor to share the stories of their lives, seemingly desperate for the chance to connect with each other and commiserate over the pain they have suffered. As the night goes on and the women drink and eat to excess, Marlene converses with the women as if they are all old friends, and eventually decides to toast them. The women want to

celebrate Marlene, though—they are proud of her accomplishments, and wish her well on the road to continued success. She has beat out "all the women" at the firm "and the men" for this promotion—this line calls attention to the fact that Marlene is, at the end of the day, still navigating a man's world, and will have to return to a work atmosphere that may not be as celebratory of her success as her "friends."

JOAN: But I didn't know what was happening. I thought I was getting fatter, but then I was eating more and sitting about, the life of a Pope is quite luxurious. I don't think I'd spoken to a woman since I was twelve. [My lover] the chamberlain was the one who realized.

MARLENE: And by then it was too late.

JOAN: Oh I didn't want to pay attention. It was easier to do nothing. [...] I never knew what month it was. [...] I wasn't used to having a woman's body.

JOAN: I didn't know of course that it was near the time. It was Rogation Day, there was always a procession. I was on the horse dressed in my robes and a cross was carried in front of me, and all the cardinals were following, and all the clergy of Rome, and a huge crowd of people. [...] I had felt a slight pain earlier, I thought it was something I'd eaten, and then it came back, and came back more often. I thought when this is over I'll go to bed. There were still long gaps when I felt perfectly all right and I didn't want to attract attention to myself and spoil the ceremony. Then I suddenly realized what it must be. I had to last out till I could get home and hide. Then something changed, my breath started to catch, I couldn't plan things properly any more. [...] I just had to get off the horse and sit down for a minute. [...] And the baby just slid out on to the road.

Related Characters: Marlene, Pope Joan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27-28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Pope Joan relays the story of her pregnancy and the birth of her first—and only—child. Joan had disguised herself as a man and ascended to the papacy in the Middle Ages. Though she reigned for only a couple of years, as she tells the story of her life to the other party guests, she reflects on how deep into the role she got—she nearly forgot that she was a woman, and though she had an affairs with a man, she was ignorant of the possibility of becoming pregnant. When the pregnant Joan went into labor in the middle of a religious procession, she had no idea what was happening to her—and neither did anyone else around her. When Joan gave birth in the street, in full view of her attendants and devotees alike, her cardinals declared her "The Antichrist" before dragging her away and stoning her to death.

Though she doesn't know what happened to the child, she assumes that it died—but she doesn't display much emotion as she relays this sad fact. "If it hadn't been for the baby," she laments to the other women at Marlene's dinner party, she might have ruled into her old age. Joan sees her pregnancy and motherhood as her downfall—which it decisively was. This passage demonstrates Joan's conflicted view of motherhood, and indeed femininity more generally. Having spent so many years denying her womanhood and living as a man as a means of attaining power in the religious world, Joan had, by the time she realized she was pregnant, chosen to live in ignorance rather than confront the inconvenient fact of her womanhood. In this passage, Churchill shows how for many women not just motherhood, but the state of simply being a woman, is a burden due to the demands and constraints of life under the patriarchy.

GRET: We come to hell through a big mouth. Hell's black and red. It's [...] like the village where I come from. There's a river and a bridge and houses. There's places on fire like when the soldiers come. There's a big devil sat on a roof with a big hole in his arse and he's scooping stuff out of it with a big ladle and it's falling down on us, and it's money, so a lot of the women stop and get some. But most of us is fighting the devils. There's lots of little devils, our size, and we get them down all right and give them a beating. [...] Well we'd had worse, you see, we'd had the Spanish. We'd all had family killed. My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword. I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. I come out of my front door that morning and shot till my neighbours come out and I said, "Come on, we're going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out." And they all come out just as they was from baking or [...] washing in their aprons, and we push down the street and the ground opens up and we go through a big mouth into a street just like ours but in hell. [...] You just keep running on and fighting, you didn't stop for thing. Oh we give them devils such a beating.

Related Characters: Dull Gret (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39-40

Explanation and Analysis

Dull Gret is Marlene's quietest dinner guest. She says little, and only speaks when spoken to—and even then answers only in brief, nearly grunted responses. Towards the end of the dinner party, as the women's intoxication reaches a fever pitch, Gret decides to speak up and describe the journey she and the women of her village undertook as they pillaged Hell and sought retribution for the losses they had all suffered—particularly the losses of their children. The painting of which Gret is at the center—*Dulle Griet* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder—depicts much of what Gret is describing in this passage, but its painter (a man) may have intended for the painting to serve as a ludicrous lampoon of women's fury. In giving new context and deep emotional motivation to Gret's circumstances, Churchill allows Gret to reclaim her own story and be framed in a different light—one which allows room for her enormous suffering, and the suffering of all the other women in the painting, whose grief was so unimaginable they had to transcend the veil between worlds in an attempt to ease it.

Act One, Scene Three Quotes

ANGIE: I'm going to London. To see my aunt.

KIT: And what?

ANGIE: That's it.

KIT: I see my aunt all the time.

ANGIE: I don't see my aunt.

KIT: What's so special?

ANGIE: It is special. She's special.

KIT: Why?

ANGIE: She is.

KIT: Why?

ANGIE: She is.

KIT: Why?

ANGIE: My mother hates her.

KIT: Why?

ANGIE: Because she does.

KIT: Perhaps she's not very nice.

ANGIE: She is nice.

KIT: How do you know?

ANGIE: Because I know her.

KIT: You said you never see her.

ANGIE: I saw her last year. You saw her.

KIT: Did I?

ANGIE: Never mind.

KIT: I remember her. That aunt. What's so special?

ANGIE: She gets people jobs.

KIT: What's so special?

ANGIE: I think I'm my aunt's child. I think my mother's really my aunt.

Related Characters: Kit, Angie (speaker), Marlene, Joyce

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kit and Angie are hiding out in a shed made of junk in Angie's backyard. Angie's mother, Joyce, has been calling for the girls, but they have shut themselves up in the shed and refuse to come inside. They have a close but strange friendship—the girls insult each other and call each other terrible names, but clearly have a deep affection for one another. Angie has, over the course of this scene,

revealed to Kit that she has a desire to kill her mother—in this passage, she confesses that she is unsure of who her mother truly is. This complicates her vow to kill her mother—it becomes unclear in this moment whether Angie wants to kill Joyce, who has been cruel and impatient with her all her life, or Marlene, who abandoned Angie for a cushy life in London. No matter who the object of her ire truly is, it is clear that Angie feels let down by the woman who was supposed to protect her. Angie has had a lack of maternal love in her life and is finally growing angry about it.

Act Two, Scene One Quotes

NELL: Howard thinks because he's a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard and that's that.

WIN: Poor little bugger.

NELL: He'll live.

WIN: He'll move on.

NELL: I wouldn't mind a change of air myself.

WIN: Serious?

NELL: I've never been a staying-put lady. Pastures new.

WIN: So who's the pirate?

NELL: There's nothing definite.

WIN: Inquiries?

NELL: There's always inquiries. I'd think I'd got bad breath if there stopped being inquiries. Most of them can't afford me. Or you.

WIN: I'm all right for the time being. Unless I go to Australia.

NELL: There's not a lot of room upward.

WIN: Marlene's filled it up.

Related Characters: Win, Nell (speaker), Howard Kidd , Marlene

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

At the Top Girls Employment Agency the Monday after Marlene's promotion, her gossipy coworkers Win and Nell discuss how Marlene beat out a man named Howard for the job. This foreshadows the conflict Marlene will have with others who feel that she, as a woman, did not deserve the promotion over a man, and also allows the women to vent their contradictory feelings about Marlene's success. Nell goes on to brag about the constant offers of employment she is receiving from other agencies and businesses; she clearly values herself as a worker, but at the same time would give herself over to the highest bidder without hesitation. She and Win are both concerned, however, that there is not enough room for them to grow at Top Girls now that Marlene is "the" Top Girl herself, and so are forced to confront the possibility that they'll need to eventually move on.

WIN: So I take it the job itself no longer satisfies you. Is it the money?

LOUISE: It's partly the money. It's not so much the money.

[...]

WIN: So why are you making a change?

LOUISE: Other people make changes.

WIN: But why are you, now, after spending most of your life in the one place?

LOUISE: There you are, I've lived for that company, I've given my life really you could say because I haven't had a great deal of social life, I've worked in the evenings. [...] I had management status from the age of twenty-seven and you'll appreciate what that means. I've built up a department. And there it is I, it works extremely well, and I feel I'm stuck there. I've spent twenty years in middle management. I've seen young men who I trained go on, in my own company or elsewhere, to higher things. Nobody notices me, I don't expect it, I don't attract attention by making mistakes, everybody takes it for granted that my work is perfect. They will notice me when I go, they will be sorry I think to lose me, they will offer me more money of course, I will refuse. They will see when I've gone what I was doing for them.

Related Characters: Louise , Win (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62-63

Explanation and Analysis

As Win interviews Louise, Churchill explores feelings of frustration which have arisen in the latter woman as a result

of years of being overlooked. Having toiled in a male-dominated office setting for years, Louise has never been noticed for her efforts, and has in fact sat back while others have been promoted over her—mainly men. Louise has had enough—she has given up everything, including a healthy social life, to succeed on the terms the patriarchy has dictated, and has wound up with little to show for it. These anxieties and frustrations represent a new kind of story within the world of the play; surely Louise is better off than Nijo, a courtesan, or Gret, a peasant woman, but as far as she has come from the pains of her forbearers, she is still unable to carve out a satisfying space for herself in this man's world. Now, Louise wants to make her employers realize just how much she's done for them, and just how much they're losing in overlooking her.

ANGIE: This is where you work is it?

MARLENE: It's where I have been working the last two years but I'm going to move into another office.

ANGIE: It's lovely.

MARLENE: My new office is nicer than this. There's just the one big desk in it for me.

ANGIE: Can I see it?

MARLENE: Not now, no, there's someone else in it now. But he's leaving at the end of next week and I'm going to do his job.

ANGIE: This is where you work is it?

MARLENE: It's where I have been working the last two years but I'm going to move into another office.

ANGIE: It's lovely.

MARLENE: My new office is nicer than this. There's just the one big desk in it for me.

ANGIE: Can I see it?

MARLENE: Not now, no, there's someone else in it now. But he's leaving at the end of next week and I'm going to do his job.

ANGIE: Is that good?

MARLENE: Yes, it's very good.

ANGIE: Are you going to be in charge?

MARLENE: Yes I am.

ANGIE: I knew you would be.

MARLENE: How did you know?

ANGIE: I knew you'd be in charge of everything.

MARLENE: Not quite everything.

ANGIE: You will be.

MARLENE: Well we'll see.

Related Characters: Marlene (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66-67

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Angie has just arrived—unannounced—to visit Marlene at work in London. She is beyond impressed by Marlene's life; she sees Marlene's office and job as glamorous and exciting. Angie, who comes from a working-class home in a working-class town, has been more or less ignorant that this kind of world even exists; as she sees Marlene's life up-close for the first time, she is filled with joy and admiration. Marlene, meanwhile, takes the opportunity to brag about the triumph of her recent promotion, and the fact that she will soon be unseating a man from his position. Angie sees this as the ultimate achievement, and believes this makes Marlene in charge of "everything." Unfortunately, Angie is naïve to the way the corporate world really works, and Marlene must—sadly—point out that just because she has risen one more rung on the corporate ladder, there is still a long way to go. This moment creates one of the first instances of self-doubt in Marlene as she subliminally reckons with the fact that she is still in a man's world, playing a man's game, and may never actually be in charge of "everything," no matter how hard she works and how far she advances.

MARLENE: Don't you have to go home?

ANGIE: No.

MARLENE: Why not?

ANGIE: It's all right.

MARLENE: Is it all right?

ANGIE: Yes, don't worry about it.

MARLENE: Does Joyce know where you are?

ANGIE: Yes of course she does.

MARLENE: Well does she?

ANGIE: Don't worry about it.

MARLENE: How long are you planning to stay with me then?

ANGIE: You know when you came to see us last year?

MARLENE: Yes, that was nice wasn't it.

ANGIE: That was the best day of my whole life.

MARLENE: So how long are you planning to stay?

ANGIE: Don't you want me?

MARLENE: Yes yes, I just wondered.

ANGIE: I won't stay if you don't want me.

MARLENE: No, of course you can stay.

ANGIE: I'll sleep on the floor. I won't be any bother.

MARLENE: Don't get upset.

ANGIE: I'm not, I'm not. Don't worry about it.

Related Characters: Angie, Marlene (speaker), Joyce

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is mysterious both logistically and emotionally. When Angie announces that she wants to stay with Marlene, Marlene is confused—she doesn't understand why Angie, who is only sixteen is no longer beholden to Joyce's rules. Given that the last time we saw Angie, she was speaking of her desire to kill her mother, and had gone so far as to don a special dress and pick up a brick to use as a weapon, Churchill raises the possibility that Angie has actually done the deed in order to free herself from her stifling home and neighborhood. On the other hand, Angie could simply have run away from home, and might just want Marlene to cover for her and not make a fuss. Either way, Angie's repeated refrain of "Don't worry about it" implies that she has both accepted full responsibility for her life—and is more than likely hiding something. At the same time, Angie, who is attempting to assert her independence, clearly becomes irate when Marlene implies that Angie's presence is an inconvenience. Angie wants to be independent, but is still very much after Marlene's attention and affection.

MRS. KIDD: Howard's not in today.

MARLENE: Isn't he?

MRS KIDD: He's feeling poorly.

MARLENE: I didn't know. I'm sorry to hear that.

MRS KIDD: The fact is he's in a state of shock. About what's happened.

MARLENE: What has happened?

MRS KIDD: You should know if anyone. I'm referring to you been appointed managing director instead of Howard. He hasn't been at all well all weekend. He hasn't slept for three nights. I haven't slept.

MARLENE: I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs. Kidd. Has he thought of taking sleeping pills?

MRS KIDD: It's very hard when someone has worked all these years.

MARLENE: Business life is full of little setbacks. I'm sure Howard knows that. He'll bounce back in a day or two. We all bounce back.

MRS KIDD: If you could see him you'd know what I'm talking about. What's it going to do to him working for a woman? I think if it was a man he'd get over it as something normal.

MARLENE: I think he's going to have to get over it.

Related Characters: Marlene, Mrs. Kidd (speaker), Howard Kidd

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Kidd—Howard's wife—comes to visit Marlene in order to indict her as being complicit in Howard's pain and humiliation. Mrs. Kidd has internalized the constraints of the patriarchy so deeply that she has become a misogynist herself—she believes that Marlene has less of a right to the

promotion than Howard simply because she is a woman. Mrs. Kidd states outright that it will be humiliating and soul-crushing for Howard to have to work underneath a woman. The irony in all of this is that the sleeplessness, misery, and fragility Mrs. Kidd is describing in her husband as a result of his being passed over for the promotion are all stereotypically "feminine" displays of sadness or disappointment. Howard wants to be seen as worthy due to his masculinity, but he, too, is failing to exist according to the terms of the patriarchy, and is showing himself to be weak and unstable, rocked to his core by something so small.

MARLENE: Are you suggesting I give up the job to him then?

MRS KIDD: It had crossed my mind if you were unavailable for some reason, he would be the natural second choice I think, don't you? I'm not asking.

MARLENE: Good.

MRS KIDD: You mustn't tell him I came. He's very proud.

MARLENE: If she doesn't like what's happening here he can go and work somewhere else.

MRS KIDD: Is that a threat?

MARLENE: I'm sorry but I do have some work to do.

MRS KIDD: It's not easy, a man of Howard's age. You don't care. I thought he was going too far but he's right. You're one of those ball breakers, that's what you

MARLENE: I'm sorry but I do have some work to do.

MRS KIDD: are. You'll end up miserable and lonely. You're not natural.

Related Characters: Mrs. Kidd , Marlene (speaker), Howard Kidd

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This passage shows Mrs. Kidd no longer just hinting at what she wants (Marlene to step down so Howard can receive the promotion), but actively asking for it—and yet denying that she is doing so. She wants for Marlene to forfeit the promotion to make Mrs. Kidd's own life—and Howard's life—easier. When Marlene refuses, Mrs. Kidd resorts to cruel nicknames and threatening, hateful language, angry that the "natural" order which she has been striving so hard her whole life to fit into is being disrupted. Mrs. Kidd values her husband's sense of pride more than Marlene's chance at success—she is more loyal to her husband, and the triumph of patriarchy he represents, than Marlene's success, and the new era of female independence and self-determination it represents.

NELL: You find it easy to get the initial interest do you?

SHONA: Oh yeh, I get plenty of initial interest.

NELL: And what about closing?

SHONA: I close, don't I?

NELL: Because that's what an employer is going to have doubts about with a lady as I needn't tell you, whether she's got the guts to push through to a closing situation. They think we're too nice. They think we listen to the buyer's doubts. They think we consider his needs and feelings.

SHONA: I never consider people's feelings.

NELL: I was selling for six years, I can sell anything, I've sold in three continents, and I'm jolly as they come but I'm not very nice.

SHONA: I'm not very nice.

Related Characters: Shona , Nell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

As Nell interviews Shona, she informs the girl of how important it is to be able to close a deal. Such aggressive business tactics are usually seen as the domain of men—in today's world, though, women must prove that they too have what it takes to "push through," even if it means shirking the nice, polite personas they have been trained to present no matter the situation. This is a bleak passage, as it implies that women must "never consider people's feelings" in order to succeed within the patriarchy. Considering people's feelings should not be an expressly feminine trait, and suppressing it should not be a requirement of getting ahead in the world, and yet sadly, the patriarchy has dictated that, in order to get ahead, women must divest themselves from all warmth, empathy, and "nice"-

ness—traits that could be seen as liabilities in the cold, calculating, individualistic world of business and corporate success.

MARLENE: Is she asleep?

WIN: She wants to work here.

MARLENE: Packer in Tesco more like.

WIN: She's a nice kid. Isn't she?

MARLENE: She's a bit thick. She's a bit funny.

WIN: She thinks you're wonderful.

MARLENE: She's not going to make it.

Related Characters: Win, Marlene (speaker), Angie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

After Marlene returns from an afternoon of meetings, she finds that Angie has fallen asleep in her office. As Win and Marlene stand over the girl, discussing her, Marlene reveals that she sees Angie not in the tender light a mother—or at the very least, an aunt—might be expected to. The individualism of the corporate world has warped Marlene so much that she can only evaluate Angie in terms of what the girl might one day bring to the workforce. Having dismissed Angie out of hand as someone who could only ever aspire to be a bagger in a grocery store, Marlene declares that Angie will not "make it." In this passage, Churchill express the unfairness of class and privilege; Marlene has worked her way up to a role as a gatekeeper, and now gets to decide who "make[s] it" and who doesn't. In sizing Angie up with no hope or empathy, Marlene reveals how calculating and individualistic she has become—she will not even help her niece (who is actually her daughter) because there's the chance that Angie could be an emotional or logistic liability.

Act Two, Scene Two Quotes

JOYCE: [Kit's] a little girl Angie sometimes plays with because she's the only child lives really close. She's like a little sister to her really. Angie's good with little children.

MARLENE: Do you want to work with children, Angie? Be a teacher or nursery nurse?

JOYCE: I don't think she's ever thought of it.

MARLENE: What do you want to do?

JOYCE: She hasn't got an idea in her head what she wants to do. Lucky to get anything.

JOYCE: True enough.

Related Characters: Marlene, Joyce (speaker), Angie, Kit

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82-83

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Joyce reveals that Angie is good with children. Rather than admiring this as a nice trait or simply being excited to learn something new about her "niece," Marlene immediately jumps down Angie's throat, seeking to see if Angie has thought about how this benign, unremarkable personality trait could be monetized or turned into a way to make herself of value in the workforce. Joyce replies for Angie, stating that she hasn't "an idea in her head" about what she wants to do. This is both a criticism of Angie's unfocused nature and a criticism of Marlene's worldview—Angie comes from a different world in which thinking about aspirations or dreams is something foreign. Joyce is highlighting the privilege inherent in Marlene's asking such a question, and revealing how obsessed with success and monetary gain Marlene has become.

JOYCE: You couldn't get out of here fast enough.

MARLENE: Of course I couldn't get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who'd come home pissed? Don't you fucking this

JOYCE: Christ.

MARLENE: fucking that fucking bitch fucking tell me what to fucking do fucking.

JOYCE: I don't know how you could leave your own child.

MARLENE: You were quick enough to take her.

JOYCE: What does that mean?

MARLENE: You were quick enough to take her?

JOYCE: Or what? Have her put in a home? Have some stranger take her would you rather?

MARLENE: You couldn't have one so you took mine.

Related Characters: Marlene, Joyce (speaker), Angie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Joyce and Marlene begin quarreling about the dark secret that forever changed both their lives—the fact that Marlene had an unwanted pregnancy, and gave the child, Angie, to Joyce to raise. Marlene is completely unapologetic about her choices, and blind to the ways in which her individualistic need to get out of her hometown no matter the costs or casualties has forever impacted both Joyce and Angie. Marlene attempts to spin the facts to make it seem like Joyce was desperate for a child at the time—which she may or may not have been. Regardless of the truth of Joyce's feelings, Marlene wants to deflect blame away from herself and instead paint Joyce as the desperate and selfish one—when really, Marlene has shown herself at every turn to be individualistic and uncaring to others.

JOYCE: Listen when Angie was six months I did get pregnant and I lost it because I was so tired looking after your fucking baby because she cried so

MARLENE: You never told me.

JOYCE much—yes I did tell you—and the doctor

MARLENE: Well I forgot.

JOYCE: said if I'd sat down all day with my feet up I'd've kept it and that's the only chance I ever had because after that—

MARLENE: I've had two abortions, are you interested? Shall I tell you about them? Well I won't, it's boring, it wasn't a problem. I don't like messy talk about blood and what a bad time we all had. I

JOYCE: If I hadn't had your baby. The doctor said.

MARLENE: don't want a baby. I don't want to talk about gynaecology.

Related Characters: Marlene, Joyce (speaker), Angie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Joyce reveals that adopting Angie was not exactly a blessing—Joyce gave up her own happiness, and had her attempts at having her own child thwarted, because she was so busy attending to Marlene's cast-off daughter. Joyce no doubt blames Marlene for her miscarriage, and all of the grief and frustration that followed it. Marlene, though, seems to want to make her sister feel like her suffering is nothing special—most likely to make herself feel better about her own selfish actions. Marlene brings up her own abortions and takes a cavalier attitude to the discussion of them, as if to point out that caring about such matters is weak and "messy." Marlene cruelly reduces her sister's deep emotional suffering to "gynaecology," invalidating Joyce's feelings and trying to make herself look aloof, evolved, and above her sister's concerns.

JOYCE: You can always find yourself work then?

MARLENE: That's right.

JOYCE: And men?

MARLENE: Oh there's always men.

JOYCE: No-one special?

MARENE: There's fellas who like to be seen with a high-flying lady. Shows they've got something really good in their pants. But they can't take the day to day. They're waiting for me to turn into the little woman.

Related Characters: Marlene, Joyce (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marlene laments the fact that men want to be "seen with" a successful woman like Marlene, but do not actually want her to be independent or prosperous in her own right. Men want to use women as accessories, and admire the qualities of independence, success, and intrepidness for a while. However, Marlene has found that, without fail, men always want for her to abandon her pursuit of success, fortune, and self-actualization and settle into a traditionally feminine role. Having confronted extreme sexism in the workplace, it is disheartening for Marlene to realize that it is not only the corporate world which actively attempts to curb women's success; it is the whole of the world, which is, from top to bottom, a patriarchal one.

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

JOYCE: Who for?

MARLENE: For me. I think I'm going up up up.

JOYCE: Oh for you. Yes, I'm sure they will.

MARLENE: And for the country, come to that. Get the economy back on its feet and whoosh. She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job. She just needs to hang

JOYCE: You voted for them, did you?

MARLENE: in there. This country needs to stop whining. Monetarism is not

JOYCE: Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

MARLENE: stupid. It takes time, determination. No more slop. And

JOYCE: Well I think they're filthy bastards.

MARLENE: who's got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

JOYCE: What good's first woman if it's her? I suppose you'd have liked Hitler if he was a woman. [...] Great adventures.

MARLENE: Bosses still walking on the worker's faces? Still dada's little parrot? Haven't you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.

JOYCE: I am looking at you.

Related Characters: Marlene, Joyce (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 94-95

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Marlene displays the kind of individualist thinking which is characteristic of Margaret Thatcher's politics, and the politics of her supporters. Marlene sees Margaret Thatcher as a saving grace—not only are her policies bound to pull the country's economy out of recession, but she is a woman. What Marlene fails to see is that just because someone is a woman, they are not inherently good. Marlene is so preoccupied, perhaps, with supporting women that she is blind to nuance. Joyce attempts to point out that perhaps Thatcher is not good for the UK, but Marlene teases Joyce for "parrot[ing]" their father's pro-worker politics. When Marlene urges Joyce to "look at [her]," she wants her sister to see how individualism has enabled Marlene to live a fabulous life—but all Joyce can see is how Marlene has abandoned Joyce, Angie, and their parents in pursuit of her own success. As entrenched as Marlene is in Thatcher's doctrine, it makes sense that she

would see her cutthroat individualism as a positive, and be blind to any other interpretation of her success, or her means of attaining it.

MARLENE: I hate the working class which is what

JOYCE: Yes you do.

MARLENE: you're going to go on about now, it doesn't exist any more, it means lazy and stupid. I don't

JOYCE: Come on, now we're getting it.

MARLENE: like the way they talk. I don't like beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits and brothers and sisters—

JOYCE: I spit when I see a Rolls Royce, scratch it with my ring Mercedes it was.

MARLENE: Oh very mature—

JOYCE: I hate the cows I work for and their dirty dishes with blanquette of fucking veau.

MARLENE: and I will not be pulled down to their level by a flying picket and I won't be sent to Siberia or a loony bin just because I'm original. And I support

JOYCE: No, you'll be on a yacht, you'll be head of Coca Cola and you wait, the eighties is going to be stupendous all right because we'll get you lot off our backs—

MARLENE: Reagan even if he is a lousy movie star because the reds are swarming up his map and I want to be free in a free world—

JOYCE: What? What?

MARLENE: I know what I mean by that—not shut up here.

JOYCE: So don't be round here when it happens because if someone's kicking you I'll just laugh.

(*silence*)

MARLENE: I don't mean anything personal. I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.

JOYCE: And if they haven't?

MARLENE: If they're stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I?

JOYCE: What about Angie?

MARLENE: What about Angie?

JOYCE: She's stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?

MARLENE: You run her down too much. She'll be all right.

JOYCE: I don't expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had. If she has children. Because nothing's changed and it won't with them in.

Related Characters: Marlene, Joyce (speaker), Angie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

In this explosive passage, Marlene and Joyce indict one another's lifestyles violently and furiously, expressing contempt for everything the other believes and feels. Marlene cannot stand working-class culture, which she perceives as shallow, base, and restrictive. Joyce, on the other hand, has real anger towards the middle class and the economically privileged, and states that she goes so far as to scratch nice cars with her rings when she walks past them. Joyce, who is employed as a housekeeper, surely harbors deep resentment of those who have fared better than she has, entrapped within the same working-class town as she has been all her life. Joyce clearly feels that Marlene has been a large part in the circumstances which have held her back from moving on with her life—and, by association, Angie as well.

Marlene's argument that "anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" displays a deep sense of individualism and is ignorant of the societal, economic, and political disadvantages which keep many members of the working class from ever gaining enough of a stable base or foothold in society from which they can advance. Marlene's thinking is textbook Thatcherist, and as Joyce tries to point out the ways in which this thinking is harmful not just to members of their own generation but to members of the next—Angie included—the sisters find that they are so entrenched in their own beliefs that they cannot even begin to meet in the middle.

ANGIE: Mum?

MARLENE: Angie? What's the matter?

ANGIE: Mum?

MARLENE: No, she's gone to bed. It's Aunty Marlene.

ANGIE: Frightening.

MARLENE: Did you have a bad dream? What happened in it? Well you're awake now, aren't you, pet?

ANGIE: Frightening.

Related Characters: Marlene, Angie (speaker), Joyce

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which appears at the very end of the play, suggests that Angie has heard Joyce and Marlene's argument in its entirety—and now knows that Marlene is her biological mother. Angie descends the stairs in a daze, calling for her mother. While Marlene thinks that Angie is looking for Joyce, it's possible that Angie is simply addressing Marlene as "mum" for the first time, having overheard the truth of her parentage. Since this scene is set a year before the second act—in which Angie has very strong suspicions that Marlene is her true mother—it follows that she would have put everything together for the first time in this moment. When Angie repeats the word "Frightening" over and over again, what exactly is "frightening" to her is unclear—it could be the fact that Marlene is her mother; it could be the verbally violent fight she's just overheard; it could be that she in fact has just woken up out of a nightmare; or it could be, in a breaking of the fourth wall, Churchill's own commentary on everything this scene has explored: Marlene's selfishness, Joyce's inertia, Angie's lack of prospects, or the state of contemporary feminism and politics in general.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

In a restaurant in London on a Saturday night, Marlene sits alone at a table set for six. She orders a bottle of wine from a waitress, and then welcomes her first dinner party guest, Isabella Bird, a nineteenth-century writer, explorer, and naturalist. They greet each other like old friends, and Isabella congratulates Marlene. Marlene wishes she could take a vacation to somewhere like Hawaii to celebrate her recent success, but has settled for a dinner party instead. Isabella reminisces about her own time in Hawaii—when she first traveled there, she wanted to stay forever, and even sent for her sister, Hennie, to come join her on the islands. Isabella asks if Marlene has a sister, and Marlene says that she does.

By beginning the play with a scene that combines elements of the real and the unreal, Churchill establishes that this scene will reveal more about Marlene's inner state than her physical circumstances. It's also significant that Marlene has just had a great thing happen to her—but instead of celebrating with friends, family, or coworkers, she is assembling women from history, art, and legend—imaginary friends, so to speak.

Marlene's second guest, Lady Nijo, arrives at the party. Lady Nijo was a thirteenth-century concubine who eventually became a Buddhist nun. Marlene greets Nijo excitedly, and introduces her to Isabella. The waitress returns and pours all the women some wine—Marlene remarks that she could use a drink, as it has been a big week for her. Nijo reflects on her own time at court, and how the men always used to get drunk while she passed around sake. One night, she says, her father and the Emperor became very drunk, and the Emperor asked for Nijo's father to send her to live as his concubine come springtime.

As the women begin arriving for the dinner party, it's clear they need only the slightest association to begin divulging secrets from their pasts. This eagerness to share stories—and the idea of the play as a space to validate these women's stories—is at the heart of Churchill's thematic vision for the play, which encompasses the importance of women learning from each other's tales of triumph, despair, and struggle.

As Nijo tells her story, Marlene and Isabella interject with their own opinions. Isabella recalls once meeting the Emperor of Morocco, while Marlene asks Nijo whether the emperor was old or not. Nijo states that he was twenty-nine; she herself was fourteen. She describes sending back the Emperor's gift of an eight-layered gown, even though her own gowns were thin and badly ripped. Marlene asks if the Emperor raped Nijo—"Of course not," Nijo replies, stating that she belonged to the Emperor; service to him "was what [she] was brought up for from a baby." Soon after she became the Emperor's concubine, Nijo found herself feeling sad if he ever stayed away for more than a day or so, and dreaded bringing "other women to him."

Nijo was brought up from birth to be a concubine, or mistress, to the powerful Emperor. Though this created a fundamental imbalance of power, Nijo found herself actually enjoying the Emperor's company and her own role in his court.

Isabella remarks that she never saw her own father drunk, as he was a clergyman. She adds that she did not marry until she was fifty. Nijo replies that her own father was religious, too; before he died, he advised Nijo to enter the holy order if she ever fell out of favor at court. Isabella points out that Nijo eventually became a wandering nun—surely going against her father's wishes, as he probably wanted her to stay put in a convent. Nijo defends herself, stating that at the end of the day, she "still did what [her] father wanted," or at least tried to.

As Isabella and Nijo compare their life stories and seek to find points of connection, Marlene fades mostly into the background—she is not revealing anything about herself, and is instead listening to and absorbing the information her guests are sharing with one another.

Dull Gret arrives at the party. Marlene introduces Gret to Nijo, while Isabella greets Gret as if they already know one another. The waitress has brought the women their menus, and Marlene wonders aloud if they should wait for Joan before they put their orders in; the last guest, Griselda, she says, is going to be late. Isabella begins describing her own attempt to be a dutiful clergyman's daughter. She took up needlework, music, and "charitable schemes"; after an operation to have a tumor removed from her spine, she was forced to spend much of her time recovering on the sofa, reading and studying poetry and convincing herself that she enjoyed intellectual pursuits.

The conversations the women will have over the course of the evening aren't necessarily related to one another. For instance, here, Isabella ignores the shift in conversation and returns to what she feels is important to share about her own life. Churchill's choice to imbue her characters with the desire to make themselves heard speaks to her thematic preoccupation with the necessity of sharing and validating women's stories.

Nijo interjects that she herself comes from a line of eight generations of poets. Isabella states that she was always more suited to manual work such as cooking, mending, and horseback riding, and longed to live "a rough life in the open air." Nijo says that she did not enjoy her own "rough life"—the high point of her life, she says, was being the Emperor's favorite and wearing fine silks.

Nijo and Isabella find that their lives were marked by very different interests. Nijo enjoyed being a kept woman, while Isabella longed to expand her horizons and push herself out of her comfort zone in the outdoors.

Isabella attempts to engage Gret in conversation, asking if she ever had any horses. Gret replies with one word only: "Pig." Pope Joan arrives at the party—Marlene is grateful that their group can at last order some food. Marlene asks Joan if she knows everyone, and tells Joan that they were all just talking about "being clever girls." She asks Joan what excited her when she was ten; Joan gives an esoteric answer about angels. The women all laugh and look at their menus. As they continue sharing stories, the waitress comes around to take orders.

The characters' vastly different backgrounds are played to comic effect in this passage. Gret's almost surly, gruff demeanor is in contrast with Nijo and Isabella's florid speech and desire to share, while Joan's contemplative interiority and thoughts on the divine are exactly what all these women might expect from a woman who was Pope.

The conversation turns to death, as Isabella recalls her father's death, and Nijo recalls her father's, too. Joan states that "death is the return of all creatures to God." The women begin discussing religion; Isabella identifies herself as a member of the Church of England, and Marlene states that though she hasn't been to church for years, she enjoys Christmas carols. She admits to not doing any "good works." Nijo says that the first half of her life was "all sin," and the second "all repentance." The women talk over each other, ordering appetizers and more wine. They continue comparing their religious beliefs, and eventually Joan and Nijo begin to snipe at one another over heresy. When Isabella remarks that they all should have kept off the topic of religion, Joan confesses that she is "a heresy" herself.

Here, Churchill is playing with the form of a traditional dinner drama. Religion is a taboo topic for any kind of dinner party—but especially one where a devout and powerful religious figure is in attendance. Churchill is drawing lines between joke formats and clichés from traditional plays and the surrealist, absurd world of this opening scene, and commenting on the ways in which people often tiptoe around one another conversationally. These women, though, get right down to the tough topics.

The food arrives, and Marlene seems to hope the conversation will turn away from religion, but Nijo presses on. She says that when she fell out of favor at court, she had nothing, and so chose to turn to religion, which she saw as a "kind of nothing." Marlene tries to distract Nijo by offering her wine, but Nijo just grows more morose, asking the other women if they have ever felt like their lives were over and they were "dead already." Marlene admits to feeling that way when she first came to London, and when she returned from her travels in America—"but only for a few hours."

In this passage, Churchill demonstrates the vast difference between Marlene's life and Nijo's. Marlene is a modern woman, and has not known the deep existential pain and traumatic suffering Nijo has—her only point of comparison to the emotions Nijo is describing only lasted "a few hours." In sharing their experiences, though, Nijo and Marlene are growing to understand more about one another.

Isabella reflects on a time when she thought her life was over—at forty, she was sent on a cruise to Australia for her health. She looked and felt miserable and suicidal. Nijo commiserates, saying she felt the same way when she began dressing as a nun. Marlene is surprised to hear Isabella and Nijo admit to such feelings, as she thought travelling cheered them both up. Nijo says she is not a cheerful person; she just laughs a lot. Isabella, on the other hand, admits that travelling did eventually bolster her; on a trip from Australia to the Sandwich Islands, she "fell in love with the sea." She woke up each morning of the journey grateful to be freed from having to get dressed up. Nijo comments that her favorite part of her role as a concubine was the luxurious clothing.

Nijo's claim that she is not a cheerful person, but merely laughs a lot, demonstrates how she has changed herself to survive in the patriarchal world she was raised in. She has made herself softer and more pleasant to mask her true feelings. The ways in which women change themselves to survive in a patriarchal world will develop as a major theme as the play progresses, and Churchill intends to keep her audience constantly questioning which parts of her characters' personalities are genuine and which parts are adjustments they've made in order to get ahead in a world constructed for and by men.

Pope Joan declares that she herself dressed as a boy as early as she could. She ran away with a male friend a few years older than her—she wanted to study in Athens, but women were not allowed in libraries in the Middle Ages. Isabella states that in all her travels she never dressed as a man. Marlene says that she never wears trousers in the office—she could, but she chooses not to. Joan describes traveling with her friend, sharing a bed with him, and masquerading as poor students. "I think I forgot I was pretending," she says.

Joan's choice to disguise herself in order to take part in a part of the world restricted only to men—and Marlene's follow-up comment about her choice to dress femininely for work in a male-dominated corporate atmosphere—is in keeping with Churchill's investigation of what changing oneself in order to survive within the patriarchy looks like in different times. Joan's comment that she forgot she was pretending shows just how dangerous such changes can be, and how it becomes increasingly challenging, the more one changes, to discern what aspects of oneself are genuine and what aspects are learned.

Isabella tells the women about a mountain man she encountered in her travels through America who fell in love with her. She knew she could not marry him, though, and so returned to England—she mournfully tells the women she never saw him again, though she had a vision of him in a dream; later, she learned that the day of her vision had been the day of his death. Lady Nijo tells the women that one of her lovers died, too—he was a priest named Ariake. Joan adds that her friend from her travels died—they all have dead lovers, she observes.

As the conversation turns to love, the amount of sadness, pain, and loss which has dominated these women's lives where romance is concerned becomes overwhelming. They find common ground in their sorrow and broken hearts.

Nijo begins telling Isabella the story of Ariake—she met him when she was still at court. He was a Buddhist priest, and shared his beliefs about the afterlife and reincarnation with her. Joan, meanwhile, tells Marlene about her friend, with whom she'd passionately debated scripture and theology. After her friend died, Joan says, she decided to continue pretending to be man, and to devote her life to learning. She went to Rome, she says, because Italian men at the time did not grow beards.

Joan and Nijo both pursued love affairs that fed them intellectually as well as emotionally. Both of these women also found themselves shaped by the serious conversations they had with their lovers—Nijo would later become a Buddhist priest like Ariake, and Joan would pursue religious debate and education even after losing her lover.

Isabella says that she never fell in love with the mountain man—rather the loves of her life were her sister, and her "dear husband"—the doctor who nursed her sister, Hennie, through her illness and death. When Hennie died, Isabella felt that half of her had "gone," and she saw no way to continue her travels. The only thing that brought her solace was seeing how the doctor, Doctor Bishop, had the same "sweet character" as Hennie, and had been tenderly devoted to Hennie throughout her illness. For this reason, she decided to marry him. Nijo says that she thought the Emperor had a sweet character, as well, as he was supportive of her affair with Ariake—but really, she understands now, he had just stopped caring for her, and began arranging for her to sleep with other men from court.

For Isabella, love was less about finding her intellectual match than it was about feeling comforted and cared for—and knowing that her male partner would treat her well, since she had seen him treat her sister with great care and tenderness.

Isabella was only married for a short time before her husband also fell ill and died. She herself was afflicted with gout, and fell into a depression. Nijo reflects on how, without the Emperor's favor, she felt she had "nothing" in her life. As for Joan, she reveals that she devoted herself entirely to her studies—as she became more and more well-known as a teacher, she became famous, and huge crowds gathered to hear her speak. As Marlene listens to Joan's story, she remarks that "success is very…" but trails off as Joan, Isabella, and Nijo's stories continue. Isabella, at fifty-six, decided to leave her grief behind and set off for Tibet; Nijo left court on foot and wandered Japan for the next twenty years; Joan was chosen to be Pope, and became excited at the prospect of finally getting to "know God."

Isabella has the sunniest disposition of all the women present—and yet her story is still full of heartbreak, disappointment, and physical struggle. The women commiserate about how difficult it is to fill the gap left by loss of love—but Marlene cannot contribute to the conversation, as she is so devoted to her success that she has shirked romance entirely; she has no point of reference for this kind of pain. Similarly, Joan, having suffered pain in romance, buried herself in work and attaining success for herself.

Marlene orders more wine from the waitress; though Griselda still isn't present, she says that she wants to make a toast to the gathered women. Isabella points out that they are all gathered to celebrate Marlene's success. Joan asks what exactly Marlene has achieved; Marlene replies that while she hasn't been made Pope, she has been made managing director of her firm, an employment agency called **Top Girls**. Nijo admires Marlene for being promoted "over all the women [at the firm,] and the men [as well.]" The women all toast Marlene, and Marlene toasts them in return. She raises a glass to her friends' success and her own: "To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements."

As the women toast Marlene, they express pride in her accomplishments. Nijo's remark that Marlene beat out everyone else for the role is just a little off—Churchill is demonstrating both that Nijo is growing increasingly drunk, and that the women can see transparently how badly Marlene wants to beat both the women and the men she is in professional competition with.

Joan continues her story. She found that once appointed to the papacy, God did not speak to her: "he knew I was a woman," she says. Marlene is amazed that no one else suspected Joan to be a woman. Joan reveals that she took a lover at the Vatican—one of her servants. When Nijo asks what the man was like, Joan replies only that "he could keep a secret." Joan enjoyed being Pope, but worried when she received news of earthquakes and plagues in Italy and France that she had brought misery to Europe through her false claim to the papacy.

Joan worried that she was being punished for having tried to gain power normally reserved only for men. Her failure to communicate with God, plus the news of plague-like atrocities unfolding throughout Europe, made Joan feel as if she had trespassed, and was being punished.

If it hadn't been for the baby, Joan says, she would've ruled to an old age. Nijo asks Joan to tell them what happened to her baby; she says that she herself had "some babies." Marlene asks Joan if she thought of getting rid of the child; Joan points out that that would have been a worse sin than having the baby. Joan admits that at first she didn't know what was happening; she thought she was just getting fatter. When her lover pointed out what had happened, she "didn't want to pay attention" to the matter; "it was easier to do nothing."

As Joan begins talking about her pregnancy, she reveals that she had entered into a deep state of denial. Joan had grown so disconnected from her womanhood that she chose not to pay attention to her own body, even as it grew, changed, and began to house new life. This denial of womanhood is exactly what Churchill worries that the attempt to assimilate into the world of the patriarchy will to do women—strip them of their essential femininity, which is a beautiful thing, and should not be seen as an albatross or a weakness.

Nijo begins talking about her own pregnancies. Her first child was the Emperor's and it died as an infant; her second was one of her lovers', a man named Akebono. To disguise the fact that the child was not the Emperor's, Akebono and Nijo conspired to deliver the baby in secret. The baby was a girl, and Akebono took the child away from Nijo as soon as it was gone. Nijo told the Emperor she had miscarried as the result of an illness, and "the danger was past."

The recurrent motif of lost children will intensify as the play goes on. Nijo and Joan are not the only women to have experience with the terrible pain of having lost a child—Marlene, Gret, and Griselda all have stories to share on the topic, too, though some will be more reluctant than others to share their experiences.

Joan tells Nijo that she wasn't used to having a woman's body—she had all but forgotten that she could get pregnant in the first place, and so couldn't plan to have the child in secret or give it away. On the day of a major religious procession, Joan went into labor, and delivered her baby right in the street in front of her attendants and commoners alike. The cardinals immediately dragged Joan out of town by the feet and stoned her to death. When Nijo asks if the child died, too, Joan says that she doesn't know what happened to it. Isabella blithely states that she never had any children and was instead fond of horses. Nijo recalls seeing her daughter by Akebono only once—the child was being "brought up carefully so she could be sent to the palace" as a concubine one day, just like Nijo.

The idea of motherhood as a punishable offense is explored in this short passage. Joan is stoned to death for having been a woman, and for having borne a child during her tenure as Pope; Nijo is cruelly made to realize that her only daughter is bring brought up to meet the same exact fate she herself did, being just one more individual in an endless cycle of servitude and debasement. Only Isabella, who never had children, is exempt from this particular kind of torture.

Nijo continues talking about her own children—her third child was the son of Ariake, the priest, as was her fourth. She never saw either of them after they were born, but oddly, she says, by the fourth child she "felt nothing." Marlene asks Gret, who has been nearly silent thus far, how many children she had; Gret replies "ten."

Nijo feels less and less as each of her children is systematically removed from her care until she is entirely inured to the experience. The revelation that Gret had ten children—an enormous number—seems to indicate that she, too, suffered a similar breakdown of emotion to Nijo's.

Marlene asks aloud why she and her guests are "all so miserable." Isabella talks about her extensive charity work in England, which she undertook between adventures around the word. Joan tells the women that after her, the Vatican introduced a special chair with a hole in the seat, which each new pope had to sit on while clergymen looked up his skirts to make sure he was a man. Griselda arrives, but everyone is so delighted by Joan's anecdote about the chair that no one notices. It is clear that at this point, everyone is "quite drunk."

Marlene does not talk all that much or express her inner emotions during this scene—or really during the rest of the play—but her frank declaration that she and her friends are all living "miserable" existences as women is a tacit admission that she knows her own attempts to escape pain and suffering by playing by the rules of the patriarchy are in vain.

Marlene notices Griselda and greets her—Griselda apologizes for her lateness. Though the women have all finished their dinners, Marlene asks Griselda if she'd like to order something, but Griselda declines. Marlene tells Griselda they are all ordering dessert, and Griselda agrees to have some.

Griselda shows herself from the very moment she's introduced to be demure and self-sacrificing, more comfortable putting her own needs on the back burner than making a fuss over herself.

Marlene tells everyone that Griselda's life is "like a fairy story," except her marriage to a prince is only the start of the tale. The women begin asking Griselda about herself, and she reveals that she was married at fifteen. She had seen the Marquis riding by, but she was only a peasant girl, and never thought he'd noticed her. On the Marquis's wedding day, Griselda went outside to see the procession—the wedding had been announced, but not the bride. As Griselda joined the other peasants who were waiting anxiously to get a glimpse of the lucky woman, the carriage stopped at Griselda's cottage—the Marquis spoke to Griselda's father, and then proposed marriage to Griselda himself. He warned her, though, that if she said yes to him, she would have to obey him always and in everything.

The pattern of Griselda's life does follow the pattern of a traditional fairy tale—only the circumstances are horribly twisted. Instead of telling the story of a woman finding joy and respect in her marriage and being elevated out of miserable circumstances into a carefree life of luxury, Griselda will meet only pain when she leaves her parents' home, and will be tested in cruel and unusual ways.

Griselda agreed, and the Marquis's ladies-in-waiting dressed her in white silk and adorned her hair. Marlene interjects to remark how "normal" the Marquis seemed at first. Griselda laments that Marlene is "always so critical of him." Marlene tells Griselda that the Marquis did, after all, take away her children. Griselda explains to the rest of the women that the Marquis had a hard time believing Griselda loved him and would obey him, so he decided to test her. Marlene remarks that the Marquis didn't "like women."

Marlene is remarkably comfortable calling out inequity and abuse at the hands of men when she sees it in the stories of her friends, but is not self-aware enough to see how her own life is completely dictated by the demands of the patriarchy, as well.

Griselda begins telling the other women how her first child, a girl, was taken away at only six weeks old. Nijo commiserates about how awful it is to have a child taken away. Though Griselda feared that the Marquis was going to kill the child, she allowed him to take it—after all, she had promised obedience. Marlene, unable to stand Griselda's story, gets up to go to the bathroom. The waitress brings in dessert as Griselda continues. Nijo empathizes with Griselda—she understands that the Marquis was Griselda's whole life.

Marlene's disgust for the Marquis's behavior is out of character for her—she does not acknowledge the ways in which the patriarchy has warped her own life, only the lives of her guests. Marlene's refusal to apply the lessons of her guests to her own life demonstrates her deep state of denial—she is grateful for her success and does not want to admit that it came at the cost of abandoning the same values that her friends did.

Four years later, Griselda says, she gave birth to a boy—but when he was two years old, the Marquis took that child away, too. Griselda allowed him to do so again. Nijo asks if the second time was easier or harder—Griselda replies that "it was always easy because [she] always knew [she] would do what he said." Twelve years later, she continues, he tested her again—he sent her away, explaining that his people wanted him to marry someone else. Griselda left in just a shift, and returned to her father's house, where "everyone was crying" except Griselda herself. Soon, though, the Marquis sent for her again, asking her to help prepare his wedding.

Griselda's intense devotion to her husband seems genuine—she does not seem to remember feeling any anger, resentment, or even real pain as a result of his actions. She simply bends to his will, submitting to the whims of the male power in her life and never considering that the treatment she is receiving is not merely unjust but also inhumane. Griselda's seemingly willful blindness in this regard, then, mirrors Marlene's current state of denial.

At the ceremony, the Marquis's sixteen-year-old bride and her younger brother, serving as her page, arrived. The Marquis then embraced Griselda and told her that the girl and the page were none other than her son and daughter. Marlene says that the Marquis was a "monster." Joan, incredulous, asks if Griselda forgave the Marquis—she says that she did, and returned to her life with him, where she was dressed again in cloth of gold. Nijo begins crying, and says that nobody ever gave her back her children.

Marlene's guests have found solace in the similarities their stories all share—but here, Nijo is brought to tears by the differences between her own narrative and Griselda's. Griselda was reunited with her children, but Nijo was denied the chance to ever do so. Nijo's sorrow is deep and enduring as she confronts the injustice of the world she lives in.

Joan comforts Nijo, telling her not to cry. Nijo talks about the deaths of her father and the Emperor—she was not allowed in the palace while the Emperor was dying, and had to sneak in to visit his coffin. Nijo wonders if she would have been allowed to wear full mourning garb if she had still been at court.

Nijo recalls how, after her life of service to the Emperor, she was denied even the chance to mourn him.

Nijo, now on a tear, begins talking about a time when she was eighteen years old, and subjected to a Full Moon Ceremony during which all of the women at court were beaten across the loins with sticks so that they would bear sons, not daughters. The Emperor beat all of his concubines—though this was "normal," Nijo says, what made her angry was that the Emperor told his attendants that they could beat the women, as well. She and one of the other concubines made a secret plan to hide in the Emperor's room that night—when the Emperor came in to go to bed, her conspirator seized him and held him while Nijo beat him until he promised "he would never order anyone to hit [them] again."

Nijo's story of rising up against the power structures that had entrapped her in a humiliating cycle of submission and exploitation since her youth is rebellious, bold, and slightly out of character for Nijo, who has portrayed herself in her own anecdotes up to this point as demure and submissive. Her resistance against the patriarchy in this violent and unmissable way speaks to her inner strength and her capacity for protecting herself—in spite of the fact that she was raised all her life to succumb to the whims of men.

The waitress comes and pours everyone more brandy. Joan drunkenly begins reciting a long prayer in Latin, part of which, in translation, expresses the calm feeling of watching the suffering of others from a distance. The women, all drunk, talk over one another. Griselda says it would've been "nicer" if her husband hadn't taken away her children. Isabella asks everyone why she should be made to live as a lady. Nijo reflects on hitting the Emperor, over and over, with a stick.

Joan's prayer about watching the suffering of others from a distance more or less sums up the events of the evening. The women have each borne witness to each other's pain and suffering—they have shared their stories with one another, and have all had the chance to be heard, but whether this shared knowledge they all have will be of use to them seems dubious at best.

Finally, Gret begins talking. She describes pillaging Hell with the other women of her village. Marlene urges Joan, who is still chanting in Latin, to be quiet so they all can hear Gret speak. Gret describes a nightmarish, surreal scene of her village on fire, invaded by demons. She and the women of the village tried to beat the demons back, but they refused to back down. Their village had "had worse," though; when the Spanish invaded, many women had to watch their children die. Gret describes seeing her son's corpse be picked at by birds. With the invasion of the demons, Gret says, she'd had enough. Recalling the charge against the demons, Gret says she gave the devils "such a beating."

Gret finally speaks up, and the speech she delivers is as triumphant as it is tortured. Gret has suffered just as much pain and loss as the other women—and yet she chose to fight back against it in a no-holds-barred crusade against the very forces of evil which had so marred the landscape of her life. The story is both painful and beautiful, full of misery and grotesque images but also somehow hopeful that the "devils" that plague women from all walks of life can indeed be beaten back.

Joan resumes her chanting. Isabella describes returning to Morocco on one last journey, in her old age. Nijo begins laughing and crying simultaneously; Joan vomits, and Griselda comforts her. Isabella proudly declares that she was, at seventy, the only European woman to have ever seen the Emperor of Morocco. Though she knew the return of her strength was "only temporary," it was "marvelous while it lasted."

The women, completely inebriated at this point, begin to break down and fall apart. The evening has been too much for all of them—reliving their individual and shared pain, regret, and loss has caused old traumas to resurface. Isabella, however—ever intrepid and optimistic—recalls how "marvelous" it felt to roam the world. Her happy reminiscence can be read as a moment in which she is oblivious to the others' pain, or a cruelly ironic and vaguely melancholic meditation on the fleeting nature of happiness, and the fact that suffering and tragedy often overwhelm women's lives.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

It is Monday morning at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**. Marlene is meeting with a woman named Jeanine. She asks her about her education and her present job—Jeanine works as a secretary to three men who "share [her.]" The job is fine, she says, except she has no prospects, and feels there is no chance of advancement in terms of either position or salary. Marlene asks if Jeanine will take "anything comparable" to her current position, but Jeanine insists she wants more money.

Here, Marlene meets with a young woman who has clear and somewhat lofty aspirations. She knows that she wants to gain more power and enjoy more success in her career, and she is not willing to settle for being an underpaid secretary any longer.

Marlene asks Jeanine how much she is making, and when Jeanine answers her, Marlene remarks that her salary is not bad—Marlene points out that Jeanine is only twenty. Jeanine replies that she is saving up to get married. Marlene advises Jeanine not to tell any potential employers that she's planning on getting married. Jeanine starts to ask Marlene what she should do if, in an interview, she's asked about her marriage plans, but Marlene cuts Jeanine off, asking if she has a feel for any particular kind of company. When Jeanine answers "advertising," Marlene tells her advertising firms are looking for "something glossier." Jeanine explains that she dresses demurely for her current job; Marlene answers that she means "glossier" in terms of experience, not appearance.

The realization that Jeanine is pursuing more lucrative employment in order to finance a wedding causes Marlene to change her opinion of Jeanine. Marlene knows that marriage—any kind of attachment, really—is a liability. As the play unfolds, Churchill will examine the lengths to which Marlene has gone to ensure that there is nothing standing in the way of her career. Marlene wants to encourage Jeanine to keep her desire for marriage under wraps, as it will hurt her chances of being taken seriously in the corporate world.

Marlene tells Jeanine she might have something for her in the marketing department of a knitwear manufacturer, working as secretary to the male marketing manager. She warns Jeanine not to mention marriage if she goes in for an interview, as the last girl Jeanine sent to him left to have a baby. Alternatively, Marlene says, there's another company that pays less but is just starting out—if Jeanine starts there now, she'll grow with the company, and then will be "at the top with new girls coming in underneath [her.]" Marlene decides she will first send Jeanine to interview at this new company, which manufactures lampshades, with the knitwear manufacturer as a backup.

Marlene wants to offer Jeanine the chance not just to thrive, but to actually experience the feeling of being the "top girl" at her new company. She is careful to remind Jeanine, though, that any mention of marriage or plans to become a mother will greatly hurt her chances—this is a man's world, and Jeanine must sacrifice certain things (or at least appear to) if she wants to succeed.

Jeanine mentions she'd like a job with a travel component. Marlene asks if Jeanine's fiancé wants to travel; Jeanine answers that she wants to work primarily in London, but go abroad every now and then. Marlene tells Jeanine there's a job as a personal assistant to a top executive available, but that Jeanine needs to consider whether that's where she'll want to be in ten years. Jeanine replies that she might not be alive in ten years; Marlene retorts that Jeanine will have children in ten years.

Marlene is going to help Jeanine, but clearly thinks that the fact that Jeanine is even considering marriage means that in ten years, she will be out of the work force and living an average life as a wife and a mother. Marlene is disdainful of women who choose family over their careers—and as the action continues, the audience will come to understand just how much she looks down on such women.

Marlene tells Jeanine she's sending her to the lampshade company and the knitwear company, and in doing so is "putting [her]self on the line." She advises Jeanine to go into her interviews behaving as if she is the best person for the job; if Jeanine doesn't believe it, Marlene says, the companies won't. Jeanine asks if Marlene believes it; Marlene replies that Jeanine "could make [her] believe it if [Jeanine] put [her] mind to it."

Marlene seems to believe that Jeanine is genuinely smart and worthy of the jobs she's applying for, but still thinks that Jeanine needs to make others believe that she wants personal financial and corporate success as badly as she says she does. She is subtly encouraging Jeanine to pretend to be someone else in order to land the job.

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

In Marlene's sister Joyce's backyard, two girls—Angie, who is sixteen, and Kit, who is twelve—play in a "shelter made of junk." The girls hear Joyce calling for Angie, and Angie tells Kit that she wishes Joyce was dead. Kit asks Angie if she wants to go to the movies, but Angie says her mother won't let her. Kit offers to pay for them to go, or to ask Joyce on Angie's behalf, but Angie says that Joyce doesn't like Kit. Kit says she'll go by herself, but Angie tells the younger girl she won't be allowed to go unsupervised. Kit asserts that Angie is the one that Joyce doesn't like; Angie replies that she doesn't like Joyce in the first place.

Angie and her friend Kit's relationship is strange and combative. The girls do not seem to like each other very much, and would rather challenge one another or pick on each other than actually do something fun. The dissonance of this female friendship, even though the girls are young, represents the dissonance Churchill sensed in the feminism of the early 1980s; a world in which women preferred to tear each other down in pursuit of individual success rather than come together and bolster one another.

Joyce calls for Angie, telling her to come inside. Angie doesn't answer, or move. She tells Kit that last night, while she was lying in bed, a picture of her grandmother fell off the wall; Angie believes she can make things move without touching them. Kit is skeptical. Angie tells Kit that she heard the ghost of a dead kitten she had once meowing in the yard. Kit tells Angie she's lying, and Angie accuses Kit of being scared. Kit tells Angie that she's sitting too close—Angie tells Kit to get off of her, and Kit tells Angie she hates her. Angie replies that she is going to kill her mother and make Kit watch. Angie teases Kit for being scared of blood. Kit puts her hand under her dress, and pulls it back out, covered in blood. Angie licks Kit's finger, proudly declaring herself a cannibal.

Angie's strange beliefs about her powers seem to be intended only to spook Kit and gain some sort of upper hand in their friendship. Again, this is symbolic of the ways in which women attempt to dominate and suppress one another. The unsettling moment in which Angie licks Kit's menstrual blood off of Kit's fingers is highly symbolic, as well; it shows how codependent the girls are in spite of their meanness towards one another, and implies that they need one another more than they realize—they exist, it seems, largely in their own world.

Angie demands that when she gets her own period, Kit must lick her bloody fingers, too. Kit refuses. Angie tells Kit that if she doesn't get away from home, she's going to die. Kit tells Angie she's going to leave; Angie warns her not to go through the house, or else Joyce will know they've been playing together in the yard. Kit and Angie begin arguing, but Angie shushes her—Joyce has come out of the house, and is in the yard. She calls sweetly for the girls to come inside for tea and cookies; when there is no response, she calls Angie a "fucking rotten little cunt," and tells her she can "stay there and die." Joyce goes back into the house, and Kit and Angie sit in silence.

Joyce's Jekyll-and-Hyde monologue in this scene reveals her deep frustration with her child, Angie. Joyce clearly has trouble controlling Angie. She tries being sweet to her as a way of coaxing Angie out, but when that doesn't work, Joyce just gives up entirely and instead berates her daughter for being horrible, spoiled, and mean.

Kit asks Angie where the safest place is during a war. Angie tells her nowhere is safe. Kit says that New Zealand must be safe, and asks if Angie wants to go there with her. Angie tells Kit she's not old enough to go; Kit retorts that it's Angie who isn't old enough. The two begin bickering about whether or not they should go; eventually Angie reveals that she's going to "do something else anyway," but that it's a secret. Kit presses Angie to tell her what it is; when Angie refuses, Kit says that there's "something wrong" with Angie, and calls her a bad influence.

The girls' chilling interactions and strange speculations reveal their deep anxieties about the world they live in, and how they might survive such a bleak and treacherous place.

Angie twists Kit's arm and tells her to admit she's a liar. Kit refuses, and Angie lets her go. Angie says she doesn't care about Kit, because she's going to leave; one morning, everyone will wake up and find that Angie has gone. Kit asks Angie where she's going, and Angie tells her she's going to London to see her aunt. When Kit says she sees her own aunt all the time and asks what's so special about Angie going to visit hers, Angie replies that her aunt is special and nice, though Joyce hates her. When Kit asks repetitively what's so special about Marlene, Angie answers that she thinks her aunt is actually her biological mother.

Angie's belief that she is Marlene's child seems, at first, to be ridiculous, given the context of her behavior in the rest of the scene. This claim, though, is perhaps driving some of Angie's peculiar language and behavior, and is maybe what is behind her deep frustration with her mother and her anxieties about her relationships with other girls and women.

The girls curl up in each other's arms and sit in silence. Joyce comes out of the house and approaches the shed. She tells Kit that it's time to go home. Kit protests that they want to go see a movie, but Joyce insists that Angie needs to clean her room before the girls go anywhere. After a brief argument, Angie goes inside to tidy up. Joyce makes conversation with Kit, asking her about school, and wondering aloud whether Angie should have stayed on. She laments that Angie will have difficulty, as a dropout, getting a job. She worries that Angie is "one of those girls might never leave home." Joyce asks Kit whether Kit has any friends her own age; Kit replies she's too clever and mature for friends her age. Joyce worries that Angie is simple. Kit, defending her friend, declares that she loves Angie.

Despite Kit and Angie's contentious and occasionally cruel relationship, this scene makes it clear that Kit is fiercely protective of Angie. Kit seems to know how cruel Joyce can be to Angie, and doesn't want to hear any of Joyce's talk about Angie being slow, burdensome, or inadequate. As Joyce confides in her daughter's best friend—a twelve-year-old child—about her fears for Angie, it becomes clear that Joyce's anxieties about Angie's trajectory in life extend beyond the norm.

Angie comes back out of the house—she has changed into a fancy dress, which is too small for her. Joyce asks why Angie has put the dress on just to clean her room. Angie picks up a brick from the ground. Kit tells Angie it's time to go to the movies. Joyce insists Angie finish cleaning her room first. Kit observes that it is beginning to rain. Joyce urges Angie to go inside and finish cleaning her room, then runs inside to avoid the rain. Kit follows her, but Angie stays where she is as the rain starts coming down. Kit pokes her head out of the house and urges Angie to come inside. Angie says that she "put on this dress to kill [her] mother." Kit asks Angie if she was planning to do it with the brick; Angie puts the brick down.

Angie ceremoniously dressing up in her Sunday best to kill her mother is a strange and grotesque image. Angie clearly feels stifled, unloved, and misunderstood, and wants to take direct action to escape her circumstances. Murder, though, is not the right course of action, as Kit points out. Angie's strange and violent impulse, though, creates a startling image and sets up the central dramatic question of the play's second half: what mothers owe their children, and what happens when children feel they've been cheated, mistreated, or abandoned.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

It is Monday morning at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**. Win and Nell arrive for work. Nell prepares coffee while Win talks about her weekend visiting her lover's rose garden while his was wife away visiting her mother. Nell remarks that Marlene is late, and suggests she's been celebrating all weekend. They also observe that one of their other coworkers, Howard, isn't in yet; Win says he's "really cut up" about Marlene's promotion, but suggests he'll move on to a new company soon enough. Nell says she wouldn't mind moving on herself. Win presses her for more details, asking if she has another job lined up. Nell says there's nothing definite, though she's been getting a lot of inquiries—no one can afford her, though. She is reluctant to stay on at Top Girls, as there's "not a lot of room upward;" Win remarks that Marlene has "filled it up."

Win and Nell are not cruel women, though they are gossips and seem to be more than a little self-absorbed. They are happy enough for Marlene's success, but worry that Marlene's triumph means that there is no room for them at the "top." Win and Nell clearly see each other as competition, and each is focused on assuring that she is getting the most out of any given job at any given moment.

Win and Nell discuss some of the people they've placed over the last couple weeks, what they each did over the weekend, and what's on television lately. Nell reveals that her boyfriend asked her to marry him "again," but she told him she refuses to "play house." Win says Nell could get married and go on working; Nell retorts that she could go on working and not get married.

Nell and Win clearly both have contempt for real romance or commitment—they are too concerned with their own careers to be waylaid by marriage or any serious relationship with a man.

Marlene walks in and greets Win and Nell. They cheer, whistle, and whoop, welcoming her. They tease her for being late now that she's the "top executive." Win says she's delighted about the promotion; Nell comments that Howard's "looking sick" over it. Win retorts that Howard actually is sick, with ulcers and a bad heart. Nell asks if Howard will stop drinking, smoking, and working; Win says he'll probably just stop working. Marlene says she's going to take some meetings with another employee's interviewees; they've been piling up while the other woman is away. Nell says she's looked through the files, and they consist of "half a dozen little girls."

Win and Nell—and indeed Marlene—seem to delight in Howard's misery over Marlene's promotion, and wonder if Marlene's success will actually defeat the man. When the conversation turns to business, Nell exhibits a condescending attitude towards the women that they are supposed to help, lift up, and encourage. Win, Nell, and Marlene's collective desire for the failure of others is gender nonspecific.

Win tells Marlene that she spent the weekend at her lover's house; she says she had to lie down in the back of the car so his neighbors wouldn't see her going in. Nell remarks that she'll "tell the wife"—maybe the wife will leave Win's lover, and Win will get to have the rose garden she so admires. Win protests, saying the minute it's not a secret, the affair will end. Nell asks why Win's pursuing it, then; Win says she's doing it for a "bit of fun."

Win, like Nell, is dabbling in romance but avoiding a situation that requires either her full attention or a genuine commitment.

Nell tells Marlene that soon Marlene will be upstairs, watching over the rest of them. Marlene asks if Nell feels badly about it; Nell answers that she doesn't like coming in second. Marlene agrees that no one does. Win admits that the two of them would rather Marlene get promoted than Howard, and tells Marlene she's glad for her. She asks Nell if she is, too, and Nell agrees that Marlene's promotion is "aces."

Though Win and Nell do admit to a bit of jealousy in this passage, they also admit that they stand behind Marlene—they would rather she succeed than a man.

Win goes into an adjacent room to interview Louise, a woman in her early forties who has been at the same job for twenty-one years. Despite her long tenure at the company, she feels it's time to move on. Win warns her that her age is a "handicap," though her experience should count in her favor. Win asks if there is any secret reason why Louise is leaving, poking around to see if Louise has had "personality clashes" with any coworkers, but Louise insists she gets along well with everyone in the office. Win asks if it's the money which is making Louise move on, but Louise says it's not so much the money.

Win's initial attitude toward Louise betrays a serious ageist bias and more than a little bit of contempt for Louise's seemingly unmotivated decision to seek a change so late in life, and with such a large "handicap" working against her.

Louise tells Win that she has "lived for [the] company," and has sacrificed her social life to work late in the evenings. She has had management status for over a decade, and has built up her department—but she herself has not been able to advance. She has trained young men who have gone on to higher things, while no one at the company notices her own hard work. She wants to leave the company and make her superiors sorry to lose her—but she says that even if they offer her more money and try to get her to stay, she will refuse. Win asks if Louise is the only woman at the company—Louise says apart from the secretaries and assistants, she is. She feels she "pass[es] as a man at work," and does not particularly enjoy working with other women.

Louise is clearly in pain, having watched her life go by in service to others' successes while never experiencing any of her own. Louise's story reveals the insidious ways in which the corporate world overlooks and purposefully discounts women, and Louise's desire for relocation is motivated mostly by spite and an need to retaliate, in whatever way she can, against such treatment at last.

Win warns Louise that in many interviews she'll be competing against younger men—but there are fields that are easier for women, such as a cosmetics company Win knows of. Win warns Louise that she'd have to take a pay cut at the cosmetics company, but Louise says what's most important is for her to get away from her old job.

Louise doesn't care how much money she's making—she just wants to make a point about how invaluable she was to her old company, and how wrong they have been in overlooking her and preventing from achieving the success she deserves.

In the main office, Angie arrives to visit Marlene. Marlene is surprised to see Angie, and asks how she got past the receptionist; Angie says she just walked right in. Marlene asks if Joyce is with her; Angie replies that Joyce is at home. Marlene asks if Angie is here on a school trip, but Angie informs Marlene she's left school. When Marlene asks Angie if she's been shopping or sightseeing, Angie tells her that she came here just to see Marlene.

Angie has one goal in mind for this trip, and it is to get close to Marlene. Given Angie's previous promise to kill her mother contrasted against her clear adoration of Marlene, it seems that Marlene is not, after all, the "mother" she intends to kill.


Marlene tells Angie that she has, unfortunately, picked a day when Marlene is quite busy. She tells Angie that if it were any other day, she'd take her out for lunch and shopping. She asks Angie when she has to go back; Angie says she's staying the night. Marlene asks if Angie wants Marlene to put her up for the night, and Angie says she'd like that. Marlene wonders aloud why Joyce wouldn't have called to let her know Angie was coming, but concedes that it's "like her" not to.

It's unclear whether Marlene would devote a day's worth of attention to Angie even if she could—her promises to her niece seem to go against her individualistic, self-absorbed patterns of behavior.

Angie admires Marlene's "lovely" office, but Marlene brags that she'll soon be moving to a new office even nicer than this one. Angie asks to see it; Marlene says that they can't go in, as there's someone else in there now; but at the end of next week, he'll be leaving, and Marlene will be taking over his job. Angie asks Marlene if she's going to be in charge, and Marlene says she will be. Angie says she always knew Marlene would be in charge of everything. Marlene concedes that she won't be in charge of everything, exactly, but Angie insists Marlene will be.

In this moment, Angie admires Marlene's life of luxury and the trappings of her success. When Angie asks if Marlene is in charge of everything, though, Marlene is forced to admit that she isn't—and is perhaps forced to reckon with the fact that maybe, despite all her best efforts, she never will be due to the inherent constraints of success in a patriarchal society.


Angie asks if she can see the office next week—Marlene asks Angie if she has to go back home, but Angie says she doesn't. Marlene asks Angie why not, but Angie tells her not to worry about it. Marlene asks Angie if Joyce knows where Angie is, and Angie again tells Marlene not to worry about it. Marlene asks Angie how long she's planning on staying with her. Angie does not answer, but instead tells Marlene that the last time Marlene came to visit Angie and Joyce, one year ago, was "the best day of [Angie's] whole life." Marlene again asks Angie how long she's going to stay; Angie asks Marlene if she doesn't want her around, and says she won't stay if Marlene doesn't want her. Marlene says it's fine if Angie stays, and tells her not to get upset. Once more, Angie tells Marlene, "Don't worry about it."

In this passage, Marlene attempts to investigate Angie's coy and slightly strange behavior—but to no avail. As soon as Angie picks up on the fact that Marlene might not want her, she becomes upset, shifting the focus from whatever has happened at home with Joyce to Marlene's need to talk Angie down from the edge of a fit. Her secrecy about Joyce and her seeming disregard for her mother's concern is strange, and lets Marlene know that perhaps something is wrong back home. Given Angie's previously stated desire to kill her mother, her shiftiness where questions about Joyce are concerned is most worrisome to the audience.

A woman lets herself into Marlene's office. She apologizes for showing up unannounced, but insists she has to talk to Marlene right away. Marlene tells the woman she's busy, but the woman interrupts her. She introduces herself as Rosemary—Howard's wife. Marlene apologizes for not remembering Mrs. Kidd, as the women met some time ago. Marlene tells Mrs. Kidd that Howard should be in his office, but Mrs. Kidd says he isn't—it's not Howard she has come to see, but Marlene. She asks for just a minute or two of Marlene's time, as she must discuss with her "a matter of some urgency." Marlene agrees to hear Mrs. Kidd out.

Marlene is willing to give Mrs. Kidd the benefit of the doubt, in spite of Marlene's busy schedule and the fact that Angie has come for an unexpected visit. Marlene is a shrewd businesswoman, and surely doesn't enter into any interaction unless it either benefits her personally or piques her interest—perhaps she is hoping that this conversation with Mrs. Kidd will do both.

Mrs. Kidd tells Marlene that Howard has stayed home today—he is in "a state of shock about what's happened." When Marlene asks Mrs. Kidd to elaborate, the woman says she's referring to Marlene's promotion. As a result of Marlene securing the promotion over Howard, Howard hasn't slept in three nights. Marlene suggests Mrs. Kidd give Howard sleeping pills, and assures her he'll bounce back soon. Mrs. Kidd worries aloud to Marlene about what "working for a woman" will do to Howard. Marlene says Howard will just have to get over it. Mrs. Kidd replies that it is she who has to bear the brunt of Howard's despair—she has put her husband first every step of the way, and now he has been slighted for the sake of another woman's glory.

Mrs. Kidd's pleas to Marlene seem so over-the-top as to be ridiculous, but as the conversation goes on, it becomes clear that Howard and Mrs. Kidd do truly blame Marlene for Howard's failure. Howard's ego is so bruised by the fact that he has been passed over for a promotion, which was then given to a woman, that he has made himself physically ill, and literally cannot imagine returning to work in an environment in which he is even in title alone beholden to a woman.

Marlene says she's sorry Howard's been taking out his disappointment out on his wife—Howard "really is a shit." Mrs. Kidd replies that Howard has a family to support. Marlene wants to know if Mrs. Kidd is suggesting she give up the job to Howard—Mrs. Kidd says only that if Marlene were "unavailable after all for some reason," Howard would be "natural second choice." Mrs. Kidd asks Marlene not to tell Howard that she came to see Marlene. Marlene tries to get Mrs. Kidd to leave, but Mrs. Kidd keeps going, saying how things are "not that easy" for a "man of Howard's age." She calls Marlene a "ballbreaker," and warns her that she'll end up "miserable and lonely." Marlene tells Mrs. Kidd to piss off, and then Mrs. Kidd at last leaves.

When Mrs. Kidd realizes that her method of coercion and suggestion is not going to work, she turns on Marlene, calling her horrible names and blaming her outright for Howard's failure. Mrs. Kidd represents the scourge of internalized misogyny, and the ways in which it forces women to see other women only as competitors or traitors.

Angie tells Marlene that how she handled Mrs. Kidd was "wonderful." Marlene, exhausted, tells Angie that she has some work to do, and asks if Angie can come back later. Angie insists that she wants to stay in Marlene's office—it is "where [she] most want[s] to be in the world." Marlene leaves Angie in her office, and goes off to do some work.

Marlene seems anxious to get away from Angie for a bit, but for Angie, there is nowhere she would rather be than smack dab in the middle of Marlene's world.

In another part of the office, Nell interviews a young woman named Shona. Shona is, according to her paperwork, twenty-nine years old and earning well at her job. She answers Nell's questions vaguely—she wants a change of both product and area, and, at Nell's suggestion, says she'd be open to management status, but also expresses a desire to remain on the road as a salesgirl. Nell asks her how many sales calls she makes a day, and Shona answers six; when Nell asks how many of those are successful, she answers six again, but when Nell doubts her, she amends her answer to four. Nell asks if Shona is good at closing deals, and explains that potential employers often worry that women in particular are too "nice" to "push through to a closing situation."

When Nell tells Shona that potential employers don't want "nice" women, Churchill is examining how much women have been forced to sacrifice basic elements not just of femininity, but of humanity in general, in order to seem "strong enough" to participate in the male-dominated arena of business, finance, and other branches of the corporate world.

Based on Shona's answers and resume, Nell tells her she'd be suited for a high-profile job in video systems making a large salary. Nell then asks Shona to tell her a little bit more about herself, but Shona clams up. When Nell asks her to describe her present job, Shona talks about driving around in her Porsche, selling "electric things" across the countryside. She rambles and goes off on tangents, and talks about the expensive hotels she stays in at on her company's expense account. Nell realizes that Shona is lying about everything—she has never held a job in her entire life.

It is clear that Shona is so desperate to enter the workforce and succeed within the bounds of the patriarchy that she has fabricated an entire life for herself—a life that she believes will attract the right kind of attention and position her on a path to success. This demonstrates how cutthroat the world has become for women, and how often women are forced to change themselves to have even the slightest chance at success.

In the main office, Angie has sat herself down in Win's chair. Win introduces herself, and offers Angie some food, but Angie declines. Angie asks Win how long she's worked at **Top Girls**, and Win says she was headhunted from another office some time ago. Angie asks Win if she thinks Angie could work here—Win asks what skills she has. Angie admits she cannot type and does not have very impressive school marks.

Angie wants to work at Top Girls presumably because she wants to both get closer to and emulate Marlene. Angie, however, is unprepared to enter the workforce, and very far removed from Marlene's world.

Angie asks Win if she went to school, and Win begins telling Angie the story of her life. She describes how she has always been naturally talented at whatever job she undertakes, and has been "unpopular" all her life for this reason. She went to work in California, and then Mexico, to escape the "slow" atmosphere of England, but then "went bonkers for a bit" and had to enter psychiatric care. She married, but her husband is in prison, and she hardly ever sees him. She has found peace working at **Top Girls**, though, because she is able to offer her clients "hope."

Win's emotional rollercoaster of a success story leaves Angie physically exhausted. Win arrived at her current success via an unlikely route, but seems genuinely grateful for her job at Top Girls, and made happy by the chance she gets to offer women like her younger self—or perhaps like Angie—the chance to succeed.

Nell comes into the office, and points out that Angie has fallen asleep. Nell asks who Angie is, and Win tells her she is Marlene's niece. Nell comments that Marlene never talks about her family, and then asks Win if she heard that Howard had a heart attack. Win suggests they send flowers to the hospital. Marlene comes in, and Win asks if Marlene's heard the news; she calls Howard a "poor sod." Win tells Marlene that Angie wants to come work at **Top Girls**; Marlene says Angie could only ever be a packer in a grocery store. Win points out that Angie's a "nice kid," but Marlene replies that Angie is a little stupid, and a little odd. Win says that Angie thinks Marlene is "wonderful." Marlene replies flatly that Angie is "not going to make it."

This moment shows Marlene's utter lack of compassion for and interest in anyone other than herself. Angie clearly loves Marlene, and wants to be just like her. However, rather than extending tenderness, empathy, or help to Angie, Marlene dismisses her as stupid and strange, predicting that the girl—who is only sixteen, with so much life ahead of her still—will amount to nothing. Marlene's job has trained her to see people—women especially—only in terms of what they can achieve rather than what they are actually like, and this does not bode well for her relationship with Angie.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

The action flashes back to one year earlier; Marlene, Joyce, and Angie are in Joyce's kitchen. Marlene is pulling numerous presents out of a bag for Angie, saying she's brought "just a few little things." Angie opens one of her presents—the fancy dress from Act One. Angie is thrilled with it, and Joyce tells Angie to go to her room and try it on. Angie wants to open one of Joyce's presents, though; it is a bottle of perfume. Angie asks to put some perfume on, and encourages Joyce and Marlene to try some too so that they'll "all smell the same." She leaves, going up to her room to try on the dress.

In this scene, Churchill brings the narrative back to one year earlier, to allow her audience to take a look at the day that Angie described earlier as the best day of her whole life. Angie is clearly thrilled by the visit, and Marlene is using the opportunity both to lavish gifts on her sister and niece and show off how successful she has become. Angie is totally in Marlene's thrall, and is both hungry for her attention and impressed by her wealth. The Angie in this scene is much more outgoing and childlike than the Angie from the rest of the play, implying that something very painful or disorienting has happened to Angie between this moment and the events of the earlier scenes.

As soon as Angie is out of the room, Joyce chides Marlene for dropping in unannounced, but Marlene is surprised to hear that Joyce didn't know she was coming since Angie, over the phone, told Marlene that Joyce had asked for Marlene to come for a visit. Joyce is amused, and asks if Marlene ever wondered why Joyce wouldn't have called Marlene herself. Marlene replies that Angie said Joyce was shy on the phone and didn't like using it—Marlene protests that she didn't know any better, because she doesn't know what her sister is like in the first place. Marlene says, looking back, she had been surprised that Joyce wanted to see her. Joyce deadpans that she didn't want to see Marlene at all.

In the previous scene, Angie showed up to London unannounced to visit Marlene after dodging her mother's watchful eye. In this scene, it is still Angie who has orchestrated the surprise, but in reverse. Angie clearly knows that Joyce and Marlene do not get along well and do not want to see much of each other, yet her desire to have Marlene around is so strong that she has defied her mother and invited Marlene anyway.

Marlene offers to leave, but Joyce teases that she doesn't mind seeing Marlene now that she's here. She tells Marlene that she can come see Angie anytime she likes—Joyce won't stop her. Marlene is the one who went away—Joyce and Angie have always been in the same place.

In this passage, Joyce seems to absolve Marlene of the sin of abandonment—then right away turns around and points out, rather snidely, that Marlene's abandonment is never forgotten.

Angie comes back in wearing the dress, and Marlene compliments her on how pretty she looks. Joyce tells her to take it off so that she doesn't get it dirty. Angie protests that she wants to wear it, and Marlene remarks that "it is for wearing after all." Angie thanks Marlene profusely for the dress. Marlene asks Angie why she didn't tell Joyce she'd invited Marlene down, and Angie replies that she wanted the visit to be a surprise—she hasn't seen Marlene since she was nine years old. Marlene is shocked by how much time has gone by since her last visit.

Marlene has clearly been absent in Angie's life, and judging by her lack of awareness as to how much time has passed, it's evident that Angie is not one of her priorities. She is attempting to make up for it now through the lavish gifts, and Angie is falling for it, grateful for the attention and chance to partake of some of the luxuries that define Marlene's life.

Kit walks into the house "as if she lives there," inserting herself right into the action. Joyce introduces Kit to "Angie's Aunt Marlene." Kit seems uninterested in Marlene's presence, and instead asks Angie if she's going to come out to play. Angie says she isn't. Kit says the air in the room smells "horrible," and then leaves. Joyce tells Marlene that Kit is a little girl Angie plays with sometimes, and that the two are like sisters; she tells Marlene how good Angie is with little children. Marlene asks Angie if she would like to work with children when she gets older, as a teacher or nursery nurse. Joyce answers for Angie, saying that Angie hasn't thought of what she wants to do. Marlene presses Angie, but Joyce keeps answering for her, saying that Angie is not clever and hasn't thought at all about her future.

In this passage, Churchill shows how Marlene's preoccupation with success and corporate life has completely overtaken her world. When she hears that Angie is good with children, she immediately asks how Angie plans to monetize this "skill." Marlene can only think of even the most basic human traits in terms of their profitability and potential for engendering personal gain. Joyce's insistence that Angie hasn't thought about her future is both meant to call attention to this peculiar habit of Marlene's—and also to take a slight dig at Angie.

Marlene pulls a bottle of whiskey out of her bag, and though Joyce protests at first, she eventually gets some glasses down so the two can have a drink. Marlene recalls that the last time the two of them got drunk together was the night their father died. Joyce says that she still keeps the grave decorated with fresh flowers. Marlene asks if Joyce has seen their mother, and Joyce replies that she visits her every Thursday.

Joyce wants to make Marlene feel badly for abandoning her hometown, and so points out how loyal she is not just to their mother, who is still alive, but how loyal she is even to their father's memory.

Marlene asks Joyce to catch her up on all the neighborhood gossip—Angie is confused as the women trade stories from their own youth, and attempts to get Marlene to pay attention to her by reminding Marlene of her last visit, for Angie's ninth birthday. Angie asks if Marlene remembers the pink cake from the party, and recalls to herself that her own mother and father were there, along with Kit. Marlene asks where Angie's father is, and Joyce replies that he moved out three years ago. Angie is amazed that Marlene didn't know, and tartly states that Marlene doesn't know much of anything at all. Joyce states that Marlene was in America when Angie's father left, and Angie becomes excited, remembering that she has a postcard Marlene sent from the Grand Canyon in her room. She runs up to fetch it.

Angie clearly wants to be the sole focus of Marlene's attention. Marlene and Joyce, however, have their own relationship to attend to—there are a lot of things happening in Joyce's life that Marlene has, out of her own negligence, been ignorant of.

While Angie is out of the room, Joyce states that she doesn't know any of Marlene's business—so it's only fair that Marlene doesn't know any of hers. Angie returns with the postcard and reads from it excitedly. She asks if Marlene will take her to America; Joyce tells Angie that Marlene is not returning to America, and calls her "stupid." Angie asks Marlene to take her to America, becoming almost manic as she expresses her desire to be American. Joyce urges Angie to get to bed—Angie offers Marlene her own bed, saying she'll sleep on the sofa, but Marlene, too, ushers Angie up to bed. Angie tells Marlene that she has a secret to show her up in her room; Marlene tells her she'll be in to see her in a minute. Angie excitedly hurries to bed.

Joyce seems to actually want to keep her sister uninformed about the details of her life as retribution for Marlene's having moved away. Joyce sees Marlene's desire to leave her old life behind and pursue corporate and financial success as the ultimate betrayal—as a result, Joyce wants to keep Marlene in the dark about what is happening in her family. If Marlene doesn't have the time or patience—or decency—to check in with her family, Joyce reasons, she doesn't deserve to hear about them.

Joyce and Marlene talk idly about the weather and the neighborhood, and Joyce is a bit short with Marlene. Marlene tells Joyce she could have left town if she wanted to—Joyce replies she didn't want to. Joyce tells Marlene she picked an inconvenient time to show up, on a Sunday evening. Marlene begins telling Joyce that she got in to town earlier that morning, and spent the day otherwise engaged, but Angie's shouts cut her off. Marlene goes to Angie's room, leaving Joyce alone for a minute, and then comes right back.

The biggest rift in Joyce and Marlene's relationship, as Churchill will continue to demonstrate, is that Marlene chose to leave their hometown. Joyce now wants to prevent Marlene from having any point of reinsertion or any point of reconnection—and so Angie's affinity for Marlene gets under Joyce's skin.

Joyce asks Marlene what the secret was; Marlene replies that it's a secret. Joyce says she knows Angie and Kit have some "secret society"—Marlene teases Joyce for not knowing the "password." Joyce worries that Angie is "useless" at school, even though she spends hours and hours writing in her secret society notebook. Marlene thinks Angie might be developing a plot to "take over the world," but Joyce points out that Angie has been in remedial classes for two years now.

Joyce seems very worried about Angie, but Marlene seems to think that Angie is doing fine and just enjoying a normal girlhood. Of course, though, Marlene is not present in Angie's life, so she is blind to the ways in which Angie has struggled and suffered, and may actually be in danger of falling behind and getting stuck.

Marlene tells Joyce that she arrived in the country this morning, and spent the day visiting their mother in a neighboring town. Joyce asks if their mother recognized Marlene, and Marlene defensively states that she was "very lucid." Marlene comments on the "fucking awful life" their mother had, but Joyce tells Marlene to stop. Joyce points out that Marlene left home and went away, and doesn't get to comment on the people she left behind. Marlene states that their mother is not only Joyce's mother, and Angie is not only Joyce's child. She asks why she can't visit her own family without dredging up ill will. Joyce wants to avoid an argument, but asks Marlene not to comment on their mother's life when Marlene hasn't been to visit in so many years, while Joyce goes weekly.

In this passage, Marlene reveals that Angie is in fact her daughter. Despite her lack of desire to maintain any closeness with her family, Marlene feels she has the right to drop in when she feels like it, whereas Joyce believes that Marlene needs to give all or nothing, so to speak; she can't be an occasional presence in Angie's life, or in their mother's, because it is unfair and selfish to do so.

Marlene suggests that Joyce would feel better about things if she didn't go to visit their mother every week; Joyce states that Marlene couldn't get out of town fast enough. Marlene agrees, pointing out that she didn't want to stay and marry a working-class drunkard. Joyce says she can't believe Marlene went off and left her own child. Marlene points out that Joyce was "quick enough to take her." Joyce protests that she only took Angie because she didn't want her to go to an orphanage, or a stranger. Marlene suggests that Joyce, who had been unable to conceive in three years of marriage, got "lucky" when Marlene offered her Angie. Joyce comments that the deal worked out well for Marlene, too, who is able to hoard her salary rather than spending it on raising a child.

Marlene's ethos and approach to life is all about doing whatever makes one "feel" good. Joyce visits her mother weekly, selflessly showing up for her mother every chance she gets, while Marlene believes that it would be easier for Joyce to ignore their mother and focus on herself. Marlene's deep sense of individualism also applies to her treatment of Angie—whom she abandoned when she decided that it was more important to get out of her hometown than it was to fulfill her duties as a mother.

The two women argue back and forth about marriage and child-rearing; Marlene keeps insisting that she essentially did Joyce a favor by allowing Joyce to take Angie and raise her as her own. She asks if Joyce doesn't want Angie anymore, and offers to take her back to London this instant. Joyce says she of course wants Angie; Angie is her child.

Marlene is so deluded that she believes she did her sister a favor in saddling Joyce with her own unwanted child. Marlene does not see how selfish she is now, and has apparently never been able to see her selfish actions clearly, even years and years ago.

Joyce confesses that when Angie was six months old, she did become pregnant on her own—but she miscarried, because she was so exhausted and strung out from looking after the infant Angie, who cried nonstop. In response to this story, Marlene angrily retorts that she herself has had two abortions, but doesn't want to tell Joyce about them because "it's boring." She doesn't like "messy talk about blood" and "gynecology," she says, and she certainly doesn't want a baby.

Joyce attempts to talk to her sister about a painful, traumatic event that occurred in her life directly due to Marlene's influence. Marlene, however, wants to try to minimize her sister's pain, and so ridicules Joyce for starting a conversation about something so "messy" and embarrassing as "gynecology."

Marlene confesses that she was afraid of fighting with Joyce when she made plans to visit, and she breaks down in tears. Joyce attempts to cheer Marlene up, telling her she loves her. Marlene asks Joyce to let her cry—she likes crying. The two women laugh, and Marlene thanks Joyce earnestly for looking after Angie. Joyce tells Marlene she's drunk, and fixes her some tea. As she does, she concedes that their hometown is a "dump," and admits she understands why Marlene wanted to leave.

As their argument reaches a fever pitch, Marlene seems to realize she has overstepped a boundary—or, perhaps, as at the dinner party, she is merely drunk. Nevertheless, her breakdown allows for a genuine moment between the two sisters in which Joyce earnestly acknowledges Marlene's point of view, and validates her desire to seek something more than the lot she was born into.

Marlene asks Joyce what happened with her husband—Joyce reveals he was cheating on her incessantly, and she kicked him out. Marlene asks if Joyce's ex sends her money, but Joyce says she doesn't take his money, and instead has four cleaning jobs that help her support herself. Marlene asks if Joyce has taken up with anyone else, but Joyce says there aren't many options for her. Joyce asks Marlene about her job, and Marlene says it's a good one. Joyce asks Marlene if she's involved with anyone, but Marlene says no; every once in a while she goes out with "fellas who like to be seen with a high-flying lady," but finds that none of them can "take the day to day," and in the end always want her to "turn into the little woman."

Joyce and Marlene have very different concerns. Joyce is trying to support herself and her child by stretching herself thin and taking multiple low-paying jobs, whereas Marlene's largest concern is finding a man who will allow her to pursue her career above everything. Marlene will not be domesticated though—she does not want to return to the small life she worked so hard to escape.

Marlene predicts that despite her lack of romantic success, the eighties are going to be "stupendous"—she is going to rise "up up up," and the country's economy is going to get back on its feet thanks to Margaret Thatcher. Joyce urges Marlene to drink her tea and shut up. Marlene keeps going, though, saying it's "terrifico" that the UK has gotten its first woman prime minister. Joyce says that Margaret Thatcher is a terrible choice, and suggests that Marlene would have "liked Hitler if he was a woman." Marlene cruelly teases Joyce for "parrot[ing]" their father's working-class, anti-establishment values, never thinking for herself. "I believe in the individual," she says; "Look at me." Joyce replies stonily that she is looking at Marlene.

Marlene offers her tone-deaf prediction that the eighties are going to be an amazing and prosperous time. Joyce points out that there are serious social and political problems at stake—but because those issues benefit Marlene, and others of her class and social standing, she doesn't see them as things she needs to worry about. She believes in the tenets of Thatcherism—that everyone is responsible for themselves, and anyone who does not try to change their circumstances is lazy, idiotic, or a failure.

Marlene urges Joyce to stop quarreling with her over politics. Joyce, though, doesn't want for Marlene to blame everything on their father, who "work[ed] in the fields like an animal." Marlene states that their father was an abusive drunk, but Joyce excuses his behavior by pointing out how terrible both their parents' lives were—they didn't get to go to America "and drive across it in a fast car." Marlene accuses Joyce of being jealous of her, but Joyce expresses contempt for Marlene's high-class lifestyle and says she's "ashamed" of having a sister who thinks of nothing but herself.

Marlene and Joyce see their shared childhood very differently. Joyce understands that their parents had certain problems due to the restrictions and limitations of their financial and social standing; Marlene is unable to see why her parents didn't try to advance out of their low position and try to make successful lives for themselves. Marlene is blind to the ways in which people suffer and struggle due to societal issues rather than personal failings.

Marlene asks if Joyce is going to accuse her of hating the working class, and then outright admits that she does. Joyce retorts that she "spit[s] when [she] see[s] a Rolls Royce," and scratches up nice cars with her ring. The women berate one another's lifestyles, talking over one another until Marlene at last states loudly that she doesn't believe in class. She thinks that "anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes," and if they're "stupid or lazy or frightened," it shouldn't be up to her to help them get a job.

As the sisters argue viciously and disparage the social class to which the other belongs, Churchill demonstrates the deep animosity class issues engender, even between people who come from the same family and the same background. Marlene's politics are in direct conflict with how Joyce lives her life—and Joyce's ideology threatens to reveal how damaging Marlene's way of life is.

Joyce asks what Marlene would do about Angie, then, who is "stupid, lazy, and frightened." Marlene assures Joyce that Angie will be all right, but Joyce says she doesn't think she will be. She predicts that Angie's children—if she has children—will one day talk about what a "wasted life" she had, because nothing in their country has changed since their parents' generation, and certainly won't under Thatcher.

This passage seems to directly inform the statement Marlene will make about Angie one year from now, when she tells her coworkers that Angie is "not going to make it." Joyce planted the seed of that thought in Marlene's head by pointing out that Marlene's own daughter is the very things Marlene purports to despise—dull, lazy, frightened, and unmotivated to change her station in life.

Marlene asks Joyce if they can stop fighting—she says she "didn't really mean" any of what she said. "I did," Joyce retorts. Marlene asks if they can be friends anyway, and Joyce says she doesn't think they can be. Marlene remarks that it is "lovely to be out in the country," and then says she wants to go to sleep. Joyce gathers up some blankets for Marlene to use on the sofa, and then goes up to bed.

Things are so easy for Marlene in her life back in London that she thinks the same rules apply to her anywhere she goes. She doesn't understand that her statements and actions have consequences, and that in trying to prove her rightness she has alienated her sister even further, and possibly ruined their relationship beyond repair at last.

Marlene wraps herself in a blanket, sits on the couch, and has another drink. After a moment, Angie walks in, calling for her mother. Marlene asks Angie what the matter is, and Angie again asks for her mother. Marlene tells Angie that Joyce has gone to bed, and reminds Angie that she is only her "Aunty Marlene." "Frightening," Angie says. Marlene asks if Angie had a bad dream, and reassures her that everything is okay now—she's awake. "Frightening," Angie says once again.

This passage seems to reveal that Angie has heard the entirety of Joyce and Marlene's long, painful conversation. Angie now knows the truth about her parentage. When she is calling "mum," she is not calling for Joyce, but rather addressing Marlene as "mum" for the first time ever. Angie's dull, flat delivery of the word "frightening," again and again, seems to suggest that this is the moment when Angie became angry, withdrawn, and "frightening" herself.

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