

**A LEVEL**  
*Teacher Guide*

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

H459  
For first teaching in 2016

## Cloud Nine – Caryl Churchill

Version 1





# Cloud Nine

*by Caryl Churchill*

**Caryl Churchill's play about sexual/gender politics, identity and repression, set in Victorian colonial Africa and London a hundred years later where characters have aged 25 years.**

## Summary

In her introduction to her play, Caryl Churchill writes that it was written for the Joint Stock Theatre in 1978-79 and followed their usual practice of workshopping from research and ideas the ensemble had done on a given topic, but neither the characters nor story.

After a workshop on sexual politics which came to include gender politics, Churchill wrote what she said wouldn't have been the same play without that approach. It's helpful to know that in order to make sense of the structure.

The first act takes place in colonial Africa, where Clive, a Victorian white gentleman is busy sorting out local troubles – from discontent among the native tribes around them to problems in his own household. These include his bored wife Betty, his effeminate son Edward and the native house servant, Joshua.

The introduction explains which characters are played by actors of the opposite sex and why. The struggle to maintain a lifestyle that he understands and craves where men are in charge and everyone is in his or her natural place, drives Clive during the first act.

An explorer Harry Bagley arrives as does Mrs Saunders, a neighbour and widow looking for protection. She has a sexual relationship with Clive, which again accords with his view of the world with him as head of the family.

Some of the restless natives are flogged, which has both a sexual undertone and an assertion of the male, white authority. The main characters' sexuality is explored and there is a clear suggestion that the boy Edward is gay. Harry makes a pass at Clive which shocks and offends him and leads him to wanting to marry Harry off to Mrs Saunders.

There is a rebellion and wide unrest outside the house and its presence is felt within. Joshua loses his parents at the hands of British troops and as the Act ends Joshua raises a gun to shoot Clive.

Act Two is set a hundred years later, in a London familiar to a contemporary audience and played by actors some of whom have changed roles. From the outset, sex is centre stage, beginning with a monologue from Gerry, Edward's lover, about a gay encounter on a train.

This act is more about the power of women with lesbianism replacing the homosexuality as the running theme of the previous act. On the surface, as it is set in a London park where family history and current issues are worked through, all appears like a family drama.

But although it is a century later than Act One, only twenty five years have elapsed in character terms, so there is a need to keep sense of place and time as the drama unfolds – a briefly lost child, relationship ending, a ceremony for a sex goddess, an orgy and an appearance of a dead soldier.

There is resolution of sorts to conclude the play as the past meets the present – a new Betty is embraced by the Betty from Africa.



## The author and her influences

See the point about socialism and her background below to understand what, as a feminist, socialist writer, Caryl Churchill was influenced by. It should also be remembered that Churchill herself resolutely refuses to speak about meanings in and behind her works, leaving that to others.

Critics often argue that Churchill was most influenced by a political imperative and cite 'Cloud Nine' (identity politics), 'Top Girls' (Thatcherism) and 'Serious Money' (The City of London) as evidence to support that line.

Some disagree and argue that her pre-1975 work and her 1990s' work following the ending of collaboration with Max Stafford-Clark of the Royal Court Theatre indicate more that she is a wider writer, influenced by imagination and politics but not in such a narrow doctrinal way as suggested by just three plays.

Recent work has used texts, dance and music in a mixed theatre with greater use of space and the poetry of language, although that has always been a feature.

The play publisher Nick Hern has said that her plays just turn up to him by email these days and her work isn't premeditated or planned, 'it's scratching an itch.' He says he has no idea what they will be about.

So, given that and her political background and her commitment to women's issues, what are the main influences?

With a background in theatrical terms of acting herself, so like many successful playwrights (Alan Ayckbourn, Harold Pinter) she writes with complete understanding of stage craft and what works on stage. Yet at the same time she is inventive and innovative – no play of hers is quite like another.

Probably her biggest dramatic influence is Brecht, particularly his ways of opening up political consciousness through his theories and his own stage writing.

If we take some of Brecht's unique fingerprints and locate them in 'Cloud Nine', we will see the point, but it should be noted that she does not fit a Brechtian template in every respect.

There is multi-roling on a large scale, which in this case includes gender swapping. Brecht believed in the distancing of his actors who demonstrated a part rather than going deeply into it, and that is the case with this play.

There is a strong political message. Brecht wanted his audiences to be so stirred by a play that they left yearning to do something about the issue, to change the world. 'Cloud Nine' has many such didactic messages about repression, equality, identity and power, yet a subtle change of attitude is being asked for in an audience rather than a violent revolution against a world view.

The play is a representation of reality, not reality itself. The constructed nature of the event communicates a sense that the audience's reality is also constructed and can therefore be changed. This is a form of 'epic theatre.'

The scene settings are described and there are some props, but there is a sparseness of setting, a sense that the priorities are not the fringes of theatrical staging but the essentials of the language, in the style of Brecht.

The OCR Topic Exploration Pack on Brecht has useful introductory exercises and ideas. <http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/233363-brecht-topic-exploration-pack.pdf>

The OCR Topic Exploration Pack on Caryl Churchill which was written to support the teaching of the legacy OCR GCE Performance Studies specification may be worth reading at this point.

<http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/260990-caryl-churchill-topic-exploration-pack.pdf>

## Exploring the play

### The characters

The first issue to get to grips with is the gender swapping in playing most of the characters. Churchill's notes are helpful and she gives specific instructions that Betty in Act One must be played by a man, Edward in Act One by a woman and Cathy by a man. The soldier and Cathy should be the same actor.

Beyond that, Churchill says that while the doubling of Mrs Saunders and Ellen is not to make a point but 'for fun', other doublings are left to each production to decide. While actors get used to it during rehearsals, it requires concentration and the suspension of disbelief from the audience.

### Clive

Described as a 'colonial administrator', a civil servant, he is one of many who were sent to organise the British Empire along the lines of the Mother Country with British laws, justice and attitudes imposed on native cultures.

He is a stereotypical white, heterosexual man with an important job and position in society with no understanding of gender-issues outside the 'norm' in a time when homosexuality was a crime, punishable by imprisonment.

He is a man in denial about his son, Edward, about his friend Harry, his wife and above all, about the future end of the British Empire. He appears only briefly at the end of the second act, but his legacy survives in his wife, daughter and son.

### Betty

Clive's wife, played by a man in Act One, 'because she wants to be what men want her to be.' Churchill tells us that she doesn't value herself as a woman but by the end of the second act 'becomes real to herself.'

### Joshua

The black servant who must be played by a white man – 'he wants to be what whites want him to be.' This is a comment on the black servant role in a white hierarchy running a black country, particularly as he is far from subservient and even aims a gun at his boss.

### Edward

Clive and Betty's son, played by a woman in Act One aged 9 and a man in Act Two. He is the boy who plays with a doll when a child, much to the annoyance of Clive and who is openly gay in Act Two.





### **Maud**

Betty's mother, Clive's mother-in-law, representing the morals and behaviour of an older, more Victorian generation, tempered with a weary sense of the reality of white people living in Africa.

### **Ellen**

Edward's governess, a job that was needed because white children were generally educated privately at home unless they lived in a large British community when a school might be run for them. She is in love with Betty, yet marries Harry.

### **Mrs Caroline Saunders**

A widow young enough to be sexually active who appears to enjoy toying with Clive's feelings for her. She is certainly not the stereotypical Victorian woman too afraid to do anything without the approval of a man.

### **Harry Bagley**

An explorer, he plays along with Betty's infatuation with him. He is gay which is shown by his invitation to Joshua to go in the barn, his relationship with the boy Edward and his approach to Clive. He is persuaded to marry Ellen to give him an outward respectability.

### **Victoria**

Betty's daughter, appears as a dummy in Act One aged 2; a young mother in Act Two where her dual relationship with Martin her husband and father of her child and the lesbian Lin are central.

### **Martin**

Victoria's husband and Betty's son-in-law. Comes across as weak and ineffectual in the face of more powerful women.

### **Lin**

Appears only in Act Two, a lesbian mother who befriends Victoria in the park and has a relationship with her and Edward that is far from conventional.

### **Cathy**

Lin's daughter aged four and then five and played by a man.

### **Gerry**

Edward's lover, of indeterminate age. A cold and distant man.

## The plot

### Act One

Scene One is immediately set with the Union Flag over the family on the evening veranda as they proudly sing 'Sons of England' praising Queen Victoria and the British Empire. Clive introduces his family directly to the audience, including Joshua, 'you'd hardly notice that the fellow's black' yet he's played by a white man. He says 'My skin is black but oh my soul is white.'

It is generally thought this opening is parody, poking fun at Victorian British convention and tradition.

We see that Edward is finding it 'rather hard' to be what his father wants. Clive's daughter Victoria is a dummy and he dismisses his mother-in-law and female governess lightly – he is a man's man but in an entirely straight way.

As Clive talks to Betty with a drink in his hand, we learn that the native drums she heard in the day are 'nothing serious' but he is more concerned that he has a blister from his boots. 'We are not in this country to enjoy ourselves' speaks of duty and obligation of the administrative role.

He asks what his 'little dove' has done today in a patronising manner and is told she has read poetry and played the piano. He tells her they have a visitor coming, Harry Bagley, the explorer, who she claims is a heavy drinker and a 'bit of a bore.'

She is clearly bored with her life with only Ellen the governess and her mother Maud for company when he's away. She has fears about Joshua the servant, who she says is rude to her, citing that he'd said 'you've got legs under that dress' when asked to fetch a book for her.

Clive half-heartedly reprimands Joshua with a wink behind Betty's back. The children are brought to Clive so he can hear about their day and we see Edward is holding Victoria's doll which Clive doesn't feel is right, though the boy says he is looking after it for her.

We learn that Ellen has a friendship with Betty but knows her place as the governess, which is a contrast to the Joshua situation of not knowing his place as a servant. Bagley's visit is at least something to break the boredom. Maud tells Betty she has made a good marriage to Clive but she must learn to be patient.

Clive comes with Mrs Saunders on his arm saying that she has been very brave in riding alone to them for protection and Maud confirms that the drums meant trouble for them all. Clive won't admit to the women there is any danger and explains Mrs Saunders' arrival as her just wanting the company of white women.

Mrs Saunders either is confused in her distress or pretends to be; but she has a gun. Clive introduces her to Bagley, who displays obvious fondness (with just a question hanging over him at this point about his sexual intentions) for the boy Edward.



Clive and Harry talk man to man about the situation, that the locals are affectionate but 'can be cruel.' They are, in fact, 'savages.' Clive decides they should sleep with guns to hand and Joshua says he will pray, 'Jesus will protect us.'

Harry and Betty talk and he doubts if she is happy, but she doesn't engage him in that conversation, although he says, 'I want you' and goes to embrace her, but she leaves. Joshua emerges from the side and Harry immediately suggests they go in the barn for sex, 'it's not an order', in a tone that means it is. Joshua agrees.

The second scene sees Clive and Mrs Saunders talking away from the house, he admitting that he wants her sexually ever since he had her some time previously. While he talks, he gets closer and puts his head, then all of him, under her skirt. She wishes she didn't enjoy it because she doesn't like him.

They all have a Christmas picnic, Clive pops champagne which Edward wants to use to toast Queen Victoria and they open crackers. The men play ball with the children but Edward can't catch and Clive says he'll be no good at cricket, which is a cause for concern for an Englishman. He dismisses the idea Edward might be upset with, 'a boy has no business having feelings.'

During hide and seek, Harry says he admires Clive's work for the Empire and Joshua confides that 'his people' are not to be trusted and carry knives as well, and hints that Betty likes Harry. There is a brief moment when Harry is asked by Betty, 'shall we run away together?' Maud also has noticed the fondness between them.

In case they are attacked by the natives, Edward asks to stay in Harry's room and shares a dark dream with the explorer before giving him a necklace he found in his mother's jewel box. Harry thanks him but tells him to put it back.

It's clear that although Edward is only nine now, he and Harry did something together when Harry visited before. Edward's homosexuality is developing rapidly.

Betty confides in Ellen that she loves Harry and wants to run off with him, which leads Ellen to make a pass at Betty. Joshua then entertains them with a Christmas carol 'In the Deep Midwinter', alien to both his culture and the African climate.

Scene Three is inside the house, the blinds drawn. Outside we learn that some natives are being flogged, which the women wonder about, never having seen it. It's part of the order of things, so cannot be changed, but Mrs Saunders doesn't approve.



Edward has watched the flogging but comes in having seen enough. Maud warns Betty about being on her own if her marriage fails when Edward is caught playing with the doll again. When told he won't grow up like his papa, retorts, 'I hate Papa.' He is slapped by his mother and Ellen for that.

There is a symbolism in Edward being slapped while the natives are flogged, implying Edward is a 'savage' for being drawn to men.

When Joshua appears, Mrs Saunders wants to know if he hit his own people, but he says they're not his people. Edward confesses to Clive he was playing with the doll and gets the lecture about respecting his elders and betters.

In a shared moment, Clive explains to Betty the justification for flogging the natives, his 'enemy', as a lead in to hinting he knows there is something between her and Harry. She confesses and he states that 'women can be treacherous and evil', forgetting his own recent betrayal with Mrs Saunders.

Edward retrieves the doll and is called sissy by Joshua; Edward plays the man by ordering Joshua to obey what his mother has asked of him. The scene ends with a song, typical of the Brechtian style, 'A Boy's Best Friend'.

Scene Four is on the veranda in the morning. Joshua tells Edward a story from his own culture about the 'great goddess' at the beginning of the world, but claims the problems for all men began with Eve in the Adam and Eve story.

Harry explains to Edward about the trouble they had last night from the natives and asks if he'd like to be a soldier, but he just wants to go off with Harry, exploring. There is another moment for Ellen to tell Betty she wants to be with her as she loves her eternally.

Harry apologises to Clive about Betty; Clive says their friendship will not be ruined, 'friendship between men is the ... noblest form of relationship.' This leads Harry to make a pass at Clive which shocks him and makes him feel 'contaminated' as the 'perversion' is 'not a sin, it is a disease.' He believes effeminacy is contagious which is why he's so hard on Edward. He demands Harry gets married to save himself.

Harry asks Mrs Saunders at once. She declines, telling him she's just seen Joshua mourning his parents who were killed by British soldiers in the trouble last night. Clive's 'sympathy' extends to offering Joshua a day off to go to his people, (and is told that Clive is 'mother and father' to him) before demanding Joshua serve him a drink.

The scene ends with Harry asking Ellen to marry him and her suggesting that she may.

The final scene of the act is set on the veranda for Ellen and Harry's wedding with a cake and glasses. Joshua takes the doll from Edward and cuts it with the cake knife so the stuffing pours out. To get him into trouble, Edward accuses Joshua of stealing Betty's necklace but the boy hid it, pretending he was guarding it.

Ellen asks Betty for advice about being with a man and is told to 'just keep still' because 'you're not getting married to enjoy yourself.'

Mrs Saunders announces she is returning to England and is kissed by Clive. Betty 'launches herself' on the woman in a fight separated by Harry and Clive. Mrs Saunders is ordered to leave; Betty and Clive feel closer.

The damaged doll is discovered and Edward accuses Joshua again (rightly, this time) and is slapped for it. Clive makes a speech of joy during which Joshua takes aim at him with a gun; only Edward notices.

He says nothing.





## Act Two

A hundred years later, twenty five years of their lives later, Scene One starts with a monologue about casual sex on a train from Gerry, Edward's gay lover.

The action moves to a children's play area in a park on a winter day, with Victoria, now a mother, Lin another mum and Cathy her daughter aged four, reciting nursery rhymes and refusing to paint. While children play, Lin talks and comes round to asking Victoria out to a movie.

Cathy has acquired a boy's gun and is told by mum Lin to 'kill him' as she plays; the two discuss giving kids toy guns when Lin says she has a brother in the army in Belfast. This was during the time of sectarian violence across Northern Ireland when troops from mainland Britain served, attempting to keep the peace.

Lin and Victoria exchange information about their husbands (Lin's left her) and she admits she is a 'men-hating' lesbian. The adult Edward – now the park gardener - arrives and says to Victoria their mum is in the park and Lin says to Edward she knows he's gay. He is afraid of losing his job over it.

Betty, now the mum/grandmother comes in and reports a fight between the kids and drones on telling her about African life, about Edward as a gardener, and that she is going to leave his father ... so we know that Joshua didn't kill Clive in Act One.

Rather than talk about that, Betty prattles on and gives the child Cathy her necklace (from Act One) and her hat and earrings which causes some chaos, paralleling the doll with Edward in Act One, except Cathy is exhibiting signs of wanting to look feminine, not masculine.

Victoria and Edward start to absorb the news of their parents' separation when Lin asks Victoria to have sex with her.

Scene Two is a spring day in the park with Edward gardening and Gerry sitting on a bench discussing last night when Gerry didn't come home which upset Edward.

Victoria walks with Betty and with the child Tom in the distance. Betty is anxious in case Tom falls in the duck pond and further displays a general inability to cope well with her life now.

Martin has a monologue addressed to Victoria revealing his own insecurities in his marriage including their sex life, broken by dialogue between Lin, Cathy and Betty. Martin

gets into a long complaint about the problem for men trying to please women sexually as well as themselves.

Betty and Lin exchange views about husbands and living alone which highlights their differences in backgrounds and experiences besides the generational gaps between them. This issue of the ways we are brought up is further exploited when Lin threatens her child Cathy for throwing stones at the ducks, with 'the man's going to get you.'

We now learn that Lin's brother has been killed in Belfast but because she is anti-military her father doesn't want her to go to the funeral. The increasingly poor mother-daughter relationship between Lin and Cathy is displayed. Then they realise they have, through talking, misled Tommy.

There is more domesticity between Edward and Gerry, with Edward 'getting like a wife,' which he doesn't mind. He wants to marry Gerry; Gerry wants his freedom.

Edward, alone, is joined by his sister Victoria and he says that he'd rather be a woman, 'I think I'm a lesbian.'

Scene Three is a summer night in the park with Victoria, Lin and Edward engaged in a ritual of some paganistic, primitive, age-old chanting and incantation to the 'Goddess of many names' who 'created life.' A female God, in effect.

Edward is described as drunk, but still contributes thoughts of self-abasement and destruction, of castration and death. Martin approaches them whereupon they grab him as in an orgy and a stranger appears.

It's Lin's brother, the dead soldier, looking for sex. He grumbles about army life before they all amble off, still drunk. Gerry appears and talks about sex. The boy Edward

from Act One appears and says the same things he said to Harry and everyone sings the 'Cloud Nine' song.

Scene Four is late summer, afternoon, with a sense of finality. Edward is looking after Tommy and Cathy since Victoria and Lin are together. Martin is to look after both children and asks if Tommy still wets the bed. Betty has got herself a receptionist job. In fact, Edward is part of the Victoria-Lin domesticity too and they all sleep together.

There is a wrap-up duologue between Edward and Gerry and an appearance of Harry, Maud and Ellen from Act One. Betty has a monologue about masturbation and suggests living in a house with Victoria, Edward, Lin and Cathy.

The little girl is attacked by the Dead Hand gang, a bunch of rough boys, despite Martin supposedly looking after her. When he is criticised he says all he wants is his own Tommy, not Lin's girl.

There is a touching dialogue between Gerry and Betty which Betty pushes on with despite (generational) awkwardness. Above all, she confesses to not understanding Edward. The final word goes to Clive speaking about his wife Betty, leaving young Betty from Act One to embrace old Betty from Act Two.

Put in terms of simply recounting what happens, the play may seem confusing and sex-driven. It's necessary to unpick it, bearing in mind that it is about sexual and gender politics, unashamedly, and that Churchill is regarded as a feminist playwright.

There are some taster clips from 'Cloud Nine' on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cl2wJMJ8ofg>



## Key themes

### Politics

Caryl Churchill was born in 1938 to a cartoonist and film actress so had early exposure to art in its widest sense. She is generally regarded as a life-time socialist so that doctrine would be her first and longest influence.

Socialism is a political/economic philosophy which argues for the collective ownership (usually the state) of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Feminism is a doctrine which advocates equal rights for women. It's fair to call Caryl Churchill a radical, socialist feminist.

This is not to make any particular point beyond accepting that the mindset informs and underpins much of her dramatic writing, certainly from 1975 on. 'Objections to Sex and Violence' in that year tackled themes of sexual repression and femininity which emerged later in 'Cloud Nine' (1979).

It is not the case that feminism entirely focussed the approach she took to the writing. With a more general notion of sexual repression felt by men, women and children, the workshops with Joint Stock theatre explored this widely before her actual writing began.

### Colonialism

This term means a land occupied by others who run it as a distant part of their own country. The British Empire during the reign of Queen Victoria (1819 - 1901) had become described by the phrase, 'the sun never sets on it', as at some part of every 24 hours it was daylight over at least one point of the Empire – it was that widespread across the globe.

Clive, his family and their lifestyle represent that in every way. They are determined to uphold their empire, even if it means flogging the 'savages' and killing locals who rebelled against their rule.

By 1979 when we are into Act Two, British colonialism had almost gone, but Churchill makes the point that other forms of repression remained. Certainly the movement to liberalise the sexual equality laws which made it a criminal offence to be homosexual was growing and gaining support.

There were some years to go before acceptance and equal gay marriage, but the gay movement was becoming accepted within what was called the 'cultural landscape' making full acceptance a matter of time. Divorce was easier and more accepted than it had been

decades earlier and cohabitation was on the road to becoming normal and widely practised.

### Sex

The play is full of sex, sexual suggestion and multi-partnered sexual relationships with a relentless sexuality that drives the characters and the story. One of the hallmarks of the Victorian era was their hypocrisy in being prudish on the surface (covering piano legs as too provocative and enforcing a tight moral code of respectability), while condoning widespread prostitution and abuse of women and children and ignoring the misdemeanours of the great and good.

The sex is heterosexual, gay and bisexual (Harry, for example) and it is honest to the point of being shocking, even in the 1980s. It is about sexual politics, gender politics and identity politics too.

It is interesting how she treats the consequences of sex – ie. children. Both the Act One Edward (9) and the Act Two Cathy (4/5) are forward and knowing beyond their years. This may be deliberate as a way of making the point that children shouldn't be repressed any more than adults.

### Gender

In acting terms, male and female actors can swap roles readily. In contemporary theatre this is quite normal and is not always simply done for humour.

Equally, racial blindness is the order of the day, partly in a conscious attempt to avoid labelling all villains one colour, all heroes another as the 'black hat' and 'white hat' code in the early movies did.

Churchill probably intended the swapped gender roles to be both comic and to make a point about repression.

### Society

This play sheds light on the Victorian heterosexual patriarchal society of quite narrow-minded provincialism, headed by Clive, one which the young Edward knew he did not wish to be part of. Later, Edward also does not play along with society's 'norms' and ends up living in every sense with his sister and her female lover in a house where two children live.

Any disapproval is generally confined to the Act One characters, with the elder Maud doing her best to manipulate things so that marriages stay together and society's codes are kept intact.

In the second act, Betty has become the elder voice who does finally embrace more modern, open relationship



thinking but nonetheless cannot escape her background and wants things to be 'normal.'

It would be fair to argue that besides sexual equality and feminism, Churchill argues for social reform too.

### Power

The play is about power. Certainly sexual power is one aspect. When Harry, the dominant white man, asks Joshua, the subservient black man, to go in the barn with him, he is exercising sexual power, using/abusing his status.

When Clive insists on touching and carrying out a sexual act on Mrs Saunders, it is his power of masculinity over femininity, as their social statuses were equal. Harry quickly persuaded Ellen to marry him, as he was her superior in the social scale and this is despite her secret passion for Betty.

Joshua's power is secret and subversive. He disobeys while maintaining the loyalty of Clive for a long time. He raises a gun at Clive, an act of supreme disobedience and, if he had pulled the trigger, the ultimate exercise of power – to kill someone. As Joshua is played by a white man, it is a further comment on the white/black, ruler/ruled stereotypes of the era.

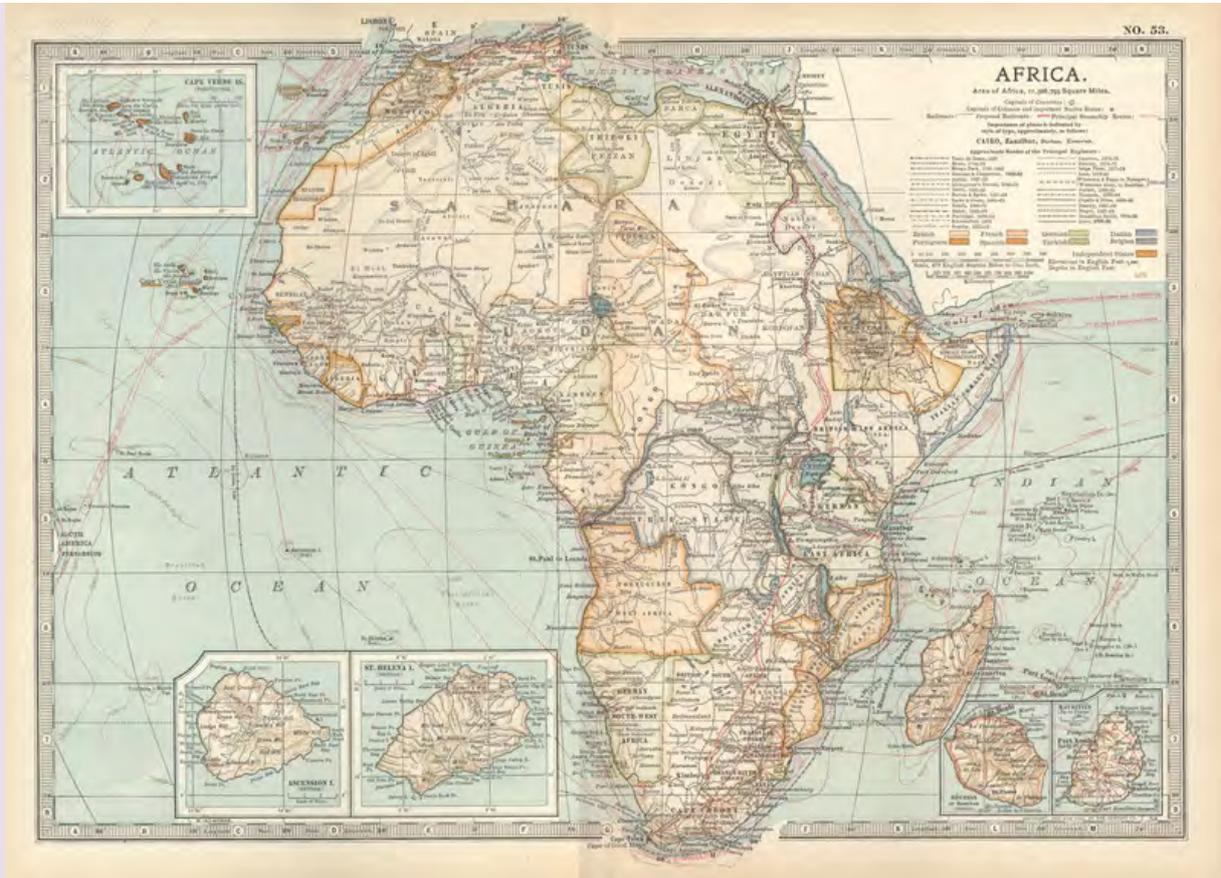
By the second act, the power is exerted differently. Martin is the weaker partner in his marriage with Victoria; Lin is the dominant role in her relationship with Victoria. Clive is the husband being ditched by Betty and we scarcely see him.

### Stereotypes

Churchill has not presented us with characters who are particularly stereotypical; there are shades of meaning and depth, although in a Brechtian style, yet they are not deeply drawn, psychological characters.

The British Empire outpost is a stereotypical one with natives fighting for their freedom, indirectly threatening poor Mrs Saunders who comes scurrying for white safety, with some dying at the hands of the British army.

Joshua who has supposedly denied his black roots, loses both parents and is offered a day off, and that's all, while he grieves from the stereotypical white man role of stiff upper lip and the work of Empire having to go on.



## Shock

Whether shock can be regarded as a theme is a matter of debate about how far a writer like Churchill, with her known influences and works, can be said to deliberately aim to shock audiences.

The themes of illicit/illegal sex, the 'unnatural perversions' of non-heterosexual activity and some of the language used will certainly shock some.

Can it be justified in order to convey a message and make a point? That is a debate worth having as a class exercise once the play has been read.

## Performance characteristics and staging requirements of the text

### Post Modernism

Churchill is listed among postmodern practitioners, those from the 1960s on who explored through their creative arts a view that explanations, truths and certainties are not equally valid for everyone. They felt (and indeed, do still feel) that interpretation is everything; there are no fixed rules.

The movement has no central hierarchy or organising principles so often it's a concoction of confusions, ambiguities and contradictions. It rejects grand narratives and sweeping themes. Some have criticised it as 'anything goes' in art, theatre, music, architecture, painting, film, literature and philosophy.

Other descriptive terms of the movement can be applied to 'Cloud Nine', such as:

- Parody and satire. Certainly Act One parodies the culture and values of the British Empire.
- Fractured time. With the 100 years between the acts and only twenty five years passing in the characters' lives.
- Juxtaposition. Putting together unlikely elements, such as the dead soldier in Act Two and cross-gender casting is present throughout.
- Non-linear narrative. Although this has a sense of natural time passing, the staging across a century with the potential to reverse the order of the acts conforms to postmodernism style
- Unpredictability. This is in the way the sexuality of the characters cannot be taken for granted, except from Clive, as in Harry's case.

There is more information about this art form at 'Postmodernism Can be Both Bewildering and Inspiring' <http://www.davidporter.co.uk/2011/06/postmodernism-can-be-both-bewildering-and-inspiring/>

## Collaboration

Churchill has worked collaboratively with Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment, for example, writing plays from out of the process of discussing and improvising with actors

and directors. Once this had gone on for some time, perhaps several weeks, Churchill formalised much of the devising into a script.

This realism, arrived at through the process, is evident in her writing, so how far that comes across in performance is an issue of performance characteristics.

Her work is also surrounded by the fact that she has had experience as an actor herself so her work has an authenticity which makes it fresh and real for audiences.

### Staging requirements

Each scene has staging instructions about entrances and exits, a large amount of details for the actors, such as Clive winking to Joshua behind Betty's back, which make staging it relatively straightforward.

The scenes are on the veranda, indoors, in the park and the seasons are mentioned for each scene as the narrative progresses, as is the time of day. If lights are to be used, they would be simple to apply in this script.

### Brechtian

To perform in a Brechtian style with minimal props/costumes, multi-roling even more than Churchill has suggested, more direct address and a 'gestus' approach to acting (gesture and attitude suggest actors are merely demonstrating their parts) would be a directorial decision.

The play could equally be played in a conventional theatrical setting of proscenium arch or thrust stage.

### Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

#### The reverse of genders

This is a comic theatrical device (as in pantomime or Jean Genet's 'The Maids'), and is meant to show that the actors will look and often behave in contrasting ways from the characters they are playing.

It also makes a general point about gender stereotyping – why should a male role not be played by a woman; a black role played by a white person and vice versa? Further, it is a way of tackling sexual repression and pressure to conform to society's and other people's values.

It foreshadows the gender confusions and mash up to come in the play, understood by a contemporary audience and may also suggest that the characters are often confused, cut off from the guidelines of life that they think they want and need.

### The message

While Churchill's play is raising awareness in a powerful way about gender, repression, individualism and sexual liberation, there is a danger in seeing it as simply a piece of agit-prop (theatre which agitates for political change).

It's a powerful piece of stagecraft that has the power to make people think, that is funny, shocking, outrageous and disturbing in almost equal measure.

### Analysis

This play is not simply a text on a page. Students will have to analyse it and at the same time appreciate its dramatic potential when realised into an actual performance.

### Contexts

Despite it being from the late 1970s, it is close to a contemporary play. However, students will need to be aware of social, cultural, historical and political contexts around the Victorian era and the late 20th century, in terms of the following areas of life:

- Sex and morality.
- Public perception.
- Roles and gender identities.
- Public life.
- Public duty versus private desires.
- Love and sex.

### How to approach essay questions in the exam

The exam paper will ask questions about directorial decisions for staging this text. Students will be assessed through their knowledge and understanding of how theatre is created on stage. They will be asked to annotate an extract and, for example, direct its comic or characterising or messaging effect, depending on the extract.

The essay question in the sample paper asks how particular technology or staging techniques could be integrated into a contemporary performance.

Students will need specific and accurate applications of technical/specialist vocabulary together with well justified directorial realisations of the play in performance.

They will need in-depth knowledge of the complete text and be able to provide directorial suggestions for set design, costume, visual aspects as well as performance skills.

## Activities

### 1. Explorations of characters

#### (i). Clive

In groups, create a scene in which a man is the head of a contemporary dysfunctional family. Ask students then to develop this back in time to an earlier period when the head of the family was obeyed, and to a large degree respected, as his role gave him authority.

Discuss what tensions there must have been then as now if life was still run like that. In some cultures, that is the way it is done – a patriarchal authority that may not be readily questioned or challenged.

Analyse the opening scene of Act One to identify the phrases that Clive uses and how those from Betty and Edward are presented in terms of what Clive wants.

#### (ii) Betty in Act Two

In groups devise two scenes of a lady when she was a young mother and then when she is an older grandmother and present the scene so that her views on life are seen to have changed over the intervening years.

Analyse the part of Scene One, Act Two (pages 54 – 57) where Betty is talking at length about her fears and feelings and see how many of her views are still influenced by her upbringing and the role she had in Act One.

#### (iii) Joshua

In groups, devise a scene where an employee is quietly subversive in the work place while appearing to be loyal, willing and committed.

Then develop it into a scene that shows Joshua as a black servant in a white colonial household, a hundred or more years ago.

Take one or two of the scenes in Act One where Joshua interacts with Clive, with Edward and Betty and explore what they tell us about his character.

#### Extension task

Take any duologue from the play and note down besides the text what each character actually says and what you think they are revealing about their characteristics for the audience.

### 2. Staging the play

In the park scenes of Act Two consider the following:

- What are the essential design elements?
- What props would be needed, if any, to show it is a park in the different seasons mentioned in each scene?
- What are the contextual constraints?
- Where have characters come from when they arrive; where do they go when they leave?

Try to block a scene according to both stage directions and required action.

Consider the use of proxemics, levels and status of characters in the scene.

Discuss the themes of the play in general and the scene in particular and link key moments from the scene to those key moments.

If a Brechtian, open, no scenery approach is adopted, how would scene transitions be handled?

### 3. Sexuality on display

While it is a comic play in part, how far would you play the sexual activity up to make the audience laugh?

This is partly an acting decision. How far would Clive and Mrs Saunders show their heterosexuality? How far would Lin, Gerry or Edward show their sexual preferences in Act Two? Would you play it as over-the-top camp pantomime style or in a different way and why?

It is also a directorial issue. Would a director want to overplay or underplay the sex and sexuality? What about the more intimate moment between Harry and the young Edward? Is it shocking?

#### Extension task

Play the Gerry monologue that opens Act Two and the Clive and Mrs Saunders sex in Act One, Scene Two to compare the substance and style of the scenes. How you would play them to achieve the intentions of the playwright.

#### 4. Vocal and Physical Analysis

If you were a director, how and why would you have your performers use the following in any scene of your choosing:

- Their vocal range
- Their physicality
- Their gestures
- Their facial expressions.

Consider the use of props to illustrate vocal, physical, gestures and facial expressions of actors – such as: drinks, a gun, an ice cream in the park.

This is a matter for performers too, of course, but how the directorial vision can be realised is as much part of it and could form the basis of a question.



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