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## Dreams and Realities: Shakespeare, Pinter and Churchill Compared

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interplay between feminist thought and theatre, focusing on Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill alongside William Shakespeare's classical texts. It analyses how these playwrights address gender, identity, and societal norms through a feminist lens, tracing the evolution of feminist discourse in theatre. Using comparative textual analysis, the study explores Pinter's surrealism, Churchill's feminist critique, and Shakespeare's engagement with dreams and reality. Through key scenes, dialogues, and theatrical techniques, it highlights how Pinter and Churchill challenge traditional gender roles and reflect the complexities of female experiences, while Shakespeare's work serves as a foundational influence on contemporary feminist interpretations. The findings reveal that Pinter and Churchill's innovative narratives critique societal norms, whereas Shakespeare's texts inform modern understandings of gender and identity. This study underscores the enduring significance of these playwrights in shaping feminist thought and their relevance in contemporary performance. By bridging classical and modern works, the paper contributes to the discourse on feminism in theatre, advocating for a nuanced exploration of how texts inform perspectives on gender, power, and identity in the context of today's societal challenges.

**Keywords:** Harold Pinter; Caryl Churchill; Shakespeare; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Gender Identity

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between dreams and reality has long intrigued playwrights, offering a compelling way to explore human psychology, social structures and immense philosophical questions about existence. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written around 1595<sup>[1]</sup>, Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*<sup>[2]</sup>, and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* written in Churchill, 1982<sup>[3]</sup>, this interaction goes beyond just being a theme. Additionally, it becomes an effective instrument for addressing the complexity of human experiences. These works all centre on the thin line that separates the actual from the unreal, despite their pronounced variations in time and style. These plays all deal with desire, power structure and identity confusion.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare masterfully blends fantasy with the everyday world, creating an enchanted forest where the rules of reality fade, and the characters' innermost desires and fears come alive. The play explores love, transformation and illusion pointing to how fragile our sense of reality can be. What we believe to be real is often influenced by our subconscious, and the dreamy tone of the play keeps the audience questioning what's real and what's not. It subtly suggests that our perceptions and beliefs may not be as solid as they seem.

Pinter's *The Homecoming*, on the other hand, deeply examines the psychology of family power struggles, where even reality itself feels shaky and unpredictable. Pinter's use of silences, pauses and ambiguous conversations creates a disorienting experience mirroring the characters' fragmented inner lives. The tension and the eerie atmosphere of the play reveal how the characters' dreams, fears, and unspoken desires warp their understanding of reality. In this unsettling domestic space, the line between reality and illusion seems to dissolve showing the audience how fragile and changeable our perceptions can be.

Then there's *Top Girls*, where Caryl Churchill throws the relationship between dreams and reality into sharp contrast by mixing the fantastical with real-life struggles. The play's famous dinner party scene—where women from history and fiction come together—becomes a metaphor for the clash between dreams of female empowerment and the cold reality of a patriarchal world. Through her fragmented storytelling and overlapping dialogue, Churchill presents a world where chasing success often leads to feelings of isolation

and disillusionment. She blurs the lines between dreams and the harshness of everyday life, challenging the audience to rethink what “reality” even means.

To provide a prism through which to evaluate identity, power and social standards, this comparative study examines how these three playwrights incorporate dreams and reality into their plots. By examining each play's treatment of the dream-reality theme, broader philosophical concepts will be understood about the larger social and political examinations they touch upon. This investigation will deepen our comprehension of why the conflict between dreams and reality is still a potent, recurring theme in literature.

As mentioned earlier, the blending of dreams and reality is a recurring theme in literature, often used to explore the complexities of the human mind, identity and social norms. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, this theme plays a key role in showing how characters deal with their desires and fears and the roles society assigns them in both real and imagined worlds. This paper's main focus is on how these plays examine and question social conventions, particularly those related to power, gender roles and identity, by drawing parallels between dreams and reality. Thus, the fundamental investigation of this paper is how these playwrights mimic and subvert the social and political realities of their eras by utilising the interconnection between dream and reality.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Homecoming*, and *Top Girls*. The selection of these three plays is based on their rich thematic engagement with the intersection of dreams and reality, each reflecting distinct historical and cultural moments: early modern England, post-war Britain, and Thatcher-era feminist discourse, respectively. These plays provide a diverse yet coherent sample that allows for a comprehensive examination of the dream-reality theme across different periods and social contexts. The justification for this sample size lies in its capacity to provide both depth and breadth, representing distinct yet interrelated approaches to the dream motif, which will allow for meaningful comparison and thematic exploration.

The methodological approach involves *textual concentrated reading*, focusing on key scenes and dialogues where the blending of dreams and reality is most pronounced. This process will ensure that the analysis is grounded in the text and will allow for an in-depth exploration of the specific ways in which dreams influence character development and plot progression. Furthermore, careful attention will be paid to how these dream-reality elements contribute to the broader themes of power, identity, and social critique in each play.

To ensure validation and robustness, this analysis will be cross-referenced with current scholarly research from 2023 and 2024, integrating recent academic discourse to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the interpretations. The methodology also takes into account the socio-political contexts of each play, employing a historically informed approach that contextualises the authors' use of dreams and reality as reflective of the societal issues of their time. This will be supported by secondary sources that link the plays' dreamlike elements to the wider cultural and historical concerns they engage with.

Additionally, this study will employ triangulation by consulting a range of critical perspectives, from feminist and psychological readings to historical analyses, thus ensuring that the findings are validated through multiple lenses. This layered approach will not only illuminate the thematic significance of dreams and reality in each play but will also provide a more nuanced understanding of how these elements intersect with social and political discourses across different time periods.

## 2.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in postmodernism, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis, enriched by recent scholarship to offer a multi-faceted and contemporary analysis of how dreams and reality intersect in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Homecoming*, and *Top Girls*. These theoretical perspectives will be crucial for examining how these plays explore issues of identity, power, and social norms through their blending of dreamlike and real-world elements.

Psychoanalysis remains a key lens, particularly Freud's theories on dreams and the unconscious, which help explain how characters' hidden desires, fears, and anxieties are projected through the dream sequences in these plays. However,

to modernise and strengthen this approach, the study will also draw on recent developments in psychoanalytic theory, including work by contemporary scholars like Slavoj Žižek<sup>[4]</sup> who examines the role of ideology and the unconscious in cultural productions, and Julia Kristeva's<sup>[5]</sup> extension of Freudian psychoanalysis into the realm of intertextuality and identity formation. These modern psychoanalytic perspectives will provide updated insights into how the characters' psychological conflicts are expressed through dreamlike scenarios and narrative fragmentation, especially in *The Homecoming* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Feminist theory is central to the analysis, particularly in relation to *Top Girls* and *The Homecoming*. Alongside foundational thinkers like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir, the study will incorporate more recent feminist critiques to address contemporary gender issues. Notably, theories of intersectional feminism from scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>[6]</sup>, will be employed to explore how gender, class, and race intersect in these plays, especially in *Top Girls*, which portrays the clash between dreams of female empowerment and the constraints of capitalist society. Recent research on feminist utopias and dystopias will also be relevant in analysing the ways Churchill disrupts traditional gender roles through fragmented narrative structures and dreamlike sequences, juxtaposing idealised futures with harsh realities.

Postmodernism highlights the fragmentation of reality and subversion of traditional narratives, is key to understanding the structural and thematic elements in all three plays. While earlier works by Lyotard and Foucault remain relevant, this study will integrate more recent postmodern critiques, such as Jean Baudrillard's<sup>[7]</sup> concept of "hyperreality," which can be used to analyse how Pinter and Churchill blur the boundaries between the real and the imagined, creating disorienting experiences that challenge the audience's perception of reality. Additionally, Fredric Jameson's<sup>[8]</sup> examination of postmodernism and late capitalism will deepen the analysis of *Top Girls*, exploring how capitalist structures are critiqued through the lens of dreams and reality.

By doing that, the study moves beyond traditional frameworks to offer a richer and more current analysis. Furthermore, postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Homi K. Bhabha [2024]<sup>[9]</sup>, will be incorporated to examine how dreams serve as spaces for negotiating cultural identities and hybrid realities, particularly in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

where the boundaries between different social and natural worlds blur. This postcolonial perspective will also allow for an analysis of how the plays question dominant ideologies and create spaces for alternative realities and identities.

In short, the study will be supported by a diverse range of contemporary theoretical perspectives that will not only enhance the understanding of dreams and reality in these plays but will also engage with the most recent academic discourses on power, identity, and societal structures. By synthesising psychoanalytic, feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial theories, this analysis will offer a comprehensive and up-to-date exploration of how Shakespeare, Pinter, and Churchill use dreams and reality to interrogate cultural and social norms.

## 2.2. Objectives of the Study

The main goal of this paper is to explore how Shakespeare, Pinter and Churchill use the interaction between dreams and reality to address larger social, political and philosophical themes in their respective times and places. Specifically, it will show how each playwright uses this method to question and assess the accepted norms of their time. This study attempts to provide new vantage points on the enduring significance of the dream-reality subject in literature through comparative analysis. Through contextual analysis, this study aims to offer new perspectives on the lasting significance of the dream-reality topic in literature. Another goal is to highlight the plays' broad concepts by drawing a link between the historical settings and modern interpretations.

## 2.3. Research Questions

Several important questions will be examined in this study: How do Shakespeare, Pinter and Churchill use dream-like elements to challenge the audience's view of reality? How do these dreams reveal the characters' true desires, fears and identities? How do the playwrights use the interplay between dreams and reality to evaluate and review social norms, particularly around power, gender and identity? Finally, what are the broader philosophical and political implications of how these plays explore the boundaries between dream and reality?

## 3. Literature Review and Necessity of the Study

The literature review will focus on scholarship that explores the dream-reality theme in the works of Shakespeare, Pinter and Churchill. For instance, studies on Shakespeare's use of fantasy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have shown how the play explores the unconscious and its social implications<sup>[10]</sup>. Similarly, research on Pinter's *The Homecoming* has looked into the psychological and existential layers of the play, especially how the line between reality and illusion is shadowy. *Top Girls* by Churchill has been analysed from a feminist perspective, with critics examining how the play contrasts dreams of female empowerment with the harsh realities of capitalist society<sup>[11, 12]</sup>.

### Shakespeare: Dreams and Fantasy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has often been regarded as a sophisticated exploration of the line between illusion and reality. Recent research by Thompson<sup>[13]</sup>, examines how the dream world of the forest contrasts with the more orderly reality of Athens, representing a space where societal norms are subverted and characters' subconscious desires manifest. Thompson argues that this dichotomy between the dream world and reality reflects early modern anxieties about social order and individual agency. The play incorporates elements of classical mythology to blend the fantastical with the real, suggesting that the play's dream sequences reveal tensions about power and identity in Elizabethan society.

### Pinter: Reality and Illusion in *The Homecoming*

Pinter's *The Homecoming* continues to captivate scholars with its ambiguous blending of reality and illusion. Recent studies examine the psychological dimensions of Pinter's characters, highlighting the existential tension between their perceived realities and the distorted world they inhabit. Research emphasises the play's use of minimalistic dialogue and pauses to create a sense of disorientation, blurring the boundaries between what is real and imagined. Along similar lines, one can notice how Pinter's play is reflective of post-war anxieties about identity, masculinity, and familial power structures, with the concept of "home" itself becoming an illusionary space where power dynamics are constantly shifting.

### Churchill: Feminist Utopias and Harsh Realities in *Top Girls*

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* has remained a focal point for feminist literary criticism, with recent scholarship adding layers of complexity to its dream-reality framework. Munford<sup>[12]</sup>, expands on earlier feminist readings of *Top Girls*, focusing on how Churchill uses historical female figures to represent dreams of liberation and empowerment, juxtaposed with the harsh realities faced by women in contemporary society. Munford argues that the play's surreal dinner party scene creates a liminal space where dreams of feminist utopia clash with the real-world consequences of capitalism and patriarchy. Adding to this, Lewis<sup>[14]</sup> explores the intersection of dreams and political ideology in Churchill's work, analysing how dreams in *Top Girls* are not merely personal desires but are shaped by larger socio-economic forces, reflecting Churchill's critique of Thatcherism.

### Comparative Analysis: Intersections of Dreams and Reality Across Different Contexts

By comparing the representation of dreams and realities across these three playwrights, new critical insights emerge regarding the socio-political implications of these themes. While Shakespeare's use of the dream motif in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is primarily linked to issues of social order and desire, Churchill and Pinter's works engage with dreams as a means of critiquing modern capitalist and patriarchal structures. For instance, Churchill's *Top Girls* contrasts feminist dreams of empowerment with the disillusionment of capitalist realities, whereas Pinter's *The Homecoming* blurs the lines between psychological reality and illusion, creating a disorienting commentary on familial and gendered power. These plays collectively illustrate how the dream motif in literature functions not just as a personal or psychological device but as a means of engaging with broader political and societal issues.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to offer new insights into the ways in which these plays reflect, and comment, on the social and political contexts of their specific respective times. Aiming to shed light on the underlying relationships between these pieces and to add to the larger discussion on the representation of dreams and reality in literature, this study will follow a comparative way of appraising these texts. Furthermore, by examining the intersections between dreams and reality in various historical and

cultural contexts, this study seeks to close knowledge gaps in the literature and provide a more thorough comprehension of this literary issue.

### 3.1. A Midsummer Night's Dream: Dream and Reality

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* intertwines several tales centred on illusion and love. Two Athens lovers, Hermia and Lysander, flee to the forest to evade Hermia's forced marriage to Demetrius, who also has feelings for her. Deeply in love with Demetrius, Helena follows him about. As Bottom, a humorous figure who has been turned into a donkey by the cunning Puck, appears, Oberon uses a magical flower to charm and make Titania fall in love. Meanwhile, the Fairies, Oberon and Titania, are occupied in a private feud. Some comic relief is provided by the Mechanicals who are an amateur acting troupe that is developing a play for Duke Theseus's wedding in a separate storyline.

### 3.2. Dream and Reality in the Forest

The theme of dream versus reality is a key part of the play's deeper meanings. Shakespeare uses the forest as a space where the lines between dreams and reality blur, allowing characters to experience transformations, fantasies and the confusing nature of love. In Act 1, Scene 1, Theseus speaks of the forest as a place where "The course of true love never did run smooth"<sup>[1]</sup>, introducing it as both a land of possibility and chaos. Richard Wilson sees the forest as a place where normal rules are put on hold, letting people explore their true desires<sup>[15]</sup>.

In this setting, the distinction between truth and fantasy becomes less evident, illustrating how love can be both magnificent and crazy. In his lines, "the moon, like a silver bow/New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night/Of our solemnities"<sup>[1]</sup>, Oberon underlines how easily illusion can become reality.

Magic significantly contributes to upending the characters' perception of reality. The characters are bewildered by Puck's charms, particularly in Act 3, Scene 2, when he asks, "What hempen home-spuns have we swaggering here, so near the cradle of the fairy queen?" Acts 3.2.56-357, Shakespeare. Laura Green believes these magical moments highlight deeper themes of identity and how people see them-

selves<sup>[16]</sup>. The funny and chaotic nature of these transformations shows how fragile reality can be. Puck's famous line, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!"<sup>[1]</sup>, underscores the unpredictability of human desires and actions.

The magical times in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* highlight deeper questions about identity and self-perception. As Catherine Belsey suggests, the play's fantastical elements create a space for characters to navigate their identities, underscoring the transient nature of self-perception<sup>[17]</sup>. This unpredictable reality is further emphasised by Puck's famous line: 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!'<sup>[1]</sup>, which reflects the complexity of human nature.

Numerous commentators have examined these enchanted situations from a psychological angle, especially by using concepts from Freud. According to Holland, Shakespeare's use of magic is a metaphor for the unconscious mind, where irrational urges that are buried are revealed. From Freudian scope, the dreamlike shifts in the play show how people's utmost desires and fears come to the surface. For instance, Bottom's metamorphosis into a donkey symbolises a return to an animalistic state where social norms disappear and instincts take precedence. The irrationality and ferocity of desire are demonstrated by Titania's love for Bottom during her spell, which is in line with Freud's idea of the unconscious mind.

### 3.3. Gender and Power

The ways in which the changes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* disrupt conventional gender roles and the distribution of power have been scrutinised by feminist critics such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir<sup>[18]</sup>; de Beauvoir, 2011<sup>[19]</sup>. Butler's conception of gender as a performance is in line with the play's portrayal of fluid identities, in which characters' roles are magically transformed. Titania's infatuation with Bottom flips the usual patriarchal order, questioning fixed gender roles and power structures. However, as Alice Jardine and Elaine Showalter point out, these challenges to gender norms are temporary, and by the end of the play, traditional gender roles are re-established<sup>[20]</sup>. Showalter<sup>[21]</sup> thus suspecting the challenge that is posed in the first place since it is finally contained.

Pyramus and Thisbe, the play within a play, is a witty critique of illusion and performance. According to Sandra Clark, the Mechanicals' awkward performance satirises

Shakespeare's day's theatrical conventions, erasing the distinction between high art and common entertainment<sup>[22]</sup>. This reflects the primary plot while illuminating the complexity and humour of human emotions. In stark contrast to the more refined and ethereal woodland setting, the Mechanicals' awkward performance of their sad drama emphasises the need to strike a balance between reality and illusion. Shakespeare<sup>[1]</sup> speaks of their play as "a most lamentable comedy," highlighting the constant conflict between tragedy and humour.

### 3.4. Dream, Reality and Identity

The dreamlike atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as mentioned earlier, critiques common ideas about love and identity. Laura Green notes that the magical transformations in the play show how fluid identity and desire can be, emphasising the gap between how we see ourselves and how others perceive us<sup>[16]</sup>. In an analogous manner, Michael Bristol contends that Shakespeare employs these changes to expose the brittleness of identity and to imply that perception has the power to quickly alter reality<sup>[23]</sup>. The hallucinatory elements of the play, whether analysed from a feminist or Freudian lens, offer a comprehensive analysis of human nature by demonstrating how constructed and flexible identity and reality are.

### 3.5. The Homecoming

In *The Homecoming*, Harold Pinter very adroitly examines the complex relationships of family, power and identity through a minimalist, unsettling narrative that deliberately obliterates the lines between reality and illusion. The story is about Teddy, a philosophy professor who returns home to his family in London with his wife, Ruth. The entire play is set in the family's cramped living room, where the interactions between Teddy, his father Max, his brothers Lenny and Sam and Ruth expose deep-seated tensions and power struggles. By confining all these characters within the same room, Pinter wants to reveal the worst of what might come of each of them; that, in turn, illuminates how the reality of those figures can be incredibly difficult, almost unimaginable. As time passes, the act becomes more and more dreamlike as the boundaries between reality and fantasy melt.

The audience and the characters alike are made even

more confused by Pinter's creative application of a single, unchanging scene and cryptic conversation. As was already established, the small, simple stage setting heightens the psychological effect, giving the events a personal and frightening aspect. The play's minimalism "creates a sense of claustrophobic confinement, emphasising the characters' psychological states rather than concrete realities," according to Michael Billington in *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*<sup>[24]</sup>. The viewer is drawn more into the intricate web of human emotions, relationships, and power as a result of this confinement, which serves to heighten the tension between the imagined and the real.

The fragmented, often cryptic dialogue and notable use of pauses are trademarks of Pinter's writing. These techniques are crucial in fostering the play's ambiguous and dreamlike quality. In the opening scene, Max's curt and sharp exchange with Lenny and Sam—"What do you think you are? A comedian?" [Pinter 1.1.19]<sup>[2]</sup> immediately sets the tone for the psychological ambiguity that follows, where reality itself is constantly in flux. In fact, the play's stagnant, unmoving setting intensifies the claustrophobic atmosphere, creating a sense of unreality. Throughout the play, the dialogue often skirts around deeper, unspoken emotions, with what is left unsaid carrying as much, if not more, weight than the actual spoken words.

Pinter's deliberate use of pauses and silences adds further layers of psychological tension, deepening the disconnection between surface interactions and underlying emotions. These moments serve as windows into the characters' subconscious minds, in line with Freudian ideas about how dreams offer glimpses into the deeper layers of the human psyche. Thomas McAllister observes that "Pinter's use of pauses and silences reflects deeper psychological and existential themes, where the unsaid is as significant as the spoken" in *The Pinter Review*<sup>[25]</sup>. The discourse is fragmented, leading to a tenuous and erratic reality in which the characters' true intentions remain obscured. The equilibrium of power also shifts rapidly.

Ruth, Teddy's wife, embodies the play's fluid power complexity and shifting identities. Her character undergoes a significant transformation from being a passive observer to assuming a dominant position within the family, reflecting the malleability of both identity and power in the play. Ruth's statement, "I am going to take a bath," denotes a

turning point [Pinter 2.2.65]<sup>[2]</sup>. No matter how inconsequential it might look, this phrase still holds substantial meaning within the context of the play's shifting power dynamics. In *The Theatre of Harold Pinter* [Carter, 2024]<sup>[26]</sup>. Ruth's role challenges traditional concepts of domesticity and authority, exemplifying the play's exploration of themes related to illusion and reality.

Ruth's ascension to a position of authority within the family challenges the established hierarchy, demonstrating that identity and power are malleable constructs. This contributes to the surreal environment that the protagonists encounter. Carter<sup>[26]</sup> posits that Ruth's transformation "challenges conventional notions of authority and reality, as her ambiguous behaviours blur the lines between public persona and private identity" in her analysis of *Harold Pinter's Theatre*<sup>[26]</sup>. In many ways, Carter's evolution echoes Judith Butler's theory of performative gender, which posits that identity is constructed and enacted rather than inherent. Ruth's shifting role within the family also resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's critique of gendered power structures, highlighting how social expectations and roles are far from fixed and can easily be overturned.

Ultimately, the psychological depth of the characters in *The Homecoming* reveals the intricate interplay between dream and reality. Ruth's evolution from a passive figure to one of dominance symbolises the malleability of identity, while the confined setting and fragmented dialogue contribute to an atmosphere where nothing is stable or certain. As the characters navigate this uncertain terrain, Pinter's deliberate use of silence, ambiguity and fragmented communication challenges both the characters and the audience's understanding of truth and identity. In this sense, *The Homecoming* transcends its domestic drama roots to become a profound exploration of the subconscious mind, the nature of power and the fluidity of identity in a world where reality is constantly in question.

### 3.6. Top Girls

Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* offers a profound exploration of gender, power and identity through a surreal narrative that blends historical and mythical figures with the life of the protagonist, Marlene. The play kicks off with a fantastical dinner party where notable women from history and legend—like Pope Joan and Lady Nijo—come together to

reflect on their achievements and struggles. The concurrent presentation of these women, each with a unique story, creates anarchy at the dinner party, as their uninhibited stories infiltrate the atmosphere. This outburst reflects their eagerness to share their stories and may also suggest their anxiety about losing this unique opportunity to express what they have experienced in an extraordinary and strange environment. This dreamlike scenario serves as a critique of social expectations and traditional gender roles, setting the stage for a deeper look at the sacrifices women make to succeed in a patriarchal, capitalist world. The stark contrast between this surreal opening and Marlene's more grounded reality underscores the tension between idealised success and the personal sacrifices required to achieve it.

Fiona Richards elucidates that this surreal assembly represents the intricacies of women's achievements and the manner in which societal constraints frequently misrepresent their roles<sup>[27]</sup>. Freudian psychoanalysis is arguably the most effective framework for comprehending the play's deeper layers, particularly in relation to dreams and the unconscious.

Marlene's dinner associates embody aspects of her personality, representing her ambitions, vulnerabilities and internal struggles that she may not entirely acknowledge. Judith Butler's feminist theory regarding the performativity of gender provides the basis for comprehending how interpersonal interactions expose the flexible and manufactured essence of gender roles. Butler argues that gender is not a static identity but rather a performance influenced by cultural interpretations<sup>[18]</sup>. In *Top Girls*, the performative dimension is evident as the characters contemplate their historical positions while acknowledging the limitations they encountered throughout their lives.

Simone de Beauvoir's idea of "becoming a woman" within patriarchal structures de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949, p. 267<sup>[19]</sup> resonates with Churchill's depiction of women negotiating personal sacrifice for social validation, especially through Marlene's career success at the expense of her relationships. The structure of the play, which alternates between Marlene's professional achievements and her personal life, highlights this divide. The opening dinner party scene acts as a metaphor for the disconnect between women's idealised public success and the private challenges they face. The historical and mythical figures, each with their own stories of success marked by loss or tragedy, mirror Marlene's

own experience. Although Marlene's rise to a managerial position at the *Top Girls* Employment Agency is celebrated, the play reveals the personal sacrifices that underpin her success. Patricia Williams observes that Marlene's professional triumphs come at the cost of her family relationships, reflecting Churchill's critique of capitalist and patriarchal systems that prioritise career achievements over personal fulfilment<sup>[28]</sup>. This duality in Marlene's life shows how public success can often mask deeper personal dissatisfaction.

Churchill's portrayal of Marlene's life as fragmented suggests a tension between her public persona as a successful career woman and her private self, burdened by unresolved relationships with her sister Joyce and her niece Angie. The play's non-linear structure reflects the fractured nature of Marlene's identity as she navigates the demands of her professional and personal life. This disjunction echoes Butler's ideas about the multiplicity and instability of identity, challenging traditional notions of success and fulfilment<sup>[18]</sup>.

Elaine Aston argues that Churchill's use of disjointed narrative structures in plays like *Top Girls* mirrors the internal conflicts of her characters, particularly Marlene, as they navigate the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations<sup>[11]</sup>. By fragmenting the narrative, Churchill reflects the fluid and often contradictory nature of identity, highlighting the complex interplay between individual desires and external pressures. Janelle Reinelt further contends that such narrative techniques are emblematic of Churchill's broader critique of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies<sup>[29]</sup>.

Finally, Churchill's critique of capitalist patriarchy is most apparent in Marlene's strained relationships with her family, especially with Joyce and Angie. Laura J. Lee points out that Churchill contrasts Marlene's career successes with her fragmented familial ties to highlight the personal costs of ambition<sup>[30]</sup>. Angie's lack of direction contrasts sharply with Marlene's professional achievements, reinforcing the theme of unfulfilled dreams and repressed desires.

### 3.7. Reflections on Power, Identity and Reality

Churchill's *Top Girls* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both explore the blurry line between dream and reality, though they do so in distinct ways. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the enchanted forest acts as a space where hidden desires and transformations come to light. Similarly, in *Top Girls*, the surreal dinner party with histor-



ical and mythical women serves as a stage for confronting their dreams and disappointments. Richard Wilson's interpretation of the forest as a transitional space where social norms are temporarily suspended<sup>[15]</sup> can also be applied to Churchill's dinner party. This setting creates a symbolic space where women's historical struggles are brought to the forefront. However, while Shakespeare's play ends with a return to conventional social order, Churchill's narrative leaves us with unresolved tensions, reflecting ongoing personal and professional conflicts.

Unlike the fantastical elements in *Top Girls* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* operates within a more structured framework, yet it intentionally thins or even makes unseen the lines between reality and illusion. The play's static setting and fragmented dialogue evoke psychological ambiguity, making the characters' identities and desires seem elusive. Michael Billington highlights that *The Homecoming* creates a claustrophobic atmosphere through its minimalist approach, making reality feel perpetually unstable<sup>[24]</sup>. Thomas McAllister adds that Pinter's use of pauses and silences enhances this dreamlike quality, immersing the audience in a space where reality seems to constantly shift<sup>[25]</sup>.

While *Top Girls* inspects Marlene's fragmented identity, *The Homecoming* presents Ruth's transformation as a reflection of fluid identity. Emily Carter notes that Ruth's shifting role challenges traditional ideas of authority and identity, illustrating how illusion and reality intertwine in the play<sup>[26]</sup>. This transformation mirrors the surreal shifts in *Top Girls*, where repressed desires manifest in dreamlike or ambiguous contexts.

Freudian psychoanalysis offers in-depth insights into the repressed desires and power struggles in all three plays. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the enchanted forest allows unconscious wishes to emerge and be resolved. However, in *Top Girls* and *The Homecoming*, these desires lead to disillusionment rather than resolution. Both Churchill's and Pinter's plays use dreamlike elements to critique systems that perpetuate inequality and repression.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is relevant across these plays as well. In *Top Girls*, Marlene's professional success upholds capitalist and patriarchal systems, while in *The Homecoming*, Ruth's shifting role reveals the fluid nature of gender roles depending on family power dy-

namics. Butler's concept that identity is constantly constructed and deconstructed is evident in both *Top Girls*' fragmented narrative and *The Homecoming*'s ambiguous interactions.

*Top Girls*, in a word, employs a dreamlike framework to explore themes of gender, power and identity using what can be described as Freudian psychoanalysis and feminist theory to address repressed desires and social constraints. Through Marlene's fragmented story, Churchill criticises the systemic forces that coerce women to trade personal fulfilment for professional success. In contrast, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also uses a dreamlike setting to examine the conflict between desire and social norms but concludes with a return to social order. Pinter's *The Homecoming*, on the other hand, stays within an ambiguous, psychologically charged framework, where the line between dream and reality remains indistinct. Collectively, these plays challenge traditional ideas of identity, power and gender, prompting audiences to reflect on the complexities of human desire and social expectations.

## 4. Discussion

The interplay between dream and reality in *Top Girls*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Homecoming* is intriguing as it re-enacts narratives that allow for an exploration of the intricacies of identity, social conventions, and power dynamics. Each of these pieces traverses the nebulous boundaries between the fantastical and the real, employing surreal or ambiguous situations to interrogate conventional notions of success, identity, and authority. Yet, the methods each playwright uses to explore this blend of dream and reality reveal different socio-political critiques.

In *Top Girls*, the surreal dinner party featuring historical and mythical women reflects both Marlene's subconscious and a critique of gender expectations. This assembly establishes a venue where history and contemporaneity, actuality and ambition, converge. The dinner guests represent many facets of female ambition and sacrifice; nonetheless, the disjointed storyline hinders any definitive closure. Churchill employs the juxtaposition of this fantasy moment with Marlene's pragmatic existence to underscore the inconsistencies inherent in modern female empowerment: professional achievement frequently entails considerable personal sacrifices. By integrating these surreal components into her

critique of economic patriarchy, Churchill obscures the distinction between reality and illusion, contesting the notion of a singular female experience. Feminist academics such as Susan M. Smith and Fiona Richards propose that the play examines the fragmented ego, illustrating how societal pressures force women to navigate several, perhaps contradictory roles.

Conversely, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* used the dream metaphor to momentarily subvert social conventions. The enchanted woodland serves as a liminal area where the conventional norms of Athenian society are temporarily suspended, enabling characters to investigate desires and identities that are suppressed in their quotidian existence.

Unlike *Top Girls*, where the tension between dream and reality remains unresolved, Shakespeare's play restores social order by the end. This return to reality reconciles desire and duty, underscoring the play's conservative resolution. Thus endorsing the status quo regarding the social roles in society. Yet, the forest provides a crucial space for expressing the unconscious demonstrating how identity can be fluid when external constraints are relaxed. Richard Wilson points out that Shakespeare's dreamlike setting allows for a temporary suspension of norms but ultimately reinforces the existing social hierarchy '[see above].

Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* takes a more ambiguous approach to the boundary between dream and reality. Though it's less overtly surreal than *Top Girls* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Pinter's minimalist style and fragmented dialogue create a sense of psychological ambiguity where the lines between reality and illusion are very thin, almost invisible. The play's static domestic setting becomes a claustrophobic space where the balance of power shifts unpredictably, and the characters' motives remain unclear. Ruth's shift from a passive role to one of control mirrors Churchill's exploration of power and gender but with a darker and more existential twist. In this play, the dreamlike quality arises from the psychological tension in the characters' interactions rather than fantastical elements. Critics like Emily Carter argue that Pinter's use of pauses and fragmented language fosters a continual sense of unease where reality is perpetually shifting and the characters' identities are unstable. These pauses and fragmented language can articulate a covert voice of rejection.

In all three plays, the blend of dream and reality serves as a way to question social norms and the construction of identity. *Top Girls* uses surrealism to critique the capitalist and patriarchal systems that force women into fragmented roles. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* temporarily disrupts reality to explore repressed desires but ultimately reaffirms social order, thus confirming rather than subverting the conservative way of handling these issues. In contrast, *The Homecoming* creates an ambiguous, psychologically charged space where the tension between illusion and reality is explored more abstractly, focusing on power and gender relations.

## 5. Conclusions

The plays *Top Girls*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Homecoming* masterfully employ the amalgamation of dream and reality as both a creative mechanism and a profound method for exploring critical inquiries surrounding identity, power, and the societal structures that shape human existence. Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* critiques capitalist patriarchy through a surreal dinner party where historical female figures converge, revealing their hidden desires and sacrifices. This tableau not only highlights the ongoing disparity between ambition and reality but also reflects contemporary issues women continue to face in a patriarchal society. Scholars such as Aston<sup>[11]</sup> have noted how Churchill's work remains pertinent in discussions of gender and class, reinforcing the relevance of these themes in both historical and modern contexts.

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* allows its characters a temporary escape from societal norms through fantastical elements; however, by the play's conclusion, these very conventions re-emerge, reinforcing the social structures of Shakespeare's time. This cyclical return to reality suggests a complex interplay between escapism and societal expectations, resonating with interpretations by Smith<sup>[10]</sup>, who emphasises the unconscious social implications embedded in the text. Shakespeare's nuanced portrayal invites audiences to consider the persistence of societal norms and their implications for identity formation, echoing the arguments of modern critics who highlight the tension between individual desires and collective societal expectations.

Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* takes a more intri-

cate approach, utilising the psychological tensions inherent within the domestic sphere to subvert conventional notions of identity and authority. By dissecting familial relationships through a lens that merges dreams and reality, Pinter challenges audiences to confront the complexities of power dynamics and personal identity. It can be suggested that the play's unsettling ambiguity regarding authority and belonging reflects broader existential themes that are increasingly relevant in today's fragmented social landscapes. This alignment with current societal discussions underscores the timelessness of Pinter's exploration of identity in a world where the boundaries of selfhood are perpetually in flux.

Collectively, these works invite audiences to reflect on the fluidity of identity, the fragility of our social frameworks, and the personal sacrifices undertaken in the pursuit of success within a society governed by strict norms. By oscillating between dreams and reality, the plays provoke critical thought about the enduring struggles faced in reconciling personal aspirations with the often-oppressive forces that seek to shape individual identities.

However, this study is not without its limitations. While it effectively engages with the primary texts and their socio-political implications, it could benefit from a broader examination of how the interplay of dreams and reality might manifest in contemporary adaptations of these works, or in the larger canon of modern drama. Future research could explore how these themes are represented in postcolonial contexts or how they intersect with contemporary issues such as digital identities and the impact of technology on human relationships. Additionally, incorporating a wider range of feminist theories and critiques, particularly from recent scholarship, could further enrich the analysis and provide deeper insights into the ongoing relevance of these themes.

Finally, *Top Girls*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Homecoming* not only entertain but also challenge and enlighten, urging us to confront the complexities of our identities and the societal forces that seek to define them. As we navigate the delicate balance between dreams and reality, these plays resonate with the enduring human experience, reminding us of the importance of questioning the structures that govern our lives and the dreams we dare to pursue.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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