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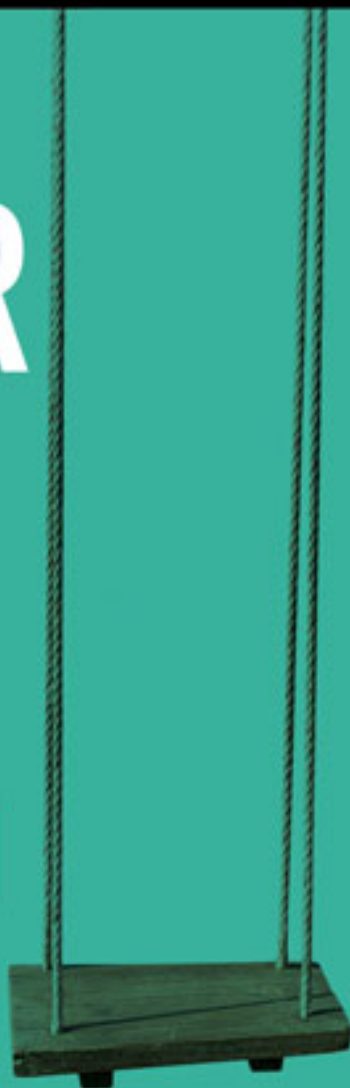
**GCSE STUDENT
GUIDE**

Charlotte
Keatley's

MY MOTHER SAID I NEVER SHOULD

**ESSENTIAL GUIDES FOR
EXAM STUDY**

BY SOPHIE BUSH



B L O O M S B U R Y

My Mother Said I Never Should GCSE Student Guide

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SOPHIE BUSH

Series Editor: Jenny Stevens

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*For my mother, and all the others, who said we should,
could and would.*

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CHAPTER ONE

The Play

Introduction: Reading drama

When reading a novel, many people imagine or visualize the story playing out in their mind's eye, rather like their own film of the book. Although this is quite a common thing to do, not everyone does this, and for those who do not, the book is a complete work of literature in its own right. However, when you are reading a play, this is not the case. The play text is not a complete work of literature; it is a blueprint, or set of instructions, for performance. The lines of dialogue are not intended to be read silently in your head, but to be spoken aloud by actors. The stage directions are not merely descriptive passages, but guidelines for designers, directors and actors on how to bring the world of the play to life. So when you read a play, you must try to visualize how it would, or could, look, sound and feel on a stage. The best way to do this is to act sections out yourselves. Some classrooms will not provide the easiest space for doing this, so you might have to make do with reading aloud. If this is the case, try to discuss, as a group, what sort of space each scene is taking place in. It may also help you to draw your ideas for the spaces and settings of the play.

Another important thing to bear in mind is that plays have two main types of writing within them: the dialogue spoken by the characters, and the stage directions that give actors, directors and designers instructions about how the dialogue

should be spoken, or what sort of environment the scene takes place in. Depending on the type and style of play, there may be a lot of stage directions or hardly any at all. For example, Shakespeare's plays, which you may also be studying, have very few stage directions. When you are reading a play, it is sometimes tempting to skip over the stage directions and concentrate only on the dialogue, so you can get through the story more quickly. This is inadvisable; if a playwright has chosen to include stage directions in their play, you should see them as an important part of the text. They may reveal crucial parts of the narrative that you would be lost without, and they also indicate vital elements of characterization, setting and atmosphere that you cannot afford to miss. If you are reading the play aloud in class, it is a good idea to nominate someone to read aloud the stage directions in each scene. Remember though, that in a finished production of the play it would be down to the actors and production team to communicate the essence of the stage directions to an audience, who would not have direct access to them, as those reading the play have.

Overview

A straightforward narrative synopsis cannot tell us everything we need to know when studying a play, because a play is defined by *how* its story is told as much as it is by the story itself. Keatley says, 'I began *My Mother Said I Never Should* with the structure and built it in three dimensions in my head before applying words. I started writing in the languages of light, colour, environment, sound, object, costume, and action or dance' (Keatley 1994: xxv). Therefore, as you read each scene of the play, do not just ask yourself 'what happens in this scene?' Start by asking yourself:

- 1 What does the audience see in this scene?
- 2 What do they hear?
- 3 What actions do the characters carry out?

Answering these questions should help you to notice how the writer uses dramatic devices, such as set, costume, props, lighting and sound effects, and how she instructs the actors to perform, in order to convey meaning, establish character and develop themes. Only once you have answered these questions will you be able to assess what the scene contributes to, or tells us about, the play as a whole. Therefore, the following should be seen as a quick reference guide to the play, not a comprehensive account of it.

Act one, scene one

Place: The Wasteground

Time: Unspecified

By opening the play with a scene set in an unspecified time and vague location, in which adult actors play the roles of young children, each dressed in costumes associated with four different time periods, Keatley signals to the reader or audience that the play should not be seen as a straightforward naturalistic or realistic one. The girls fantasize about killing their mothers, and their conversation also naively introduces some key concerns of the play, such as marriage and having babies.

Act one, scene two

Place: Doris's front room, Cheadle Hulme, Manchester

Time: Christmas Eve, 1940 and May, 1961

In contrast to the vague setting of the previous scene, this scene establishes a very specific sense of time and place, with the help of period-specific music (George Formby's 'Chinese Laundry Blues') and the sound of an air raid. We are introduced to the forty-year-old Doris, her nine-year-old daughter Margaret and the strained relationship between them. Part way through, the scene jumps forward twenty years, to contrast the relationship between Doris and Margaret with the relationship between

Doris and her nine-year-old granddaughter Jackie, which seems much warmer.

Act one, scene three

Place: The Wasteground

Time: Unspecified

With minimal understanding, the girls talk about periods, ‘catching a baby’, having a baby and being left by your husband. They play doctors and nurses. Doris asks if they can play babies tomorrow, but Rosie says they will have to play weddings first, as you have to be married before you have a baby.

Act one, scene four

Place: Margaret’s garden, Raynes Park, London

Time: May 1969

This is the first scene in which we meet Margaret and Jackie as adults: Jackie is almost eighteen and Margaret is thirty-eight. They are arguing about the fact Jackie has had sex with her boyfriend, and the generational difference between their attitudes to sex is very clear. We see Margaret reproducing some of Doris’s emotional detachment in the way she treats her own daughter, as well as the theme of resentment towards the increased options available to younger generations.

Act one, scene five

Place: Doris’s garden, Cheadle Hulme, Manchester

Time: May 1961

We move backwards in time, to later in the same day that the second part of Scene Two is set. We see that Margaret and Jackie’s relationship is warmer at this time, but that Margaret and Doris’s relationship is still very strained. We also learn that Margaret has had a miscarriage, which Doris believes is a result of her working too hard whilst pregnant.