

KEY WORDS

Same as act 1-

She remains a stagnant character who doesn't change

Mrs Birling Act 2



SHROUDED IN POMPOSITY AND EGOTISM

- Mrs Birling operates under a **shielded worldview** as she **fails to see beyond the superficial boundaries of her class**.
- Priestley employs **dramatic irony** as Mrs Birling absolves Eric from his behaviour whilst drinking by saying **"He's only a boy"**, however as the play develops, we learn that he has impregnated a woman and has a drinking problem. It seems he is far more than an innocent little boy, exposing Mrs Birling's **oblivion and ignorance**, even of her own children.
- Moreover, she is oblivious to common knowledge within her social circle, she exclaims **"Well Really! Alderman Meggarty! We really are learning something tonight."** In one sense this exposes how ignorant she is to what goes on around her, she is **encapsulated within the contrived and artificial bubble** that she has created for herself.
- Alternatively, it could show her **desperation to condemn and denounce others to distract from any of her own flaws and deny taking any responsibility**.

COMPARISON

In this, and many other aspects, Sheila serves as a foil to Mrs Birling, as she immediately detects that Mrs Birling is **"beginning all wrong"** in her response to the situation.

ROBUST TO ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

- Mrs Birling is dishonest, she claims that she did not recognise the girl (Eva Smith) in the photograph the inspector shows her, **which Priestley later uses to expose her as deceitful** when it becomes apparent that she has in fact met Eva Smith before.
- We see her **prejudice and egotism amplified at her disgust of Eva using the pseudonym (false name) Mrs Birling**, referring to it as **"gross impertinence"**. This seems **hyperbolic** (an over-exaggeration), as she merely used her name, which shows how highly Mrs Birling regards herself that she believes it is a great **misconduct to insult her status**.
- Her **arrogance is overarching**, proudly stating **"I consider I did my duty"**, which is **ironic**, as she in truth **juxtaposed** what would be expected of someone in a **philanthropic (charitable) position**.
- The noun **"duty"** could be a tool to explore the **disparity in the perspectives of capitalists and socialists**, for capitalists, **upholding the class system was paramount**, thus for Mrs Birling, her **duty may be to uphold the class gap** by refusing Eva help. This contradicts what would be the expected duty of her organisation.
- Priestley introduces the audience to the **social duty vs. moral duty dichotomy** (a contrast between two things).
- "Duty"** is a **noun echoed** by both Mr Birling and the inspector also, which puts the definition of duty up for debate.
- Through this, Priestley **critiques the classism which penetrates every aspect of Edwardian life**, rendering even the **welfare organisations hollow, corrupt and performative**.
- Mrs Birling is almost proud of her decision, even though it had negative repercussions as she is **incapable of addressing her own wrongdoing**, this extends to her family too. Despite advocating that the father of the child is to blame, when the suggestion is made that it is her own son responsible, she **simply rejects** it **"I won't believe it"**. This also suggests that her ignorance and blindness previously discussed is a **deliberate choice extending from selective belief**.

TOP TIP



Contextual link to AO3: Her name is **wholly ironic** and would be noted by Priestley's **contemporary audience** who had a good understanding of plays. The name Sibyl is an illusion to the Sibyls of Greek mythology which were **prophetesses** that could see into the future. Priestley may be highlighting how her **arrogance** is so overt she perceives herself in an almost supernaturally powerful light, which the audience knows is a falsity.

IGNORANT AND OBLIVIOUS

- Her entry into act two is **conducted entirely under the arrogance of her social superiority**, she **[enters, briskly and self-confidently, quite out of key]**, she is so performative in her expression of her class that it seems **she is living a different narrative to the rest of the characters in the play**, which serves to amplify how disjointed they are as a family.
- It also shows her lack of **genuine social awareness**, as she is unable to detect the tense atmosphere she has entered.
- Every action she makes seems **conceited and calculated**, which is made evident through the stage directions **[affecting great surprise]**, **[smiling, social]** and **[same easy tone]**. She is **well-rehearsed in conducting her social behaviour**, but this act fails to apply to the present situation they have found themselves in, her **affable performance does not match the tone of the investigation**.
- Her **class-driven egotism** characterises her as a **controlling** character, this **extends from her behaviour in Act One** when she scolded her husband and daughter (Sheila) for the way they behaved.
- The stage directions **"rebuking them"** and her saying **"I'm talking to the inspector now, if you don't mind"** **exemplifies her belief in her inherent superiority**. It also shows her defensiveness as her reputability is threatened.
- She groups together the lower classes in saying **"Girls of that class-"** to dismiss them **as an aggregate (meaning they are all grouped together as one) inferior group that all behave in the same way**, her classist attitudes are apparent.

COMPARISON

This is another way Sheila is constructed as a foil she takes very little persuasion to admit **"I know I'm to blame"**, and she is eager to accept responsibility. This is pertinent as Sheila is dismissed by her bother on multiple occasions for being childish, yet ironically, she is far more mature.

TOPIC SENTENCES

Mrs Birling's social interactions seem to be a product of the behaviours her class delineates rather than an authentic understanding of the social atmosphere around her, when events veer from her comfort zone she responds with aggression, translating her status into power.

Mrs Birling's ignorant naivety is made apparent through her son Eric who is Priestley's construction to expose her foolish and erroneous assumption that the upper classes can do no harm. She expresses the objective understanding that the father of Eva's child is in the wrong but rejects the possibility that this could be true of her own son.

Her overt bias is apparent through her physical disgust Mrs Birling seems to associate with the lower class, she dehumanises them and fails to express any empathy for the working class. Priestley uses Mrs Birling as a tool to expose classism as a wholly dehumanising process.

