

KEY WORDS

Arrogant, Controlling, Unsympathetic, Classist, A marionette of her class, Pompous, Heartless, Upholds patriarchal standards, Narcissistic, Oblivious, Cold, Prejudiced

Mrs Birling

Act 1

EMPHASISES THE DISPARITY BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

- Mrs Birling challenges the younger generation as they threaten the **capitalist and classist system that she is profiting off**. She scolds her daughter ***"Sheila! What an expression! Really, the things you girls pick up these days!"***. Her **superficially** driven codes of conduct are exposed as she **cares more about speech and etiquette than morality**.
- The **exclamation** could be a manifestation of her **desperation to oppose any changes to convention that put her class position under threat**.
- Through using the noun **'girl'** Mrs Birling **belittles Sheila in order to dismiss her behaviour and portray it as foolish or uncouth**, she reinforces the separation between the older generation who are **robust to these newer ways of thinking** and the younger ones that seem vulnerable to **'pick[ing]'** them up as if they were a disease.
- She acknowledges that marriage is a process of **enforcing and adopting a different set of controls and norms**, telling Sheila ***"when you're married you'll realise"*** which emphasises how her worldview is largely based on her role as a wife.
- She is a **tool for Priestley** to capture how marriage within the Edwardian era was a **rite of passage**, though which men would be **permitted to exert newfound control over their wives** and women would shift to **operate under a stricter degree of control**.

CONSERVED WITHIN HER CLASS

- Mrs Birling is the **paragon** (a perfect example of) the **aristocratic** woman during the **Edwardian era**.
- As a married woman of the upper class, she is secure, **almost held in aspic within the hard-wired conventions of a capitalist and classist society**, thus anything that threatens these conventions threaten her.
- She is introduced as her ***"husband's social superior"***, through which Priestley **satirises a society** that allows human beings to be **defined by their role or purpose within the class system**.
- By extension, it seems she is **commodified, valued based on what can be achieved from marrying her as opposed to value based on moral judgement**- this creates an environment in which she can act **ignorantly and reject responsibility** for her actions. This is realised throughout the play.
- Moreover, in this introduction she is the only character who is not named, even the parlour maid, Edna is individually denominated. She is instead referred to as Arthur Birling's ***"wife"***, suggesting her **social role dehumanises her and detaches her from any sense of being**.
- Priestley reinforces her as a **marionette (puppet) of her class as she is complicit in upholding its conventions**, she conditions her husband to do the same in saying ***"Arthur you're not supposed to say such things"***, trying to **iron out any social faux pas (socially awkward or improper) so they operate seamlessly within the expectations of their class**, she is reluctant to deviate from these in any way.
- It is important to note that Mrs Birling seemingly expresses no desire to break free from her **gender role**, she in fact works to **uphold the patriarchy**. She dismisses herself from the room ***"I think Sheila and I better go to the drawing room and leave you men"***.

TOP TIPS



A03: contextually, women would typically reside in the drawing room after dinner to allow the males of the household to discuss topics deemed unfit for women to talk about, the men would often also indulge in drinking and smoking cigars. This spatial segregation helped to reinforce the gender divide, which is so internalised for Mrs Birling she actively enhances this separation.

TOPIC SENTENCES

Seemingly, Mrs Birling is held in aspic within her class, it keeps her secure within the comfort of aristocratic life and she operates under the strict conventions it postulates.

Through her adherence to the conventions of the upper-class wife, Mrs Birling is complicit in upholding the patriarchy.

Mrs Birling emphasises the separation between the older and the younger generation to assert her superiority over the youths which challenge the conventions of the classist system she operates under and profits off.