

KEY WORDS

Insensitive, callous, misogynistic, arrogant

Mr Birling Act 2

MISOGYNISTIC TO ASSERT HIS POWER

- Birling uses **misogyny** to establish his role as the head of the household, he attempts to speak on behalf of Mrs Birling and Sheila, Mr Birling is **emblematic of the patriarchy**.
- He interrogates the inspector: "is there any reason why my wife should answer questions from you, inspector?".
- The **possessive pronoun 'my'** is a means of him **establishing control to elevate himself**.
- The use of a **rhetorical question** paints Birling as **patronising**, he is in a power struggle with the inspector and he immediately resorts to aggression and disrespect to win the social battle, painting him as undeserving of respect.
- As Priestley has previously portrayed him as **ignorant and oblivious** (through references such as describing the Titanic as **"unsinkable"** a key moment of **dramatic irony** to ridicule his idiocy), the audience condemns Mr Birling's arrogance.
- He also **critiques** the inspector at every opportunity, almost searching for his flaws and mistakes, he complains "a young unmarried girl [Sheila], is being dragged into this—".

PREOCCUPIED WITH REPUTATION

- Act two is an opportunity for the other characters to **start contemplating feelings of remorse**, yet we see none of this with Mr Birling.
- As a member of the older generation (we see this mirrored by Mrs Birling too) Mr Birling exhibits a **high external locus**, meaning that he perceives his behaviours as a result of external influences- not the fault of his own. He **"dubiously"** tells his wife "if this comes out at the inquest, it isn't going to do us much good. The press might easily take it up—".
- We see him subtly **reprimanding his wife for her negligence** of Eva which not only exposes his hypocrisy but also demonstrates him desperately attempting to **expel the blame and responsibility onto others**.
- The **"dubious"** mention of **"the press"** is more revealing in terms of his character, "dubious" has **connotations** of shyness and uncertainty which **juxtaposes** his former confident and extroverted self. Birling's anxiety at the mention of the press stems from a fear of his reputation being compromised, it is not at all motivated by guilt or pity towards Eva.
- This is a moment of **dramatic irony** intended to evoke a bitter excitement that Birling, a disagreeable character is **due a dire fortune**, as the audience knows that Birlings' Knighthood is at stake. Priestley is perhaps exploring how every **fibre of Mr Birling's being is superficial**- the only thing that can **elicit an emotional response from him is another frivolous trope of wealth**, yet he remains unphased by the concept of death or suicide.

Link to AO3: marriage in 1912 Britain was a means of achieving social mobility, it was perceived as a transaction. Birling taking ownership of his wife in this moment may be a metaphor for him grasping onto his status and value within society, which is currently under threat.



TOP TIP

SHEILA AS A TRANSACTION

- His artificial care for his daughter is ironic as we know that he **exploits Sheila for social and financial gain through marriage**, he views her only function as his daughter is to marry an affluent man thus he is sure to mention her marital status even though it is not relevant.
- From this we see his hollowness; he doesn't care that a young girl was subject to suicide so his apparent concern for Sheila to be exposed to a police investigation is deceitful.
- Moreover, the adjective ***"unmarried"*** is used as an epithet of weakness which emulates male arrogance, suggesting a woman 'needs' marriage as a form of safety.
- The lack of a **familial dynamic between Mr Birling and his daughter serves to exacerbate the divide between the older and younger generation.**
- Ultimately, Priestly highlights how the individualistic notions of capitalism compromise having meaningful relationships as Mr Birling fails to show compassion to anyone, even his wife and daughter.
- Another example you could consider is his exclamatory question ***"what's the matter with that child?"***- **we can look at transitions in language here**, shifting from the possessive pronoun ***"my"*** to the demonstrative pronoun ***"that"*** metaphorically expels himself of the ownership over Sheila once she begins demonstrating socialist ideology. Perhaps this is a critique of how political views were valued over familial compassion.

TOPIC SENTENCES

As a paragon of the obstinate capitalist, Mr Birling fails to show any remorse for the death of Eva. He remains static throughout the play, impassive despite the inspector's advertisement of socialism.

Mr Birling's selfishness is multi-faceted, he values his own reputation over everything. This prompts him to behave apathetically, as he is too preoccupied with the threat of his status being compromised to feel any sense of compassion.

Mr Birling is a paragon of the patriarchal male in 1912 Britain, he uses misogyny to assert his power, treating women as the possessions and property of men.