

HOW DOES PRIESTLEY USE THE CHARACTER OF MRS BIRLING TO EXPLORE IDEAS ABOUT SOCIAL CLASS?

Priestley constructs Mrs Birling as a paragon of the capitalist wife, and this role defines her whole sense of being. By extension, he condemns a class system which renders her entirely two-dimensional. Moreover, Mrs Birling is also used to portray the inter-class attitudes, more specifically the perception the upper classes had of the working class. Her character disappoints the audience as she remains static throughout the play, failing to develop in terms of her morality and she persists deeply entrenched within her classist beliefs.

From the start of the play, Mrs Birling is seemingly held within the aspic of her class, her social role precedes her as she is introduced as Arthur Birling's "wife". She is the only character in the text to be denied a name in the introduction, which voices how marriage is dehumanising in a classist system, she is commodified to the possession of her husband. Furthermore, she is described as her "husband's social superior", which further reduces her to her social position. This also provides insight into the role marriage served within Edwardian England, exposing it as a transaction in which the auction of social ascension was prioritised over a romantic connection. She is simultaneously a marionette and a puppeteer of the class system, she has internalised the conventions and etiquette of the upper classes so deeply she is a victim to them, yet she also enforces them onto others. This is evident as she scolds her husband in reminding him "Arthur you're not supposed to say such things", to iron out his social faux pas of complimenting their domestic servants. The verb "supposed", highlights that the class conventions of the time were not founded on knowledge, and Priestley subtly critiques them as hollow and uninformed. Although, at the same time she is complicit in upholding the patriarchal and classist system, announcing "I think Sheila and I better go to the drawing room and leave you men", through which she encourages the segregation of men and women into separate spheres. During the Edwardian era, it was conventional for women to depart from the dining room after eating to allow men to engage in more masculine affairs such as discussing political matters, she instigates this herself. There is a level of ambiguity to this, the audience cannot know whether she is actively upholding this division because she wants to or whether she is merely acting upon the conventions she is "supposed" to. The earlier use of this verb could imply that she is merely a marionette of the etiquette and practises she has been conditioned to believe are acceptable. By extension, the audience simultaneously pities and critiques her, she is both a victim and a perpetrator, throughout the text, this pity diminishes as she actively chooses to uphold the flawed capitalist systems, due to the protection they offer her.

Mrs Birling's attitude to the working class further illustrates the internalisation of capitalism, she dismisses the lower classes as an aggregate inferior group that all behave in the same way by referring to them as "girls of that class". This immediately undermines her beliefs as it is evident, they are rife with prejudice and not founded on empirical truths. The demonstrative pronoun "that" is used in place of a more personal pronoun such as "her" to enforce a separation between her own class and theirs, there is also an implicit disgust woven into the term. Moreover, the noun "girls" dismisses them as feeble and immature, there is an inherent superiority that underpins the way she views others. Beyond this, there is a semantic field of disgust woven into Mrs Birling's lexis as she discusses the Eva Smith case with the inspector and her family, her speech is punctuated by adjectives such as "gross", "disgusting", and "wretched". This implies she has an overt repulsion against the lower classes and merely the thought of them is associated with repugnance. Priestley encourages his audience to criticise and condemn Mrs Birling's beliefs, portraying them as inhumane and corrupt.

Mrs Birling's secondary role is to depict the lack of mobility postulated by a capitalist system; she fails to develop morally throughout the text. Priestley exposes the intentions of capitalists through the stage directions "triumphantly" to describe the manner in which she speaks when the suggestion that the inspector was not real arises. The adverb "triumphantly" connotes to the notion of a battle. This battle could be dichotomous, in one sense it could allude to her winning the battle against the inspector whom she perceives as a "trifle impertinent". More judiciously, it could be a metaphorical battle against the socialist beliefs that the inspector serves as a mouthpiece for. As a woman whom the classist system favours, it is in Mrs Birling's interest to uphold it as a means of self-preservation and protection. The subtle aggression towards anything that threatens her class is evident throughout the text as she not only is domineering and controlling but she also expresses egotistically driven anger. As the inspector begins to threaten her idealistic social status she grows "annoyed" and begins to speak "haughtily" portraying how she becomes defensive as her social class is threatened. From this Priestley portrays the classist system as wholly corrupt, it is something that some individuals profit off for self-elevation whilst it victimises and essentially dehumanises others.

In conclusion, Mrs Birling is used to explore the effects of the internalisation of the class system. She is an integral character to explore the theme of social class as it defines every fibre of her being; every action she takes within the text is under the guise of her allegedly superior social role. Priestley by extension captures the dehumanising qualities of a corrupt class system.