

“Do Now” Work

How does Priestley present Mrs Birling as a "cold woman"?
Be able to identify evidence and explore the effect on the audience.

1. Do you think Sybil is a good mother?
2. Do you think Sybil is a good wife?

Challenge: Do you think there is any reason to feel sorry for Sybil at any point during the play?

In Silence Please



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Although it defies a conventional reading of the play, it is possible to view Mrs Birling as a character worthy of our sympathy. In act 1, we see that she is complicit in her role on the gender hierarchy as she wants to "leave you men" to talk about proper business. This phrase conveys to the audience that she is happy in her own subjugation and even implies that she feels it best that the women are left out of important decisions. The audience could feel sympathy for Mrs Birling here as she is the antithesis of her daughter, Sheila, who becomes a strong character, and Eva Smith who fights for her right to a fair wage. Priestley's intention here was to show the ignorance of the upper classes and the older generation's unwillingness to change. However, the audience's sympathy for Mrs Birling is quickly subverted when we see the effect Sybil's actions have on her daughter.

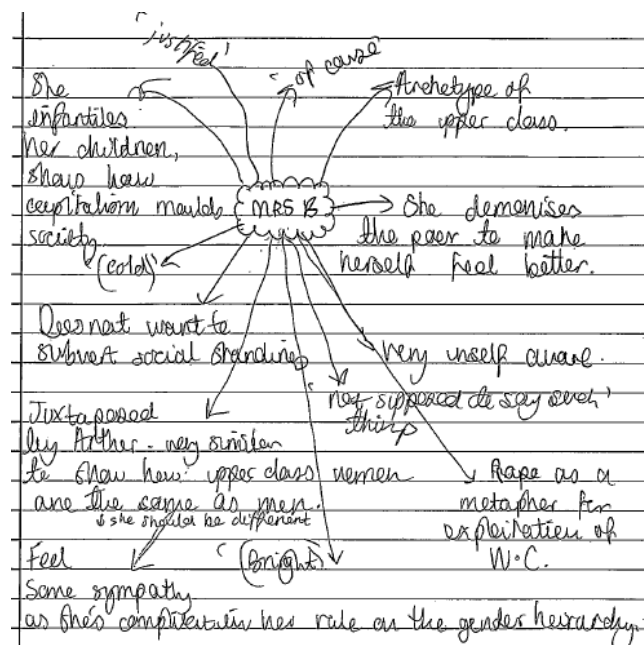
Sheila Birling is very similar to her mother at the start of the play. Sheila seeks shallow validation from superficial things such as the ring Gerald gave her at their engagement. She "really feel[s] engaged" after she has been given a gift which shows that in a relationship, she does not value the love of Gerald but the money he brings her. However, the audience become aware that this is not of her own doing but Mrs Birling's. Sybil infantilises her children when they are adults which is shown through Sheila calling her "mummy". This use of noun gives the audience the impression that Sheila has been so shielded from the outside world that she has not properly grown up. It also depicts the extent that Mrs Birling has cushioned her daughter with her wealth which is why Sheila seems not to have grown up. This is further demonstrated in Sheila's confession that she got Eva Smith fired because she was not happy with the way she perceived Smith to look at her. This is again reminiscent of a childhood tantrum. Priestley's intention here was to depict how capitalism moulds society. At the time this play was set, the gap between the working class and middle class people was expanding and Priestley did not like the way in which this took place. He believed the middle class should do more to help the working class. Through this characterisation of Sybil, Priestley makes his audience more receptive to his socialist message.

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In the play 'An Inspector Calls', J B Priestley presents Mrs Birling as the archetype of middle class social standards. Mrs Birlings' role in the play is to symbolise the older generation and their unwillingness to change their views.

- Sybil displays the traditional female role in the house.
- She sees herself as superior to the working class.
- She presents herself as moral and charitable.
- She is revealed to be a hypocrite and a bad mother.

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1. How is Sybil shown both as someone with a high social status but at the same time, a stereotypical Edwardian woman?

Page 1: her husband's social superior.

Page 2: (reproachfully) "you're not supposed to say such things"

Page 2: "very well, then. Just a little."

Page 3: "you'll have to get used to that, just as I did"

Page 5: "leave you men -"

Page 52: "Sheila, take your mother along to the drawing room -"

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2. How is Mrs Birling shown as someone who is prejudiced towards the working class but tries to use her own class to her advantage?

Page 30: "Girls of that class"

Page 30: Sheila: "You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl."

Page 31: "You know of course that my husband was Lord Mayor"

Page 32: Sheila: "We really must stop these silly pretences."

Page 32: "Naturally I don't know anything about this girl"

Page 35: "Surely you don't mean Alderman Meggarty?"

Page 42: "We've done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases."

Page 43: "naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case"

Page 43: "I think she had only herself to blame."

Page 44: "I didn't like her manner. She'd impertinently made use of our name"

Page 47: "As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money"

Page 48: "He should be made an example of."

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3. How is Sybil shown as someone who doesn't know or understand her children?

Page 3: "What an expression, Sheila. Really, the things you girls pick up on these days!"

Page 5: Sheila: "Look - mummy"

Page 29: "I don't know what you're talking about, Sheila."

Page 30: "You seem to have made a great impression on this child, inspector."

Page 30: "You're looking tired, dear. I think you ought to go to bed..."

Page 30: "I don't understand you."

Page 32: "No, of course not. He's only a boy."

Page 33: "Over excited and refuses to go."

Page 34: "It would be much better if Sheila didn't listen to this story at all."

Page 45: Sheila: "Mother, I think it was cruel and vile."

Page 49: Sheila: "Mother - I begged you and begged you to stop."

Page 54: Birling: "you've been spoilt"

Page 55: Eric: "Then - you killed her [...] damn you, damn you -"

Page 71: "They're over-tired. In the morning, they'll be as amused as we are"

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4. How is Sybil shown as someone who agrees with her husband's selfish, capitalist view of the world?

Page 44: "I did nothing I'm ashamed of"

Page 44: "I used my influence to have it refused."

Page 44: "I consider I did my duty."

Page 44: "Simply because I've done nothing wrong - and you know it."

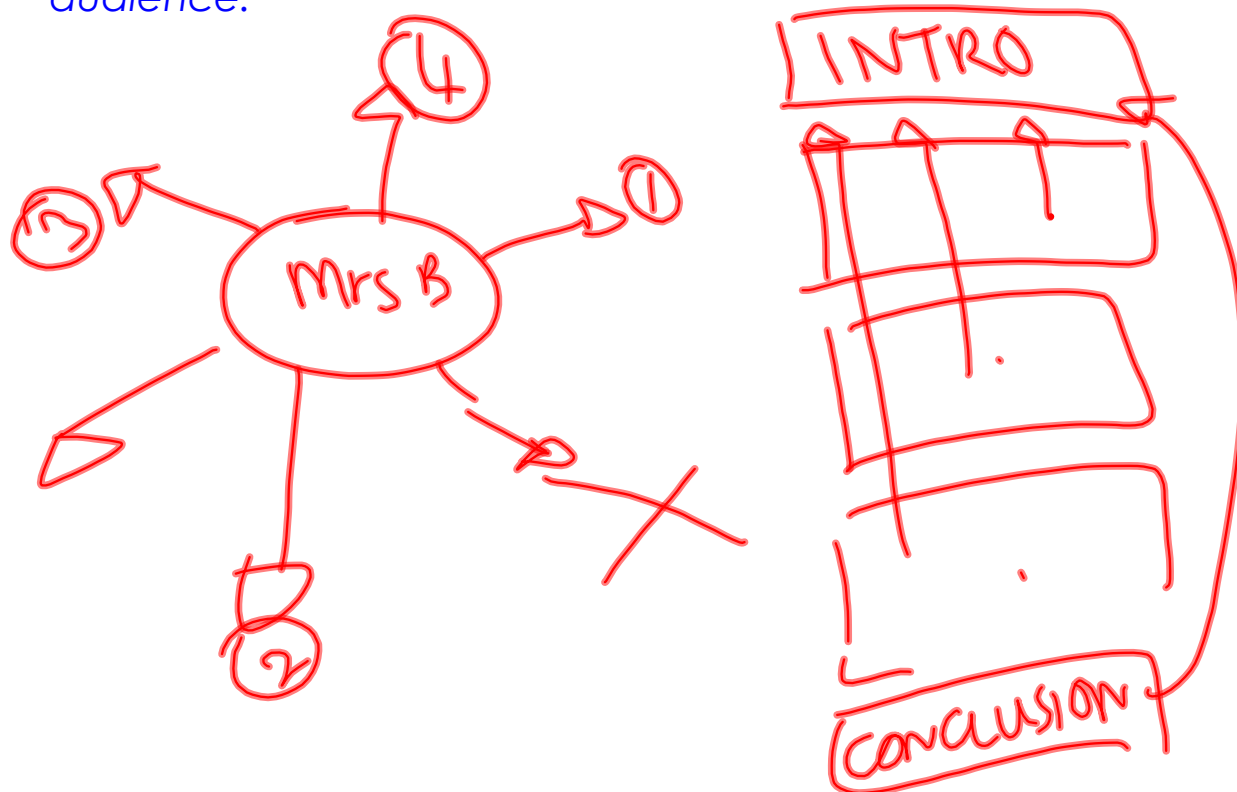
Page 47: "You're quite wrong to suppose I shall regret what I did."

Page 47: "I was perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim for assistance."

Page 47: "I accept no blame for it at all."

Page 54: (shocked) "Eric! You stole money?"

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What?	How?	Why?
	"I was perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim."	
	"As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money."	
	"Weve done a great deal [...] in helping deserving cases."	

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What? (P)	How? (ETE)	Why? (R)
Mrs Birling is presented as a cold woman through her callous refusal to accept any responsibility for Eva's death.	<p>"I was perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim."</p> <p>justified - adjective, repeated throughout act 2 to excuse her actions. perfectly - adverb - highlights selfish, stubborn attitude. my - possessive pronoun - shows off her power verb - allow - reminds the audience she could have helped Eva.</p>	To show how the middle class judged the working class in Edwardian Britain. Strengthens Priestley's message for social change.
Mrs Birling has a negative, prejudiced view of the working class.	<p>"As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money."</p> <p>girl - noun - doesn't use her name - creates distance and lack of personal connection. Girl emphasises Eva's youth. that sort - dismissive phrase - sees herself as different to Eva. refuse money - implies working class have no morals - ironic as Mrs B is the one without morals.</p>	To show the hypocrisy of the middle class. Mrs Birling judges Eva's morals based on her class when in fact it's her own class who show a lack of moral behaviour. Priestley is showing that socialism is better for society.
Mrs Birling thinks she is an upstanding member of the community, but it is false as she's uncaring and lacks compassion.	<p>"We've done a great deal [...] in helping deserving cases."</p> <p>deserving - adjective - implies that her charity is judgmental rather than compassionate.</p>	Priestley wanted to expose the 'pretences' put on by the middle class to show that they are insincere and that society needs to change. Mrs Birling has "had children" - makes links - empathy.

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Mrs Birling is described as a "rather cold woman" at the start of the play. How does Priestley show this and other ideas about Mrs Birling in the play?

"So I was perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim."

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Using the quotation, write a what, how, why paragraph answering the exam question.

"So I was perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim."

How does Priestley present Mrs Birling as a "cold woman"?
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Priestley presents Mrs Birling's cold character through her callous refusal to accept any blame for Eva's death. Mrs Birling thinks she was "perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim." By repeating the adjective "justified" throughout act 2, Mrs Birling excuses her actions, and this is reinforced by the adverb "perfectly" which highlights her stubborn, selfish attitude. Mrs Birling shows off her social power by using the possessive pronoun "my" when referring to the committee, and the verb "allow" reminds the audience that she could have helped Eva if she wanted to. Priestley presents Mrs Birling as someone who is moralistic as she is a "prominent member" of a charity. However, Mrs Birling's myopic views show how the middle class judged the working class in Edwardian Britain and strengthens Priestley's message for social change.

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Mrs Birling has a prejudiced, negative view of the working class. When Inspector Goole asks Mrs Birling to explain why she didn't believe Eva's story about the stolen money, she says "as if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money."

Throughout the play, Mrs Birling uses the noun "girl" instead of Eva's name. This creates a sense of distance between Mrs Birling and Eva, suggesting that Mrs Birling does not want to make any personal connection with Eva. This implies that Mrs Birling is unwilling to be associated with someone from the working class. This is reinforced by the dismissive phrase "that sort" to refer to Eva's class. This suggests that Mrs Birling sees herself as different from Eva, and she uses this as an excuse for her lack of empathy for Eva. Also, by suggesting that Eva wouldn't "refuse money", Priestley is implying that Mrs Birling thinks that working class people like Eva have no morals. This is ironic as it is in fact Mrs Birling who portrays a lack of morality. Priestley skillfully shows the post war audience the hypocrisy of the middle class in Edwardian Britain. Mrs Birling judges Eva's morals based on her class when in fact it's her own class who show a lack of moral behaviour. Through this, Priestley is able to strengthen his message that a socialist ideology is better for society.

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Priestley presents Mrs Birling's cold character by showing her to pretend to be an upstanding member of the community when in fact she is uncaring and lacks compassion. Mrs Birling is a "prominent member" of a charity, and she proudly tells the inspector that they have done a "great deal" to help "deserving cases". However, Priestley undermines Mrs Birling's actions here through the use of the adjective "deserving" to describe the people she's helped. This implies that Mrs Birling's committee is judgemental rather than compassionate, and this is reinforced by Mrs Birling's judgement of Eva as an unmarried pregnant woman.

Priestley wanted to expose the "pretences" put on by the middle class to show that society needs to change. Inspector Goole reminds Mrs Birling that she's "had children" and must have known how Eva felt to break down divisions in society and show the audience the importance of empathy.

