

Sybil Birling

Sybil is described as a 'cold woman.' This suggests that she is heartless and does not feel emotions. This foreshadows the rest of the play, as she is the coldest person when hearing her story told by the inspector. She denies all responsibility, admits to being prejudiced against Eva's case, refuses to show any remorse about the girl's death and can't see why everyone else is horrified by the way she is talking. She is called her husband's 'social superior,' which suggests that she has always known wealth and life as a middle-class woman. The beginning of the play doesn't name her, and in the description it only says 'his wife' (referring to Mr Birling.) This reflects the attitudes toward women at the time, as they were mainly viewed as exclusively the possessions of their husbands. This all reflects Mrs Birling's personality, as she has very traditional views. Mrs Birling is stuck in her ways, and still sees everyone of a lower class than her as worthless. This especially comes into play when being questioned by the inspector, as he tries (and fails) to make her realise that everyone matters, not just people with influence and money like herself.

Sybil's relationships with other characters do not really vary much through the play. Mr Birling sees her as his possession, and a way by which to further his social standing. Mrs Birling, in return, plays the part of the little wife that does all of her husband's bidding and serves as an object. Though they both get along, there is very much the presence of an unloving relationship, and Mrs Birling even hints towards the fact that Mr Birling may have had an affair in the early days of their relationship. This relationship has many parallels to that of Sheila and Gerald, but Sheila manages to get out of it before they marry, which shows the start of a time where women are smarter and more independent. Mrs Birling treats both Eric and Sheila in the same way. She sees them as little children, when, in reality, they are adults and more than capable of handling situations. She frequently refers to Sheila as 'over excited,' which shows her dismissive views of her children's opinions and thoughts. This reflects the middle-class attitude of the time, when the children were protected and shielded from anything and everything. Sheila and Eric both play up to this in the beginning of the play - Sheila especially when she calls her parents 'mummy' and 'daddy.' But, as the play progresses, they both learn to resent Mrs Birling for the way that she is acting and the way that she treats them. Mrs Birling sees Gerald as a worthy son in law, and Gerald, in turn, respects her.

Themes explored through Mrs Birling

- Responsibility- 'I did nothing I'm ashamed of or that won't bear investigation.' 'Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility.' 'I accept no blame for it at all.'
- Women- 'Now Sheila don't tease him... men with important work...' 'Over excited... And she refuses to go.'
- Truth- 'And if I was, what business is it of yours?'
- Social Class- 'Girls of that class-'