

Characters

Arthur Birling

Key quote

“A man has to make his own way – has to look after himself.”

Birling (p.9)

His position

Arthur Birling is proud of his achievements, but his accent and his memories reveal his humble background. He supports the economic system that has allowed him to succeed: ‘We employers at last are coming together to see that our interests – and the interests of Capital – are properly protected’ (p.6). It seems obvious to him that ‘hard-headed, practical’ businessmen know better than left-wing intellectuals, but his ‘state of the nation’ speech is full of predictions which fail to come true.

Key point

Priestley portrays Birling as typical of men who feel that their status should get them what they want.

A need to impress

Birling wants to impress. In his opening speech he points out that he buys the same port as Gerald’s father. He also tells Gerald that he is likely to receive a knighthood (p.8). This is partly to reassure Gerald’s mother, but it also reflects his sense of self-importance. He again asserts his own importance when he tells Goole, ‘I was an alderman for years – and Lord Mayor two years ago – and I’m still on the Bench’ (p.11). He later tries to intimidate Goole by saying that he plays golf with the Chief Constable (p.16).

Businessman and family man

Birling sees himself as a businessman. He therefore has no regrets about Eva Smith. He is happy that his daughter is going to marry Gerald, but partly because he wants the two families’ companies to work together ‘for lower costs and higher prices’ (p.4). He is protective towards his family, protesting when Goole upsets Sheila (p.21), and trying to stop her hearing about Gerald’s affair (pp.34 and 37). In return, he expects loyalty and resents

Sheila’s lack of it (p.50). However, he does not understand his children or respect their individuality. He calls Sheila a child (pp.21 and 33) and it is clear that Eric feels unsupported by him (p.54).

Unchanged

Birling is unchanged at the end of the play, although the final phone call threatens this. For him, the family’s problems are over if the Inspector was a hoaxer. He admits to having had ‘a bit of a scare’, but he is relieved to have avoided a ‘public scandal’ (p.70).

Activity 1

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Find and explain quotes showing the following character traits in Birling:

- his pride in his humble background;
- his sense of self-importance;
- his pride in being a ‘hard-headed’ businessman;
- his inability to relate to his children;
- his inability to learn from the Inspector’s visit.

Find at least one quote for each trait.

Sybil Birling

Her snobbery

Mrs Birling is aware of class distinctions, showing embarrassment when Birling compliments the cook (p.2) and telling him off for talking business (p.4). She also disapproves of the slang word ‘squiffy’ (p.3). She resents Eva Smith’s ‘gross impertinence’ (p.43) in calling herself Mrs Birling, and refuses to believe in her moral stance: ‘She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position’ (p.46).



Mr and Mrs Birling consider the prospects of a public scandal.

Her lack of compassion

Despite heading a charity for women in need, Mrs Birling showed no compassion towards Eva Smith. She feels ‘perfectly justified’ in having dismissed her (p.47). Yet under pressure she tries to shift blame onto Birling: ‘it wasn’t I who had her turned out of her employment’ (p.46). She is even more forceful in blaming ‘some drunken young idler’ (p.48). Priestley deals with Mrs Birling with special severity, having her fall into a trap of her own making: she is confronted with the knowledge that Eric is a hard drinker and the father of the dead woman’s child. She has helped to kill her own grandchild.

There is **dramatic irony** in the way Mrs Birling is trapped. The audience will realise before her that the ‘drunken young idler’ is Eric. There is also **situational irony**: we know that she would not apply the same standards to her own family, yet Eric is condemned by her words.

Unchanged

Mrs Birling is quick to claim that she would have handled the situation better than her husband (p.63). When the hoax appears to be confirmed, she is relieved and ‘amused’, and cannot see why the family should not carry on as before (p.71).

Activity 2

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

How do the following lines reveal Mrs Birling’s outlook?

- ‘When you’re married you’ll realize that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business.’ (p.3)
- ‘Girls of that class—’ (p.30)
- ‘That – I consider – is a trifle impertinent, Inspector.’ (p.30)
- ‘You know of course that my husband was Lord Mayor...’ (p.31)
- ‘I don’t believe it. I *won’t* believe it...’ (p.49)

Gerald Croft

His relationship with Mr and Mrs Birling

Gerald is the son of Sir George and Lady Croft, and Birling is keen to have him as a son-in-law. Gerald is described as ‘very much the easy well-bred young man-about-town’, yet he seems anxious to please the Birlings (p.2). When Birling praises the dinner, Gerald agrees enthusiastically – ‘Absolutely first-class’ (p.2). The same can be said of his response when Birling talks about the business benefits of the

Key quote

“Oh – she had some fancy reason. As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!”

Mrs Birling (p.47)

Key point

It is only in Act Three that Gerald finally apologises: ‘I did keep a girl last summer. I’ve admitted it. And I’m sorry, Sheila’ (p.66).