

Essay 1: Mr Birling Essay (Intermediate)

How does Priestley present the character of Mr Birling in *An Inspector Calls*?

In Act One of *An Inspector Calls*, Mrs Birling is a mysterious character: she is absent for a large part of the Act and when present gives little of herself away. What is clear, however, is that she is ruled by the social expectations of her status and her gender. In Edwardian England, a woman's life was focused in the home: she was expected to be dedicated to her family and obedient to her husband, who was viewed as her superior. This essay will explore how Mrs Birling's behaviour reflects that of an upper-class wife and mother in Edwardian England.

In the opening of Act One, Mrs Birling's desire to be a dedicated wife and mother is clear. Her response to both her husband's and daughter's commands ('you must take a little [port]' and 'You must drink our health', respectively) is one of obedience. Her statement, 'Very well, then' (a response which suggests she is acting due to pressure, not choice) highlights how she adjusts her behaviour to please those around her. She is bound by her duty as a wife and a mother. Priestley may have presented Mrs Birling like this to encourage his 1945 audience to question the gender roles that dominated Edwardian society and ensure that, given the progress made for women since 1912, they did not return to them.

Mrs Birling's commitment to behaving as she is expected to is clear in how she responds to Sheila when Sheila teases Gerald about having not gone near her. Mrs Birling tells Sheila that 'men with important work to do' have their time occupied by it and that Sheila will just 'have to get used to that', exactly as she did. This implies she believes that a good wife is one who is aware of the fact that they come second to work, and one who upholds this position without complaining. Her reference to men's work as 'important' further emphasises the position of women as the inferior gender as they are excluded from this superior world of work, where the things that really matter occur. Again, the 1945 audience would be aware that women too could do 'important' work given the war effort.

Mrs Birling, however, is also committed to class expectations, and this does conflict with her role as an obedient wife. In the opening stage directions, Priestley states that Mrs Birling is 'her husband's social superior'. This higher status is in evidence in the opening of Act One through her higher standard of social etiquette: when Mr Birling compliments their recently finished meal, Mrs Birling criticises him 'reproachfully', stating: 'Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things'. It would have been rude for the upper classes or upper middle classes to compliment a meal in their own home. The use of the adverb 'reproachfully' highlights the extent to which she is ruled by social expectations – she not only disapproves of her husband's act, it also fills her with disappointment. Her criticism of her husband is, in some ways, surprising given her obedience elsewhere in the Act, though it does indicate the difference between her husband's upbringing and her own, and her dedication to social expectations. Here, Priestley is reminding his audience of another sort of inequality that existed in Edwardian society: class.

In conclusion, in Act One, Priestley presents Mrs Birling as someone whose actions are controlled by codes of conduct: those of wives and those of the upper middle class. When these roles come into conflict, it is the expectations of the upper class that come out on top and guide Mrs Birling's behaviour. It could be argued that Priestley uses Mrs Birling as a vehicle to outline and demonstrate the social expectations of the period. As the plot unfolds, then, Priestley is able to undermine not only her character, but also the codes of conduct of the society she is a part of. What use are such strict codes of conduct when morality and compassion are non-existent?

Essay 1: Mr Birling Essay (Advanced)

How does Priestley present the character of Mr Birling in *An Inspector Calls*?

In Act One of *An Inspector Calls*, Mrs Birling is a mysterious character: she is absent for a large part of the Act and when present gives little of herself away. What is clear, however, is that she is bound by the societal expectations of her status and her gender, which dictate how she behaves and responds to those around her. In Edwardian England, a woman's life was focused in the domestic sphere: she was expected to be dedicated to her family and obedient to her husband, who, being of the male gender, was regarded as superior. Those of a high status, male and female, were also expected to behave in a certain way: with manners and decorum. This essay will explore how Mrs Birling's behaviour reflects that of, and is bound by the expectations of, an upper-class wife and mother in Edwardian England.

In the opening of Act One, Mrs Birling's desire to be a dedicated wife and mother is apparent. Her response to both her husband's and daughter's commands ('you must take a little [port]' and 'You must drink our health', respectively) is one of acquiescence. Her statement, 'Very well, then' (a response which suggests she is acting due to pressure, not choice), and the fact she did not voluntarily request port, highlight how she adjusts her behaviour to please those around her – to be obedient to her husband, and to support her daughter in celebrating her engagement. She is bound by her duty as a wife and a mother. Mr Birling and Sheila's use of 'you must' further reinforces these roles – social convention at the time allowed both father and daughter to directly command such obedience from Mrs Birling without appearing unreasonable. The 1945 audience may have found the obedience of Mrs Birling's character outdated as during the world wars women came to have more responsibility and freedom in society, taking on roles that had previously gone to men. There was, therefore, more equality between the genders. As a socialist, Priestley may have presented Mrs Birling like this to encourage his 1945 audience to question the gender roles that dominated Edwardian society and ensure that, given the progress made for women, they did not return to them.

Mrs Birling's dedication to Edwardian gender protocol is further apparent in her criticism of Sheila when she is teasing Gerald, doubting that he was genuinely busy with work the previous summer when he ignored her. Mrs Birling advises Sheila that 'men with important work to do' have their time occupied by it and that Sheila will just 'have to get used to that', exactly as she did. This implies she believes that a good wife is one who is aware of the fact that they come second to work, and one who upholds this position without critique. Mrs Birling's defense of Gerald and subsequent affirmation of the expected role of a wife suggests that she values propriety more than feelings: women should behave a certain way regardless of how it makes them feel. A situation they dislike is something they should passively accept – that is, 'just get used to'. Her reference to men's work as 'important' further emphasises the position of women as the inferior gender as they are excluded from this superior world of work, where the things that really matter occur. Again, the 1945 audience would be aware that women too could do 'important' work given the war effort. This comment would, therefore,

appear anachronistic and would encourage the audience to perceive Edwardian society as alien to them, which would, by proxy, lead them to question its other values, such as class and capitalism. Mrs Birling, however, is also devoted to class conventions; a devotion which does, at times, conflict with her gendered role as an obedient wife. In the opening stage directions, Priestley states that Mrs Birling is 'her husband's social superior'. This higher status is in evidence in the opening of Act One through her higher standard of social etiquette: when Mr Birling compliments their recently finished meal, Mrs Birling criticises him 'reproachfully', stating: 'Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things'. In accordance with the behavioural expectations of the upper classes, Mrs Birling does not believe one should praise a meal that one has served (albeit indirectly) – such praise should be made by those who are guests. The use of the adverb 'reproachfully' highlights the extent to which she is ruled by social expectations – she not only disapproves of her husband's blunder, it also fills her with disappointment. Her criticism of her husband is, in some ways, surprising given her obedience elsewhere in the Act, though it does indicate the difference between her husband's upbringing and her own, and her dedication to social mores. Her critique, however, does lack the assertive nature of Mr Birling's 'you must', acting instead as a reminder of how their social class is expected to behave. In her rebuke, she is still very much an 'inferior' woman. Here, Priestley is reminding his audience of another sort of inequality that pervaded Edwardian society, that of class. Given that Britain had just come out of two world wars, in which the mistakes of the upper class were responsible for the slaughter of the lower classes (notably 'Butcher' Haig in the First World War), Mrs Birling's obsession with social mores would seem pedantic and unnecessary to the audience who were aware that there had been more pressing issues upsetting lives than table etiquette. Through Mrs Birling's behaviour, Priestley, then, shows the absurdity of class protocol: for what use are strict table manners when the world is at war and when the role of the upper class in war has been far from ideal?

In conclusion, in Act One, Priestley presents Mrs Birling as someone whose actions are controlled by codes of conduct: those of wives and those of the upper class. When these roles come into conflict, it is the expectations of the upper class that prevail and dictate Mrs Birling's behaviour, though she does not completely forget the conventional behaviour of her gender. It could be argued that, initially, given her two-dimensional nature, Priestley uses Mrs Birling as a vehicle to outline and demonstrate the social expectations of the period. As the plot unravels, then, Priestley is able to undermine not only her character, but also the codes of conduct of the society she is a part of. What use are such rigorously upheld codes of conduct when morality and compassion are non-existent? The audience would come to see these social rules and inequalities as ideals that make society unstable by preventing people from valuing all humans equally; views that had led to the destruction of the Second World War and cost countless lives. Mrs Birling, then, encapsulates all that is wrong with society – the old world order which the post-war audience would return to at their peril.