

Is Mrs. Birling wholly  
dislikeable essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout the course of the play, we see Mrs Birling's attitude in many ways, however she remains a cold woman, the main reason that she is so dislikeable. She has many unusual qualities, which show the way in which she has been brought up, in a way in which she considers normal for anyone of her class. The play begins.

.. and we are introduced to Mrs Birling's character immediately, some of her first words in the play consisted of disciplining her husband's behaviour, after he has complimented the chef for the meal." Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things-" This indicates, that from her background, she has been raised to never compliment the servants of the house. One can immediately assume that she has had a strict and harsh upbringing which has shaped her personality in ways. This behaviour is repeated moments later when Sybil lectures her daughter on the responsibilities of a good wife.

" 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. You'll have to get used to that, just as I did." Similarly, when Sheila talks to Eric, and accuses him of being ' squiffy', her immediate reply is," Really, the things these you girls pick up these days!" As in all the other examples, it too indicates that Mrs Birling would never of been allowed to use such language whilst living under the guardian of her parents. These are all similar kinds of situations, where we assume Mrs Birling has received a strict childhood in which she has been taught to act like one of her class should.

Even from these first two sentences, we are able to see the way in which Mrs Birling is very aware of her behaviour and social status in life. Whilst the

family sit at the dinner table, there is a sense of control from Mrs Birling, who comes across later in the play as one who seeks it, and likes to always be on top of a situation. Throughout dinner, she has numerous small remarks to the family, showing how she keeps the family in order. If anybody is rude or abrupt, Sybil would be the one who would correct them, she would not be reckoned with, the kind of person who you would not want to cross if you met her.

She is without a doubt the mistress of the house. For example, when Arthur talks to Gerald, he passes a comment about Russia, in which Sybil's response is, "Arthur!" and on another occasion "Eric!" Another noticeable fact is that Mrs Birling leaves the room quite early in the play, and does not return for quite a while. This gives us a hint as to her involvement in the family, suggesting that although she likes to keep everybody in order, she does not participate in many of the family's issues. She does not return until later in the play, after the Inspector has arrived, and is about to start questioning Gerald Croft. She arrives, and is very sociable and polite, however she becomes agitated by the behaviour of Sheila.

This shows Mrs Birling to be a rather cold woman towards her family in terms of their attitude in front of strangers. Due to Sheila's unusual behaviour, whilst the Inspector is at the house, Mrs Birling seems to try to dismiss her daughter, telling her, "You're looking tired, dear. I think you ought to go to bed – and forget about this absurd business." This is the first example that Mrs Birling makes to show that she believes and treats her siblings as children, even though they are both in their twenties. Mrs Birling is very

aware of her social class, and in a variety of situations uses it to her advantage.

She has a complete lack of knowledge of society, and refuses to be any part of it. The harsh reality of Mrs Birling's character is summed up in one quote, when she talks of the girl Eva Smith, "I don't suppose for a moment that we could understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class - " This comment about girls of lower class than herself, shows what Mrs Birling thinks of the people around her, including the Inspector. This would not be something which could generally be due to her upbringing, this is part of Mrs Birling's personality as she is very socially aware of people, which is one of her most dislikeable qualities. She is a very confident woman, mostly due to her status.

The first time that this confidence is shaken is when Mrs Birling discovers some of the secrets of the family. She becomes 'staggered' on the discovery of Eric's drinking habit, and refuses to believe the information that she is told. The fact that she refuses to believe the secrets of her children, shows that she does not think of them as children and not as adults, possibly as children are more innocent, which leaves us to wonder if she brought up in a similar fashion. After finding the news of Eric, she replies, "It isn't true. You know him Gerald - and you're a man - you must know it isn't true." There is a similar reaction from Mrs Birling when she finds that Gerald Croft was also associated with the girl Daisy Renton who committed suicide.

When Gerald begins to talk of his association with the girl, Mrs Birling still refuses to believe, and continually asks questions, such as "Women of the town? ... Don't talk nonsense Sheila.

.. There's no need to be disgusting, surely you don't mean Alderman Meggarty?...

I don't think we want any further details of this disgusting affair - "

Throughout the play there is a constant reminder of Mrs Birling's approach to her siblings. She truly believes in the confidence of her class, that only lower class people would act in such different ways to herself. We are however able to notice that when listening to Gerald's story she is shocked, however she doesn't seem to make much fuss about the event as she is not so shaken, because it is not her own family behaving in this manner. We can also take note that she makes no objection when Sheila hands back the ring to Gerald, hinting that she is secretly satisfied that Sheila does not want to marry Gerald, and disapproves of him.

Another bad quality of Mrs Birling's is her nasty temper. She becomes very annoyed with the inspector, and disapproves of his tone of voice. This becomes obvious when the Inspector begins to enquire into her involvement with Miss Smith. She recognises the photo, however refuses to admit it, which shows a rather dishonest side to the woman, especially with her high social class, and her reaction to others' behaviour, this seems particularly unusual, and in some cases hypocritical. This anger and dishonesty is shown in the following quotation, "I meant what I said y'know." However, when Mrs Birling says this quite aggressively, both the inspector and the audience

knows that she is lying, which as I said before is quite unusual for such a critical woman.

The point in the play which makes us consider Mrs Birling as a wholly unlikeable person, is when she is not moved or affected by this horrific death of a young girl and refuses to accept any responsibility over her death. Most people in an audience would agree that this is cold, and rather selfish, even for a woman such as Mrs Birling. She even admits to being prejudiced against the case of Miss Eva Smith, however she still refuses to claim any responsibility for the death of the girl. She is slightly shaken by the sheer brutality of the Inspector's speech to her about responsibility, however she tries to pass the blame to the father. The nearest Mrs Birling comes to showing some feelings towards the girls is when she says, "I'm sorry she should have come to such a horrible end.

But I accept no blame for it all." Mrs Birling enjoys to have control of all situations, however when she is blamed for an event she claims no responsibility whatsoever." Go and look for the father of the child. It is his responsibility." This cold and frivolous act makes us realise that Mrs Birling is really a very cold-hearted woman who scarcely cares for anybody around her, except herself. The irony of the story is that Mrs Birling is so wrapped up in attempting to pass the blame onto the father that she fails to recognise that it is her own son who is the father.

We return again to the fact that any behaviour which may be classed as unacceptable has anything to do with her family, indeed her siblings. The

second act ends with Mrs Birling repeating, "I don't believe it. I won't believe it..

." We are constantly reminded that Mrs Birling is quite shallow in believing that her daughter and son are very innocent and naïve children, who have not done a thing wrong, and would not do a thing wrong in society. The first signs of concern and distress shown by Mrs Birling is when she is told that Eric has stolen money, and only when faced with the realisation that her actions have led to the death of her grandchild does Mrs Birling actually break down and it is suggested that she leaves the room crying. Throughout the play this is the greatest level of emotion shown by Sybil Birling.

However when she returns and Eric lunges at her, she becomes very distressed on stage. As I have mentioned many times before, Mrs Birling treats her son like a child, and she is faced with this harsh reality when Eric shouts at her; "You don't understand anything. You never did. You never even tried - " This is the only point in the play in which we can realise that maybe Mrs Birling is not wholly unlikeable, and that there is a small possibility that she is not aware of her cruel behaviour to others.

Overall, Mrs Birling appears to be a very cold and unappreciative woman, who is aware of her social class and others around her and uses this power to affect others. She is able to treat people how she wants, illustrated by the immature attitude she has with her children. On the whole, I believe it is this that has made Mrs Birling the dislikeable person she is, but we are left with the idea that she is unaware of how cruel she can be, which leads me to conclude that Mrs Birling is not wholly dislikeable.