

# To what extent is rafe viewed as a sympathetic character in spring and port wine ...

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Love him or hate him, Rafe in 'Spring and Port wine' by Bill Naughton has evoked strong feelings for all who have viewed the play. 'Spring and Port Wine' is set in a working class area in Bolton, Lancashire. There is no denying that Rafe, as the lord of the household, runs a tight ship: almost to the point of outright controlling his wife, Daisy, and their four children Florence, Harold, Hilda and Wilfred. As their children have grown up, there have been tensions among the children, particularly Harold and Hilda. It all culminates one evening when Hilda refuses to eat her dinner....

The dictionary defines being sympathetic as '(of characters in literature or drama) evoking empathic or sympathetic feelings' Rafe is often portrayed and described as an uncaring fellow, especially when we first meet Rafe in the opening scene of the play. In this scene he walks into the house and his first action is to turn off the television and say to his two sons: 'I don't need livening up. You two might, but I don't' This then means that our first meeting with Rafe gives the illusion that he is cold hearted and self-centered.

This shows that Rafe definitely doesn't want a democratic household and would instead prefer (and has) an autocratic one with himself at the helm. Rafe, as a traditional male, also seems to want everybody to live according to his rules. The first example of this comes from even before we meet Rafe. The next-door neighbour Betsy Jane has strong opinions regarding Rafe and isn't afraid to voice them. Betsy's opinion of Rafe can be most easily summed up in the following quote, from when Daisy tells Betsy that they are having herring for supper.

Betsy Jane's reply is thus: 'and I suppose you have got to like it' This quote tells us a lot, and gives the Rafe-haters a lot to say. It means that they have evidence to back up their assumption that Rafe is domineering. It also tells us something new. One would assume that Daisy would be in control of the meals as she is the one that cooks them. However, it would seem that Rafe is in control with not only the behaviour of his children (seen but not heard, even at the age of twenty) but also with what is served at meals, giving the indication that Rafe has an almost compulsive need to control everything.

Another slightly smaller example of this is the quote 'you'll eat it and say nothing' to his daughter Hilda who (at the age of twenty, mind you) refuses to eat her dinner and goes to eat something else. My other example is the quote 'I'll make a chartered accountant of you yet' to his wife Daisy, which again shows Rafe's almost compulsive need for perfection. It shows that Rafe expects the whole house to conform to his expectations and needs. Taken with the other quotes above, it shows that not only does he require the family to do what he wants not some but all of the time.

However, Rafe shows he has a caring side on a number of occasions. One of the most significant (and the first in the play) occurs near the end. It comes when Daisy, after pawning Rafe's new overcoat to raise money for her daughter Hilda's escape fund, feels guilty and confesses all to Rafe. Instead of getting angry, as the audience (and the Rafe-haters) might expect, Rafe instead comforts her and says in response to her guilty, worried and anxious face: 'Surely you can tell me anything?' This tells us that Rafe genuinely loves and cares for his family and wants them to be able to turn to him.

This is at odds with the Rafe-hater's image of him as the domineering and controlling autocratic head of the family. Also at odds with this image of Rafe is the quote 'all I care about - all I've ever cared about - is you and our four children' This again shows that Rafe genuinely cares about his family and how much they mean to him. Another example of Rafe showing his love for another member of the family is this quote: 'Something's been worrying me about our dear Hilda' This shows that not only does Rafe have the capacity to notice that something is wrong with his youngest daughter, but that he cares enough to let it worry him.

Bill Naughton uses a wide range of techniques that show what different types of people think about Rafe, and subtle comparisons with other men on the Bolton estate. The first way in which he does this is by, even before Rafe enters the play, is by introducing another character, Betsy Jane. Betsy Jane. Betsy Jane doesn't have much good to say about Rafe, which when combined with the fact that we haven't met Rafe and had the chance to see what he says and does, strongly reinforces a negative view of Rafe.

Betsy Jane is a rich source of quotes regarding Rafe, including Scratch him if I [Betsy Jane] got any chance' 'his domineering ways' and 'What right has he to interfere with your housekeeping?' These quotes reinforce the fact that Rafe (in Betsy Jane's opinion) isn't a nice fellow and is intent on controlling Daisy. This leaves the audience determined to see Rafe as an uncaring brute. And together with his dramatic entrance earlier mentioned, the audience's dislike of the character is intensified. What other members of

the family say and imply about him is sometimes worse than what Betsy Jane has to say.

These quotes show a family which is used to the domination of Rafe, and a family that tiptoes around him. My first quote is from Florence, the eldest member of the family and the most sympathetic of the children regarding Rafe. The following quote is from when she rebukes her mother for making up the household accounts: ' God help yourself if he ever finds out' This tells us a lot about what his family think of Rafe. It shows us that Rafe seems to want to know everything that goes on in the household, even down to what is spent on food.

It also shows us the attitude to which Florence and Daisy have towards Rafe: show him what he wants to see. In the end scenes we see that is borne out of her love for Rafe and because it would disappoint Daisy to see Rafe disappointed. However, Rafe doesn't seem to have the same consideration for Daisy. A good example of this is Rafe's flannel shirt. Rafe said it was very good to wear and of high quality. However, he didn't realise that it was hard to wash and when he learned of the trouble Daisy had in washing it, he didn't seem to care.

Another incidence of Rafe not having any consideration for Daisy was his new (and very expensive) overcoat. It says a lot about the state of communication between Rafe and the rest of the family that nobody knew that Rafe was ordering a new overcoat, or where he was during the numerous fittings that were required for the making of the coat. In

conclusion, I believe that although I feel sympathy and empathy for Rafe,

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and know many others who feel the the same regarding him, I also know many others who feel the exact opposite. This is probably because most people base their opinion on Rafe on another older male in their life.