

Exam Task 2 - An Inspector Calls

How does Priestley present Mrs Birling as a powerful character?

Write about:

- what Mrs Birling says and does in the play which shows her power
- how Priestley presents Mrs Birling by the ways he writes.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]

Sample Answer

Priestley uses the character of Mrs Birling to represent the corrosive influence of power in the hands of unfeeling authority. Mrs Birling enjoys a great deal of power because of her social position and has the ability to destroy the life of both Eva and ironically, her own grandchild. This horrific event serves as an emblem for the way in which power, when used unfairly, not only affects others, but also has repercussions for the whole of society. Mrs Birling enjoys power as the wife of a wealthy man, but is also clearly born into a wealthy family. She enjoys relative power in her own house and also in public life, as seen in her role in the charity organisation which refuses help to Eva.

The audience's first impression of Mrs Birling is as a powerful but unsympathetic character. Priestley presents her as 'a cold woman' as an unlikeable character through her speech, views and interactions with other characters. Mrs Birling's power allows her to act in a patronising manner to everyone around her. She is described to be her 'husband's social superior' showing how she was of a higher class and had married down. She often scolds him as if he is a child and when he behaves in a way that is not viewed as acceptable by the higher classes she tells him he 'mustn't do that'. This is illustrating to an audience how she is controlling and the word 'mustn't' makes her speech sound like a command, further emphasising this point. However, she also acts in a similar way towards her children. When Sheila begins to speak out and take responsibility Mrs Birling quickly shuts her down and tells her that she is behaving 'like a hysterical child'. The patronising tone of her voice insinuates her superiority. The words 'hysterical child' shows the view she has about children, she thinks that Sheila is behaving in a 'childish manner'. This is ironic because Sheila is the one who is acting more maturely – more like an adult, but as she is speaking out, Mrs Birling is quick to scold her.

Priestley also portrays Mrs Birling's power as a by-product of the class system. She looks down on the lower classes, and Priestley clearly illustrates this through her opinion of Eva. She constantly refers to her as a girl of 'that class' as if she is not worthy of respect. When Eva comes to Mrs Birling 'friendless and penniless', she refuses to help her and claims that she is lying about rejecting money by explaining that 'a girl of that sort would never refuse money'. This dismissive tone shows that she does not care for the girl's problems. She shows no remorse or regret as she believes that this view of the class system is justified.

Although Priestley presents Mrs Birling as powerful, it is made clear that she refuses to use that power for good. Her refusal to take responsibility for her actions is very plain at the end of the narrative, as is her propensity to put the blame on other people. At first she explains that 'the father of the child is responsible'. The certain tone shows that she is pushing the blame away from her. However, this statement is ironic because the 'father of the child' is Eric, her own son. Therefore, not only did she kill Eva but she also killed her 'own grandchild'. Even when finding this out she still 'simply can not accept my blame' and says that Eva has 'no one to blame but herself'. Again, she is trying to deflect the blame from herself and put it on other people. As Mrs Birling does not change, perhaps this is why a second inspector 'calls' at the end of the play. Priestley may be showing how this is her 'second chance' to change her ways.

Mrs Birling is presented throughout the play as a narrow-minded, patronising character by Priestley through her views and responses to Eva's suicide. In doing so, Priestley's wider points about the unfair distribution of power, and the corrupting influence it has upon society and human life emerge. Mrs Birling's power is a danger to the people who need it most: like her husband (and by extension the other members of her class), Mrs Birling is shown to be irresponsible, unfeeling and unsympathetic. Her social power is not used responsibly and, as Priestley's story makes clear, she and her kind need sweeping from power if society is to be a fairer place.

Sample Answer Commentary

This answer is sharply focused on the question, making several telling points about power in relation to the character's actions and words. It starts with a conceptual grasp of how and why the playwright uses Mrs Birling in the play to make a point about the misuse of power. The student shows the range of her power and writes fluently.

As the essay progresses, several effective references are used which show Mrs Birling's character, and these are all tied to the sense of power she wields. The student sees clearly how Priestley crafts the narrative to make his political points about power. The student writes in an interesting and committed way and would receive a mark in Level 6. Here is a student-friendly mark scheme:

- Level 1 (0-5 marks) – SIMPLE ANSWERS
These are brief answers which don't really answer the question in any depth. They might be re-tellings of the stories. Often poorly phrased.
- Level 2 (6-10 marks) – RELEVANT ANSWERS

These are answers which do answer the question in a basic way. They are often 'PE' answers – ie, there are several POINTS made, followed by EXAMPLES, but not much in the way of discussion or detail.

- Level 3 (11-15 marks) – EXPLAINED ANSWERS

These are straightforward answers which make sense and have some detail. They are often a collection of PEE paragraphs (POINT-EVIDENCE-EXPLANATION).

- Level 4 (16-20 marks) – CLEAR ANSWERS

These are essays which have some detail where several sensible points are being made. There is a bit more depth in the explanation of points. The phrasing makes clear sense.

- Level 5 (21-25 marks) – THOUGHTFUL ANSWERS

These types of answer show the examiner that once or twice there are moments of genuine thought, where a really good point is being made. Phrasing is clear.

- Level 6 (26-30 marks) – DETAILED/PERCEPTIVE ANSWERS

These answers have one or two moments of impressive points. They are conceptual – they link to the wider ideas of the text and argue points convincingly. Phrasing is fluent.