

## How is Mrs Birling's willingness to accept or refuse responsibility given dramatic impact throughout the play?

Below are some helpful notes to guide you in answering the question:

Firstly, although this question is about Mrs Birling's willingness to accept or refuse responsibility about Eva's death, you are asked about how the impact of it is presented *throughout the play* so you need to write about her behaviour throughout the play, including giving 'due weight' to her reactions in the final scene.

Dramatic impact means how is the impact of her behaviour shown dramatically on stage – it might be through her speeches; her behaviour to other characters; and there might be evidence in the stage directions.

Remember, you should focus on how *Priestley* creates particular effects through language and stage directions – Mrs Birling isn't real, so you must write about why Priestley has her behave in a particular way.

Your introduction should give a brief overview or summary of whether Mrs Birling does accept responsibility or not and how this fits in to the theme of responsibility that pervades the play. You might start with something like 'The way different characters view the idea of responsibility is central to the play: the inspector talks of a social responsibility whereas each of the other characters initially only refers to a responsibility to themselves and their duties. Mrs Birling's refusal to accept responsibility at the end of Act two is shocking, but not surprising to many audiences.'

You might want to use some of the following points in the main body of your essay:

Mrs Birling's behaviour at the beginning of the play – the stage direction which shows she is physically distant from her husband and Priestley's description of her. When she re-enters the room on page 29 she is described in a particular way which suggests she feels in control and 'business-like'. The fact that the second time she speaks is to scold her husband is telling. She tells Sheila even at the beginning that she has to 'realize' that men have important work to do and not question it.

Mrs Birling's arrogance when she first meets the Inspector is important (shown through her speeches and the stage directions which show how she speaks some of the lines). Her patronising manner towards her children. She calls what the Inspector tells them a story, suggesting she does not believe him.

Mrs Birling's references to class and her comments about Eva, even before the Inspector mentions Eva's pregnancy.

Mrs Birling's growing unease when the Inspector wants to show her a photograph (p.41) shown through the short, abrupt lines, use of questions and exclamation marks. This implies a sense of guilt?

When Mrs Birling recounts the story of Eva coming to the Brumley Women's Charity Organization she still seems indignant about Eva's behaviour and her apparent impact rather than sad about her death.

## An Inspector Calls

The inspector effectively leads Mrs Birling into a trap when he asks her to explain what happened when Eva went for help. The audience obviously realise before Mrs Birling that it is Eric who was the father of the child and therefore tension is developed as the episode progresses. Mrs Birling's failure to realise until the end of the scene reveals her hard nature and her inability to be sympathetic.

There is only one moment when Mrs Birling seems to repent of what she did (55), however once the Inspector has gone and the family begin to doubt his authenticity she reverts to her self confident and arrogant manner. This in turn makes the ending of the play even more shocking when the family are once again interrupted by the news of a death.

### Some useful vocabulary:

snob    prejudiced    unkind    unsympathetic    naïve    patronising  
does not want to see    questions    interrogates  
does not understand    refuses    blame    harsh  
strong character    does not    cold    heartless  
complacent    arrogant    implies    infers  
highlights    illustrate    shock    suggests  
evidence    uncaring    distant    status quo