An Inspector Calls' by J.B Priestley: Character Analysis

In the play, 'An Inspector Calls' By J.B Priestley, the audience are encouraged to find Mrs Birling unappealing due to her incredibly cold-hearted actions throughout the play. Sybil represents the wealthier, privileged classes who see themselves as the working classes moral superior.

At the beginning of act 1, Mrs Birling is introduced as 'his wife', this emphasises the theme of patriarchy throughout the play as she is being objectified and not introduced with her name, unlike the other characters. This suggests that Mrs Birling is nothing without her husband and his power. This is repeated further on, emphasising her lack of identity. Instantly, Mrs Birling is presented as a 'rather cold women' who is 'her husband's social superior'. We can infer from the first description that Sybil is an unlikable character who is emotionally cold and has no empathy. This is shown further on in the play where it is unravelled that Eva Smith visited Mrs Birling's charity and was declined assistance rather ruthlessly due to prejudices and Sybil's belief 'that she only had herself to blame'.

Sybil's resentment towards any lower class is shown by how she treats her husband. Her first line introduces her colloquial speech and good manners, contrasting with Mr Birling being more 'provincial in his speech', emphasising her social superiority. Before the Inspector's arrival, Mrs Birling emphasises the class distinction through her dismissing Edna (the family's parlourmaid), we could infer Sybil feels uncomfortable with her presence. While Mr Birling isn't so aware of the social etiquette and compliments the cook's meal, but still emphasises some prejudice against those of the working class by referring to the worker as 'cook'. Here Sybil reprimands Birling as she feels it shows bad manners. By chastising her husband for a rather harmless remark, Sybil exposes her concern for the family’s conduct and social manners; she wants to make a good impression on Gerald Croft and tediously reminds him that she married down. We could infer Sybil resents her family for not being of her class, as she symbolises the wealthier, privileged classes and their selfish attitudes.

Throughout the play, Sybil's obsession with etiquette means she attempts to lighten the mood, especially towards the tension between Sheila and Gerald. She diverts the subject by taking control of the conversation, especially towards Sheila's provincial remarks. This is especially shown when Sheila remarks about how Gerald 'never came near' her 'all last summer'. Sybil exclaims 'when you're married, you'll have to get used to that'', she fulfils the gender stereotypes of women. Men believed that women were inferior and therefore were unable to discuss certain topics, they were more encouraged towards materialistic discussions, such as clothes. The line suggests that Mrs Birling reflects the views of her husband; her daughter is oppressed similar to her, yet she encourages it, making her appear to be the perfect wife of the 1900s. Furthermore, Mrs Birling remarks,' you'll have to get used to that, just as I had''. Here, she shows a hit of resentment when referring to herself. Her upbringing disciplined her into the social norms that were expected of women from that era. Priestly's intentions are to expose the unfair treatment of women in the 1900s and how the roles need to change.

The nuclear family dynamic is shown here, Sheila teases Eric, 'you're squiffy' and he responds 'I'm not'. Sybil ignores Sheila's remark and is more concerned about Sheila being provincial and using slang. This emphasises her snobbery and breaks down her image of being the perfect

parent. In addition, this references the recurring theme of the generation gap, Mrs Birling critiques 'the things you girls pick up these days!'.