

Characters within Systems

Excerpt One

Directions: *First, read your excerpt out loud in your groups. Then, discuss the following connection questions.*

Read from Birling, 'Thanks. (*Confidentially.*) By the way...' (top of p. 8) to 'They both laugh' (top of p. 9).

1. Mr Birling says to Gerald he thinks that 'Lady Croft ... feels you might have done a little better for yourself socially'. What does he mean by this? What does this tell us about the Crofts' status in society? What does it tell us about the importance of class?
2. Mr Birling goes on to say, '[I] don't blame her. She comes from an old country family'. What does this tell us about how he views the class system?
3. Who does the class system empower in the play? Who does it place in an inferior position?
4. How does the Edwardian class system influence Mr Birling's behaviour both at home and at work? Were Mr Birling's choices and actions inevitable? Explain your view.
5. What would have been at stake for Mr Birling to act in a way that was contrary to the expectations of the class system?
6. Why is it important to consider someone's position in society, the amount of power that they have, and the structures that empower them when we are trying to understand their choices?

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Excerpt Two

Directions: *First, read your excerpt out loud in your groups. Then, discuss the following connection questions.*

Read from Sheila, '(distressed) I went to the manager at Milwards...' (mid p. 23) to Inspector, 'It's too late. She's dead' (bottom of p. 24).

1. When Sheila demands that Eva Smith is fired, she does so, in part, because a dress looked better on Eva than on her and because Eva was 'a very pretty girl'. How might Sheila's identity as a woman have led her to lash out in the way that she did?
2. What bearing did Sheila's class have on the situation at Milwards? What bearing did Eva's class have?
3. Some might argue that Edwardian gender expectations led Sheila to press Milwards to fire Eva. Do you agree or disagree with this argument? Explain your response.
4. What would have been at stake for Sheila to act in a way that was contrary to both the Edwardian class system and Edwardian expectations of gender? What would she stand to gain and/or lose?
5. How is the treatment of Eva Smith at other points in the play related to her class and gender?
6. Why is it important to consider someone's position in society, the amount of power that they have, and the structures that empower them when we are trying to understand their choices?

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