

EXEMPLAR: RAFE CROMPTON CRITICAL ESSAY

Rafe Crompton is the key character in Bill Naughton's classic 1960s working-class drama, Spring and Port Wine. Rafe's role is as the father of four: frosty school teacher Florence, happy-go-lucky factory girl, Hilda, the family clown, Wilfred and the rebellious but fearful Harold. Rafe is a tyrant to his timid wife Daisy but respected by neighbours and workmates. Rafe is at the centre of every conflict: man against woman, old against young, family against outsider.

The play opens on Friday night as the family gather for tea. Daisy, terrified of Rafe, falsifies her Accounts Book and enters anticipated window cleaner charges to deceive her husband. She escapes detection.

The second crisis occurs when Hilda refuses to eat the traditional Friday herring with her family. Rafe quells her and instructs Daisy to serve up the fish at every meal until Hilda eats it.

When a bespoke overcoat is delivered from Horsfall and Trot's it becomes clear that Rafe who is so mean with wife and children will still spend 32 guineas on clothing his own back.

The first act closes when Arthur, a sheet metal worker, comes to propose early marriage to Florence, at the request of his retiring boss, who wants a wed man to run his works. Rafe is incandescent with rage at the presumption of Aspinall, Arthur's employer.

In the second act, Hilda and Rafe resolve to compromise over the herring, but before either may do so, Wilfred secretly feeds it to the cat. Rafe holds an inquiry. He brow beats Wilfred, demanding he swear on the Bible. Wilfred collapses, having a fit.

Hilda and Arthur are so disgusted that they leave the family home. Florence follows Arthur. Rafe has antagonised his entire family.

Daisy seeks help even from her slatternly neighbour Betsy Jane to break into Rafe's desk for money to help Hilda resettle London, and sends Betsy Jane to the pawn shop with Rafe's new bespoke overcoat.

Rafe has a mix of qualities which demonstrate that Naughton has created a realistic character. Rafe's positive features include his protective attitude to his children's health. When he discovers Harold is smoking he proclaims:

"When will you learn some sense?"

He does not want Harold to suffer lung or heart disease.

When Rafe smells drink on Hilda's breath he advises her:

"Wine is a turncoat - starts off as a friend and then turns into an enemy."

He does not want Hilda to do something foolish when her judgement is affected by alcohol.

A negative aspect of Rafe's character is the way he attempts to force other people to live by his tastes in reading, music, and entertainment. He despises Hilda's magazines: "Do you have to waste your money on such trash?" No sooner has he arrived home than he switches off the TV: "Just feel how soothing a bit of quiet is." Rafe insists on quoting Shakespeare at his family and has done so frequently as Wilfred can complete the quotation without looking at the book. Rafe is very proud of his learning: "I only hope they take me away in my wooden box when I fail to be stirred by such beauty." Rafe also recommends the Bible on the grounds that it is truth, although he admits some of its 'facts' may be challenged: "You may question every fact in this holy book - but who dare say every word isn't God's truth!" Likewise, Rafe is not satisfied with making people hear the classical music he likes, but he wants to force them all to go to a concert. "Seeing's nothing - hearing's nothing. It's the participation. You've got to enter into the Messiah."

Rafe's approach to money shows a confusion of attitudes. On the one hand he wastes money on an expensive hand-made overcoat Harold says: "as a lad he musta gone round starved to death with the cold - an' now he's trying to make it up to himself." On the other hand, he is very mean, demanding diggs money from his children and forcing his wife to keep an Accounts Book. Rafe says with satisfaction: "Money can be a good servant - but a very poor master. So always have it right."

In the final analysis, Rafe is an unattractive character because of his attitude to power relationships. He stops his wife and children from developing independence. He is annoyed at Arthur not because Aspinall has told him to marry Florence, but because Aspinall has insulted Rafe's authority. "What does he imagine I am - that I'd let one of my daughters marry at the bidding of a tinker?"

To sum up Rafe's character, he is concerned only with keeping his power. It is not the money or the food or the marriage that matters to him. It is power. As Rafe says to Hilda: "If you get the better of me, you'll be the first in this house who has." He has concern for his family, his workmates and his neighbours, but Rafe is not a pleasant man. Bill Naughton has succeeded in portraying a realistic character in Rafe Crompton because although a predominantly unattractive character, he does bad things for good reasons and always has a plausible pretext to justify his behaviour. Rafe embodies the ambiguous nature of adult authority: protective and restrictive. Daisy is also protective and restrictive but she is motivated by love. Rafe is motivated by power.