

AQA English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Themes



Capitalism vs. Socialism

The theme of **capitalism vs. socialism**, alongside social responsibility, was arguably one of Priestley's **main intentions** with writing 'An Inspector Calls'. Priestley himself was a **socialist**, but Britain was - and still is - **a capitalist country**.

The Birlings represent **the prospering capitalists in society**, while the Inspector acts as Priestley's **socialist mouthpiece**. His role in the play is to **condemn capitalism** and **teach socialist ideals**. The play itself illustrates **capitalism's eventual fall to socialism**, suggesting socialism is the **superior, more beneficial, and more powerful political system**.

What is Capitalism?

Capitalism is an **economic system** where the **factors of production** (capital goods, natural resources, and entrepreneurship, the skill of setting up businesses) are owned and controlled by **private groups or individuals**. People who **control** these factors set up and own **companies**. Individuals own their labour (they get paid for it).

One motto of Capitalism is **"Greed is good"**. Business owners want to keep their **sale prices low to attract customers** and **compete** with others, so their production costs need to be as low as possible to increase profit. In a Capitalist society, people are **rewarded according to their wealth, not contribution**.

What is Socialism?

On the other hand, Socialism is where the **factors of production** are owned **equally by everyone in society**.

Socialism considers the resources' **usefulness** to people. For example, a Socialist government would **provide services** such as **education** and **health care**. People in society are **rewarded by how much they contribute**. Socialism also ensures that those who can't contribute to production, such as the elderly, are **still cared for**. There are aspects of socialism within British society: our NHS, free education and benefits system are examples.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/R8jh8KeRePPdGQXB9>

Socialism was initially designed in the nineteenth century to **improve the standard of living for the working class**. Poverty is not possible in an ideal Socialist society because everyone has **equal access** to profits and resources such as health care. Everyone owns the means of production, so they **cannot be exploited for their labour** - everyone contributes and everyone benefits.



British governments in 1912 vs 1945

In 1912, the **Liberal Party** was in power in Britain. This political party supported **laissez-faire** economics, where the government **doesn't intervene with the economy**. *Laissez-faire* economics are **ideal for Capitalism** as it gives power to the **free market** and **private stakeholders**.

In contrast, the **Labour Party** was elected into government in the **1945 General Election by a landslide**. The Labour Party's manifesto had many **Socialist values and proposals**. This massive change from a previously Conservative country is believed to be caused by the nation's **desire for social reform**. The country was facing the future after two World Wars, and required **change** and **recovery**. One of the greatest demands was for a **Welfare State**.

This all means Britain was experiencing a time of **great political change and turmoil** while Priestley was writing. The debate between Capitalism and Socialism, for Priestley, is focused on the interactions between Mr Birling and the Inspector. Each character is an **emblem for his respective political ideologies**. Looking at their **exchanges** and their **plays for power** on stage reveal a great deal about Priestley's **perspective**.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling is the **archetype of a Capitalist businessman**. He is **greedy, money-driven, and selfish**, and reflects the way private businesses want to make as much profit as possible and use any means possible to do so. He is also a **symbol for 'New Money'**, a **self-made man** (nouveau riche) who has made a great fortune for himself and his family. Many Capitalists would respect Mr Birling for his success, but Priestley encourages his audience to look at him through a Socialist lens. He does this to show how Mr Birling's Capitalist kingdom is built on vice and the suffering of others.

Mr Birling tells his family that, by 1940, they'll ***"be living in a world that'll have forgotten about all these Capital versus Labour agitations"*** (Act 1, pg 7). Under Capitalism, the country was **split into two groups**, those who controlled the **capital** and those who provided the **Labour**. Priestley suggests society at the time **revolved** around these two concepts, and ***"agitations"*** implies the structure is not **stable**. Mr Birling represents the Capital side of the conflict, and it is the implications of this that Priestley explores through the play.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/R8jh8KeRePPdGQXB9>



Mr Birling & Capitalist Greed

Firstly, Priestley uses Mr Birling to **portray Capitalist greed**. He explains to Gerald, ***“Your father and I have been friendly rivals in business for some time now [...] and now you’ve brought us together, and perhaps we may look forward to a time when Crofts and Birlings [...] are working together - for lower costs and higher prices,”*** (Act 1, pg 4).

- This shows how he only **views life through the context of business**, identifying his **“rivals”** and possible allies.
- Proposing to **“work together”** with Crofts Limited suggests he sees Sheila’s marriage as a **business negotiation** and an opportunity to **expand his own prospects**.
- **“For lower costs and higher prices”** finishes the sentence, mirroring how it is the **ultimate goal** for all Capitalists. The phrase is a **microcosm** for Capitalism, emphasising how **money and profit motivate everything in society**.

In the same way, Mr Birling describes how ***“employers are at last coming together to see that our interests - and the interests of Capital - are properly protected,”*** (Act 1, pg 6), which shows how Mr Birling’s ideal future is one where Capitalism thrives.

- Priestley suggests employers chose to **“protect”** their profits rather than **protecting their workers**.
- Mr Birling presents the **“interests of Capital”** and his own **“interests”** as the same thing, showing how his **identity is entirely contained within his desire for money**.



www.wsj.com/articles/im-running-to-save-capitalism-11557090143

Priestley presents Capitalism as a **self-absorbed, amoral system** where an individual’s purpose is **reduced to their ability to make money**.

Mr Birling as symbolic of Capitalism’s dominance

Priestley uses Mr Birling to reflect Capitalism’s **arrogance and dominance** at the start of the century. The description of himself as **“hard-headed”**, **“practical”**, and a **“businessman”** is repeated three times during his opening lecture (Act 1, pg 6-7), revealing how **arrogant** and **self-assured** he is. The refrain is comical, as if it is the **catchphrase** in an **advert** of a commercial product.

Priestley suggests Capitalists were **fully confident** in their economy, and were **unaware of its failings**. He conveys this through the **metaphor** of the *Titanic*: ***“She sails next week - forty-six thousand eight hundred tones - forty-six thousand eight hundred tons - New York in five days - and every luxury - and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable,”*** (Act 1, pg 7), Mr Birling says, oblivious of the disaster that will occur.



- Mr Birling's **admiration** for the *Titanic*, its unquestioned size and power, mimics the Capitalist's **desire for such domination**. He sees it as a **symbol of Capitalism's success**.
- Ultimately, though, the *Titanic* wasn't "**unsinkable**". Priestley shows that the economic system of capitalism has fatal flaws.

Mr Birling & Capitalism's selfish qualities

The aspect of Capitalism Priestley was arguably most interested in exposing, though, was how it **discouraged people from looking after one another**. Mr Birling repeats both the mantra that **"a man has to make his own way - has to look after himself"** (Act 1, pg 9) and the claim **"I can't accept any responsibility,"** (Act 1, pg 14), associating both perspectives with Capitalism.

Capitalism centres around private ownership, and so Mr Birling's vision of the self-made man was the Capitalist dream. However, Priestley shows how it is **selfish and lacks compassion for others**. As Eva's story is revealed, Priestley shows how this mantra results in people being **left behind**. Similarly, Mr Birling's refusal to take any responsibility in her death suggests Capitalism encourages **narcissism and carelessness**.

Mr Birling cares more about **self-preservation and comfort**. His response to the Inspector saying **"She felt she couldn't go on any longer"** is **"Don't tell me that's because I discharged her from my employment nearly two years ago,"** (Act 1, pg 17). He refuses to consider his influence on the lives of others. Priestley suggests Capitalist employers don't appreciate that **their workers depend on them for a decent wage** in the same way **they depend on their workers for production**. This means the relationship between employer and employee is not **mutual**, as the employers are always **superior** and more stable. Despite **relying** on their workers, employers refuse to take **responsibility** for them.



Competition as a destructive force

On top of encouraging selfishness, Priestley shows how the **competition** between businesses that drives Capitalism is **destructive**. When recalling the workers' strike, Mr Birling explains, **"They were averaging about twenty-two and six, which was neither more nor less than is paid generally in our industry. They wanted the rates raised so they could average about twenty-five shillings a week. I refused, of course,"** (Act 1, pg 14), showing how he judges the wages he provides by what his competitors offer. Even though they only request a small raise, Mr Birling refuses immediately because he needs to keep his

profits high but his prices low, to ensure he's still a **strong competitor in the industry**. This shows how Capitalist competitiveness stops people from making allowances for others or considering anything other than profit margins.



He justifies his decision by saying, ***“If I’d agreed to this demand for a new rate we’d have added about twelve percent to our labour costs,” (Act 1, pg 15)***. Priestley shows how workers were reduced to **statistics**, not viewed as individuals with needs and feelings. Eva Smith was ***“causing trouble in the works” (Act 1, pg 17)***, and because business owners need to make production as **efficient** as possible, any workers who are disturbing production have to go. Workers were **liabilities** for employers, viewed purely by how much they **contributed versus how much they cost**. If they reduced profit, they were **disposable**.

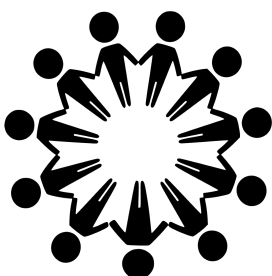
Avoiding scrutiny

Mr Birling is a representative for how Capitalism makes people **defensive, secretive, and hostile**. When the Inspector asks ***“why”*** he refused his workers’ demand, he is ***“surprised” (Act 1, pg 14)***, and tells him, ***“I don’t see that it’s any concern of yours how I choose to run my business,” (Act 1, pg 15)***. Moreover, he finds the Inspector’s questions ***“unnecessary” (Act 1, pg 15)*** and ***“officious” (Act 1, pg 18)***. This shows that he doesn’t like being questioned or criticised.

- The **adjective “officious”** in particular implies he doesn’t want the Inspector questioning him because he sees it as a **challenge to his authority and intelligence**.
- Mr Birling doesn’t want anyone **interfering** with how he runs his business, which may link to the concept of **laissez-faire economics**. In 1912, the **Liberal Party** would have allowed Mr Birling to run his business however he wanted.
- The Socialist Inspector, however, is **opposed** to the freedom **laissez-faire** economics brings. Priestley suggests this **culture of personal freedom and privacy within business allowed people to be exploitative, fraudulent or deceptive without consequence**.

The Inspector

The Inspector is a **personification** of **Socialist ideology**. He acts for **the good of others**, not himself, has a clear **moral code** and champions **social responsibility**. He also holds the Birlings **accountable** for their actions, confronting them and challenging them, showing how Priestley wanted **Capitalism itself to be held accountable for the destruction it had caused**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/UE92HxsJmDjSJwCR6>

Priestley could have chosen to just demonstrate the disadvantages of Capitalism by showing how the Birlings treated Eva Smith directly to his audience. The anti-Capitalism message would still have come across without the Inspector. However, the Birlings would have gone **unpunished**. Priestley uses the Inspector to **communicate his own ideals** to his audience, and to **provide** his audience with an **alternative**: Socialism. The way the Inspector quickly takes over and keeps hold of the



power throughout his visit is **symbolic** of the way Priestley hoped Socialism would **usurp** Capitalism.

The Inspector's societal message

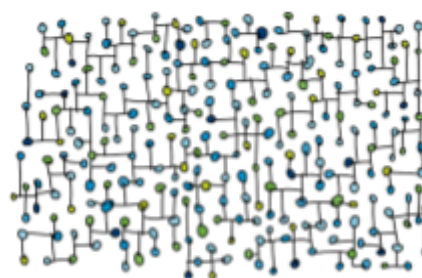
The Inspector's main message is that in society **everyone and everything is connected**. Compared to the Birlings' beliefs about every man making his own way and never being responsible for anyone else, this is a **revelatory concept**.

Connected

He has to explain to Mr Birling why firing Eva from his factory two years ago may be linked to her suicide: ***"Because what happened to her then may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events," (Act 1, pg 14)***. This suggests the Birlings were previously **oblivious** of how society is joined by a **"chain"**. It also demonstrates how **easy** it is for people, **especially the upper classes**, to **ruin the lives of others**, and how easy it is to do so **without noticing**.

- The **"chain"** **conjuges** a visual image of how, in Socialism, the means of production are **shared equally** with everyone.
- The **metaphor**, furthermore, implies **people are linked by more than just property or money**.
- Priestley shows how life itself is a **"chain"** that links everyone, meaning Socialism is **not just an economic system**. He suggests the **concepts** behind it can be applied to **morality and everyday life**.

This idea of **connection** continues throughout the play, as Priestley tries to encourage his audience to **come together as a strong community**. The Inspector explains, ***"We have to share something. If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt," (Act 2, pg 29)***, acknowledging both how responsibility is **split** between people and how human beings have a **desire to belong in a community**. The longing to **"share"** and the reference to **"guilt"** may be an **allusion** to the divided, bleak **state of the country after the war**. Priestley is proposing a way to move past the horrors of war and come together as a country to combat them. Therefore, the ideals of Socialism are presented as a **solution to conflict**.



make a connection

@gapingvoid

<https://www.gapingvoid.com/blog/2016/04/12/make-a-connection/>

Connection and community

Priestley constructs the Inspector's parting monologue around the **Socialist ideals of community and provision of greater social needs**. He tells the Birlings that the **"lives"** of others are **"intertwined"** with their own, meaning, ***"We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other," (Act 3, pg 56)***. The **semantic field of connection** advocates for community and equality, both aspects of Socialism.



- The **metaphor** of **“one body”** emphasises how **nothing happens in isolation**, or alternatively may link to the Socialist idea that **society benefits the most if everyone is contributing and receiving**. If one member of the **“body”** suffers, everyone suffers.

The Inspector leaves with the message, **“If men will not learn that lesson, they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish,”** portraying **conflict** and the **World Wars** as the direct result of choosing **Capitalism over Socialism**. He appears almost like a **prophet**, warning the Birlings of an event Priestley’s audience has just witnessed. This would make the message even more **evocative and heartfelt**.

Condemnation of Capitalism

Another purpose of the Inspector’s visit is to **condemn** Capitalism and the actions of those who support it.

When Mr Birling claims the working classes would **“ask for the earth”** if they could, the Inspector responds, **“But after all it’s better to ask for the earth than to take it,” (Act 1, pg 15).**

- The Inspector implies that the Birlings, and all Capitalists, were **responsible** for taking **“the earth”** and making a **“nasty mess”** of Eva’s **“promising life”**. This imagery shows how **extreme Capitalism’s destruction and greed is**. Business owners have **“the [whole] earth”** but **still stop others from asking for a higher wage**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/Z4V6whKLaiXB64ip8>

When Mr Birling complains about having his **“nice little family celebration”** ruined, the Inspector replies, **“That’s more or less what I was thinking earlier tonight, when I was in the Infirmary looking at what was left of Eva Smith. A nice little promising life there, I thought, and a nasty mess somebody’s made of it,” (Act 1, pg 21).**

- Mr Birling sees Eva’s death as an **inconvenience**, but the Inspector shows he only has himself to blame. The **juxtaposition** between Mr Birling’s complaints and the Inspector’s cutting responses suggest **Capitalists were unaware of the poverty and suffering Capitalism caused**.

Giving a voice to Eva

In the same way that Socialism was developed to help the working classes, the Inspector **gives a voice** to Eva Smith and her struggles. He explains to Sheila, **“There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence in every city and big town in this country, Miss Birling. If there weren’t, the factories and warehouses wouldn’t know where to look for cheap labour,” (Act 1, pg 19).** This shows how the **poverty of others is commercialised by Capitalism** (exploited to increase profit).

- Priestley **personifies** the **“factories and warehouses”** which conveys their **influence** in society. Furthermore, it implies business and profit are treated with **more respect and care** than **“young women”**, who only serve to provide **“cheap**



labour". Priestley suggests poverty and unemployment **aren't solved by authorities because they are important parts of their business models**.

The way Capitalism ensured people were only as **important as their wealth and cost** is shown when the Inspector tells Mr Birling, **"She wanted twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and sixpence. You made her pay a heavy price for that. And now she'll make you pay a heavier price still," (Act 3, pg 56)**. The **motif** of a **"price"** imitates Capitalism's focus on money and trade. The pay rise Eva asked for is **miniscule** compared to the **"heavy price"** of her death, showing how **greed and stinginess** (unwillingness to give) came before human kindness. Describing her death as a **"heavy price"** may also symbolise how everything in Capitalist society has a cost attached - nothing can be viewed in a purely emotional way. Priestley suggests Capitalist society had a **disproportionate obsession with money**, meaning its **priorities** were wrong.

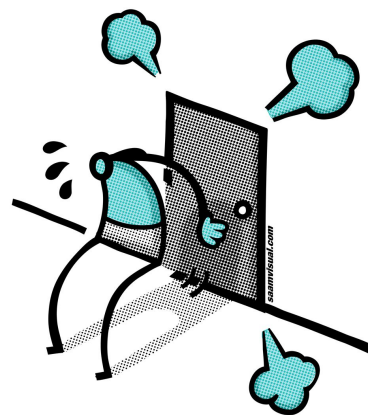
Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling's character isn't massively linked to the theme of Capitalism vs. Socialism - she mostly serves as a symbol for classism - but there are still aspects of her arc that show how **damaging** Capitalist ideals are. Namely, her experience with Eva shows how Capitalism encouraged **gatekeeping** (limited other people's access to a particular resource).

Treatment of Eva

When justifying why she didn't give help to Eva, Mrs Birling explains, **"I wasn't satisfied with the girl's claim - she seemed to me to be not a good case," (Act 2, pg 44)**. This suggests she judged the **worthiness** of her claim based on whether she **deserved** the money. Priestley suggests **even charity work** was impacted by Capitalism's money-oriented **objectification** of people. Priestley therefore implies people were **judged on their monetary value** rather than with morality or compassion.

- Because Mrs Birling wasn't **"satisfied"**, she decided to use her **"influence to have [her claim] refused"**, (Act 2, pg 44), which is an example of **gatekeeping**. Mrs Birling used her **power** to prevent Eva from accessing the resources available to her, showing how **wealth and support are not equally accessible in Capitalist society**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/QRQB5TzsYSaxa9Q4A>

Priestley shows how successful Capitalists **trapped people in poverty** in order to **remove competitors from the market** and **keep the wealth for themselves**. The imagery in the Inspector's accusation, **"You slammed the door in her face"**, (Act 2, pg 45), demonstrates how Capitalists **constructed barriers** that blocked off resources from others. Because you need to make more profit than your competitors,



Capitalism encourages people to use their power to **rig the system**, creating obstacles for others to **stop them succeeding** in the same way.

Eva Smith

Eva Smith represents the **“Labour”** side of the **“Capital versus Labour agitations,”** (Act 1, pg 7). She is **exploited and abused by the Capitalist system** innumerable times and is never **rewarded** for her hard work. Instead she is **punished** for demanding **recognition**.

By the end of the play she has been **forced out of the system** altogether, living on the streets without a job and no access to money. Even the charities who are supposed to support those **the system has rejected** don't help her. Priestley does this to show how **Capitalism is not designed to help the poor succeed**. Capitalism helps the rich make more and more money while the working class falls further and further down the social ladder. Eva Smith is a **disposable** piece in the Capitalist machinery, **useful and valuable only as long as she is providing labour**.

Eva as a worker

Eva's experience in Mr Birling's factory encapsulates this Capitalist **mindset** where workers are an **unwanted liability**. The factories need people to do the work for them, but in an ideal world they wouldn't have them at all. This means business owners want them to **stay on the factory floor** rather than have successful, evolving careers.



Mr Birling remembers how, after their holidays, his workers **“were all rather restless, and they suddenly decided to ask for more money,”** (Act 1, pg 14). He refused, so they **“went on strike,”** (Act 1, pg 15).

❖ The strike at the Birling factory may be an **allusion to the coal strike of 1912**, conveying the **unrest** and **dissatisfaction** workers felt because of how they were **treated by their employers**.

As a **“ringleader”** of the strike, (Act 1, pg 15), Eva is a **Socialist figure** who signifies the **disillusionment** experienced by the **“Labour”** side of the argument. Although she is a **“good worker”** (Act 1, pg 14), Mr Birling fires her for causing trouble, suggesting the **disturbance she caused meant more to him than her value as an employee**. Priestley shows how **resistance and strikes were discouraged**, with workers being **punished** for speaking out, meaning Capitalism **demonised and disarmed** workers.



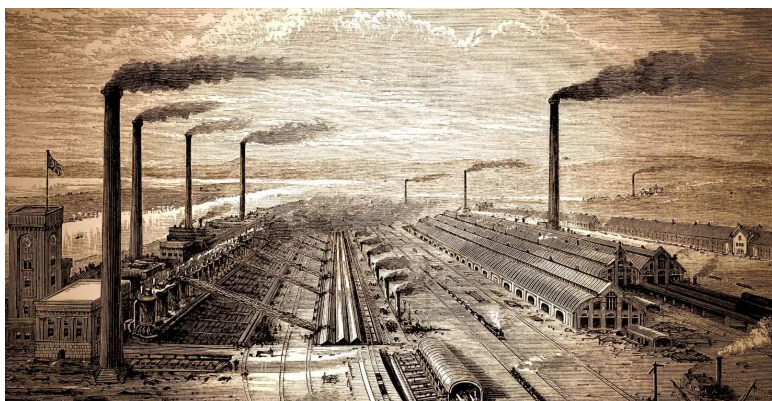
Capitalism & Social Mobility

The major flaw of Capitalism is how it results in **poverty, income inequality, and power imbalances**. Priestley uses the character of Eva Smith to show how Capitalism and the social class system prevent **social mobility** - the ability to move into a different social class.

The Inspector describes how, after she was discharged from Mr Birling's factory, ***"she hadn't been able to save much out of what Birling and Company had paid her," (Act 1, pg 19)***, implying the typical wage was not enough to support an easy lifestyle and that low wages **forced** people to work as much as possible rather than **risking unemployment**. He continues, ***"So that after two months, with no work, no money coming in, and living in lodgings, with no relatives to help her, few friends, lonely, half-starved, she was feeling desperate," (Act 1, pg 19).***

- The Inspector recognises and understands the **cycle of poverty**. He emphasises to the Birlings that Eva's situation made it **impossible** for her to **improve her circumstances on her own**, because she didn't have the resources to do so. He shows how this was **out of her control** and not her own fault.
- Equally, Priestley outlines the **isolating impacts of poverty**, showing how it has a **destructive emotional and mental impact** alongside its physical strains.

This is illustrated further when he says how, when she went to Mrs Birling for help, ***"She was here alone, friendless, almost penniless, desperate. She needed not only money but advice, sympathy, friendliness," (Act 2, pg 45).*** Priestley teaches about the **social and emotional poverty that financial hardship brings**. Capitalist society was geared



<https://images.app.goo.gl/x27FvHQN7zQ7Nn79>

towards money, so failed to recognise the other ways help could be given. He reminds his audience that **money alone cannot solve poverty and income inequality**, because selfishness and cruelty are **motivators** behind social barriers such as classism. People forget they have things to offer other than their money, just as they forget people are not objects to throw money at.

Development of the Theme

Setting

The play is set in an **industrial city** during the height of **laissez-faire economics**, and the staging depicts the grand, imposing house of a ***"prosperous manufacturer" (Act 1, pg 1)***. All of this means the setting is the **epitome** of Capitalist society. Being a ***"prosperous manufacturer"*** places Mr Birling at the top of the Capitalist hierarchy, a **figurehead** for



success. Priestley's audience would recognise 1912 as a prosperous, Capitalist era that was still thriving off the impacts of the **Industrial Revolution**.

Manufacturing cities were at the heart of this new Capitalist Britain, and were seen as hubs of activity and innovation. By placing the Birlings' house in the **suburbs** of such a city, Priestley links them to this Capitalist movement while also indicating their removal from it. Being in the suburbs means they are away from the smog and crowds of the city, a result of their upper class status. The **divisions and ignorance** of Capitalism are therefore introduced by this setting.

The Inspector and Mr Birling

Before the Inspector arrives on stage, Mr Birling is unquestionably the most **powerful** character. He is **"heavy-looking"** and **"portentous"**, (**Act 1, pg 1**), making his appearance a **physical manifestation of his dominance**. As the speech-maker he **commands** the room and leads the conversation, and his body language and gestures reflect this. His influence on stage symbolises the **dominance of Capitalism in society**, revealing how it controlled others and went unchallenged.

Yet, when the Inspector arrives, we see the power start to **shift**. He **"creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness,"** (**Act 1, pg 11**), signalling his power and ability to take over. Unlike Mr Birling, whose portentousness and **"provincial"** (**Act 1, pg 1**) manner of speaking make him seem superficial, the Inspector speaks **"carefully, weightily"**, (**Act 1, pg 11**). This implies he is in **control**. Mr Birling enters the conversation thinking he is in charge, boasting about his jobs and assuming why the Inspector is here. However, his assumption is wrong, and this, coupled with the Inspector's **reserved** manner, tests Mr Birling's patience. This foreshadows how the Inspector will challenge him later on.

As the play continues, we see Mr Birling lose more and more of his power and confidence. On his own, he is a convincing leader, but he cannot cope when challenged. This could suggest that Capitalism itself can only appear like a viable choice when Socialism is ignored.

The Inspector questions his decisions, asking **"Why?"** (**Act 1, pg 14**), **overrules** him, **criticises** him, and **silences** him. For example, we see him **"cutting through, massively,"** (**Act 1, pg 12**), while Mr Birling is speaking, and **"turn[ing] on him"** when he tries to **"protest"** (**Act 2, pg 46**). This is symbolic of Socialism's **triumph** over Capitalism. Priestley shows how Socialism is the better, superior, more successful form of politics and economy.

The play opens with Mr Birling's **derogatory** views of Socialism, referring to Socialists as **"cranks"** and their ideals as **"nonsense"** (**Act 1, pg 10**). This shows how society was aware of Socialism, but **didn't respect** it. This makes Capitalism and the problems it causes seem even more cruel and selfish, because people **kept on choosing it** over Socialism. Because Mr Birling returns to using such insults once the Inspector leaves, calling him **"some sort of crank"** (**Act 3, pg 60**) and **"a fraud"** (**Act 3, pg 64**), Priestley may suggest Mr Birling **mocks** Socialism to make himself feel more **powerful**. Mr Birling clearly felt



intimidated and overpowered by the Inspector while he was there, and by insulting him behind his back, Mr Birling can **reinstate** himself as the leader.



Exploitation

Exploitation is when someone treats something in an **unfair** and **underhand** (dishonest) way in order to **benefit** from it. This could be a **person**, **system**, or **position**. It often involves **taking advantage of weakness or trust**.

The theme of exploitation runs through the play, as Eva Smith is exploited by **individuals** and **the system of Capitalism** as a whole. Exploitation links to the themes of social class, Capitalism vs. Socialism, and gender.

Eva is **vulnerable** because she is a **working class woman**. Even though as an individual she is strong and assertive, her position in society means she has **no power** and faces **discrimination** from others.

- Priestley presents the ways in which employers - and the Capitalist economy as a whole - **prey on the vulnerability of working class women to make huge profits**. They are able to **exploit** their **desperation** by making them work for a low wage.
- He suggests **the entire function of the British economy in the twentieth century relied on the exploitation of those at the bottom of the hierarchy**.

Priestley implies **the systems of class and power in British society are exploited by the upper classes**. The Birlings take advantage of their trusted positions in the community to get their own way and escape punishment. At the time the play is set the upper classes **controlled everything in society**, including money and employment. The poor lived on the landowners' estates and had to pay rent, or were employed by factory workers and had to follow their rules. This means the lower classes were **dependent** on the upper classes for everything, and Priestley argues that the upper classes exploited this dependency to **control** others.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/XVRHgar7R9CYEqW9>

Development of the Theme

Each of the Birlings used some **form of exploitation** in their mistreatment of Eva:

- Mr Birling exploited her for **cheap labour**.
- Sheila exploited her **status** as the daughter of a well-known man to get Eva fired without a sufficient cause.
- Gerald and Eric exploited her for **sex**.
- Mrs Birling exploited her **influence** at the charity to get her case denied.

Through Eva's story, Priestley outlines the different forms of exploitation that support and benefit the upper classes of society. **He shows how the class system and Capitalism rely on the exploitation of the weak, vulnerable, or powerless.**



Birling & Co

Mr Birling's business practices are used by Priestley as an **allegory** for **Capitalism's exploitation of the working class**. He details the ways in which **profit is prioritised over personal wellbeing**, and how the poor are **dehumanised** and **reduced to cheap labour**.

Exploitation of his workers

Mr Birling uses his position as an employer to boss others around, **threatening** them with unemployment if they don't adhere to his strict ways. **He takes advantage of poverty and high unemployment rates to find workers who will work for a low wage**. He **targets** the weak and vulnerable, but isn't prepared to help when his actions backfire.

Minimum Wage

There was no national minimum wage in 1912 (when the play is set), or in 1945 (when it was written). Priestley shows the audience how employers exploited this in order to **push wages as low as possible** to maximise profits.

Mr Birling's business **motto** is unveiled when he announces his hopes to work **"together"** with Crofts Limited **"for lower costs and higher prices"** (*Act 1, pg 4*). His goal is unconcerned with improving **working conditions** or workers' **rights**. Instead, he wants to make even more profit, even though it is clear his business is already successful. His workers are **reduced** to a simple **"cost"**, a figure he wants to lower. His workers never receive the benefit of these **"higher prices"** as Mr Birling keeps the profit for himself. This simple clause summarises all of the issues Priestley sees in Capitalist business: **the exploitation and dehumanisation of workers**.

Dehumanisation of workers

Mr Birling's **perception** of his workers is in keeping with his business methods. He outlines how he has **"several hundred young women"** at his factory who **"keep changing"** which



<https://images.app.goo.gl/ePmkBA9zj5vREJ647>

shows how he doesn't see his workers as individuals. The vague term **"several hundred"** illustrates the women's **loss of individual identity**, as they are viewed as a **collective**. Furthermore, they **"keep changing"**, meaning **it is not the individual who matters, only that the factory always has a large number of workers on a low wage**. The phrase **"keep changing"** alludes to the vast number of unemployed people available, as Priestley suggests the company **consistently hires**

new staff while firing old staff to keep their costs low. As they are all **"women"**, Priestley again indicates that working class women were the most targeted by Capitalist endeavours, because companies could give them a **lower wage than if they were men**.



Poverty and capitalism

The Inspector explains how **beneficial extreme poverty and despair are for Capitalist companies**. He tells Sheila: ***“There are a lot of young girls living that sort of existence in every city and big town in this country, Miss Birling. If there weren’t, the factories and warehouses wouldn’t know where to look for cheap labour” (Act 1, pg 19)***. This suggests that companies don’t just turn a blind eye to the suffering of the working class. Rather, they **actively seek it out**, to exploit them and keep their **profit margins** high.

- The phrase ***“every city and big town in this country”*** expresses how **universal** the problem is, evoking the idea that poverty is an **epidemic**. The Inspector implies the wealth and success signified by a **“city”** **obscures its destitute** (extremely poor) **underbelly**.
- As they are prepared to harm ***“young girls”***, the audience understands how these companies must be **inhuman** and **pitiless**.

Priestley demonstrates how the **comfort** and luxury of **one person’s life**, or the **success of one business**, is directly **dependent** on the distress and hardship of others. This means the prosperity enjoyed by the upper classes in 1912 was only possible because others were struggling, proving the wealth and progress associated with the early twentieth century was just an **illusion**. Moreover, Priestley accuses ***“the factories and warehouses”*** of **perpetuating** (continuing) the **cycle of poverty** to ensure they always had a cheap workforce available. **He suggests the issue of poverty could be solved, but isn’t, because others benefit from it.**

Gerald & Eric

As the young men in the family, Gerald and Eric represent the ways in which exploitation and mistreatment of women is **normalised** and **encouraged** in society. Their behaviour is a **symptom** of a wider **culture of aggressive masculinity and pride**. Priestley uses these characters to demonstrate how men **exploit** the **dominance** they are given in a **patriarchal society** and the power their wealth brings them to **take advantage of working class women**.

Gerald

Much like how Mr Birling’s company hires young women to exploit their need for money, Priestley suggests rich men like Gerald use young women’s fear to get them to go to bed with them. Gerald doesn’t just pity Eva and wants to help her: he sees an **opportunity**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/U4XENpGpvRtVnrcB7>



His exploitation of Eva

The **morality** of Gerald's actions is the most questionable of all the family. He rescues Eva, gives her money and a place to stay and brings her love and happiness. This would suggest that he is a **Good Samaritan** who **selflessly** helps her. However, because he makes her his **mistress** and **abandons** her when he sees fit, his actions appear to have an **ulterior motive**. He takes advantage of her vulnerability for his own entertainment.

It is clear from Gerald's descriptions of when he first met Eva that her worth was based purely on how attractive she was. He said: **"looked quite different"**, **"was very pretty"**, and **"looked young and fresh and charming and altogether out of place down there"** (Act 2, pg 34-35). These **sensual, romanticised** descriptions imply his **sexual attraction** to her was always a factor in his decision to befriend her. The focus on her appearance, with the **repetition** of how she **"looked"**, shows that he formed these opinions of her before even talking to her.

He continues by saying how she gave him **"a glance that was nothing less than a cry for help"** leading him to get rid of Joe Meggarty and tell her **"if she didn't want any more of that sort of thing, she'd better let [him] take her out of there"** (Act 2, pg 35). This is an **ultimatum**, tying her escape to his company. He implies that if she rejects him, she will be in trouble again, forcing her to be **reliant** on him. He takes advantage of her distress, her need for **"help"**, and how she was **"out of place"**.

Dependency

Priestley conveys the **imbalance** of Gerald and Eva's relationship to illustrate the working classes' **dependence** on the upper classes.

- Gerald recalls how Eva was **"intensely grateful"** to him, and he **"became at once the most important person in her life"** (Act 2, pg 37). This could imply that Eva felt she **owed** Gerald for rescuing her, rather than his aid being an act of selfless goodwill. Gerald did not offer Eva much, but she had been so **lonely** and **desperate** that his status as an upper class man made him automatically **"important"**.
- The **adverb** **"intensely"** and the **superlative** **"most"** emphasise how reliant Eva was on Gerald, implying he controlled her. Gerald's friendship was **priceless** to her even if he didn't treat her well. Her life **depended** on him because he was providing her with housing and money, meaning his treatment of her became a form of **sexual exploitation**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/911R6aQggN7EiXT88>

It is clear the love and dependency within their relationship wasn't equal: he confesses he **"didn't feel about her as she felt about [him]"**, and he enjoyed being the **"wonderful Fairy Prince"** (Act 2, pg 38), suggesting he exploited Eva's need for him in order to sleep with her.

- The sense of power being her **"Fairy Prince"** gave him enabled him to do as he wished. When he did eventually break it off, she told him she **"hadn't expected it to"**



last”, and *“she didn’t blame [him] at all”* (Act 2, pg 39), showing how he **took advantage of her kindness and forgiveness**.

- As she *“hadn’t expected it to last”* this suggests she was aware that Gerald was much **less invested** in their relationship than she was, and that his **desire** for her would wear off.

Power imbalance

Priestley emphasises the **power imbalance** between the two characters: Eva’s whole life **revolved** around their relationship, whereas Gerald viewed her as a temporary source of pleasure. The power imbalance is further proof of his exploitation of Eva and her position.

Priestley uses their relationship to show how the lower classes were **fully committed** to the upper classes’ desires and whims, and the upper classes could enjoy the **benefits** of this without ever needing to be invested themselves. They could break ties whenever they wanted and not face consequences.

Eric

Like Gerald, Eric also has a relationship with Eva. This appears to be very one sided with Eric admitting: *“I wasn’t in love with her or anything - but I liked her - she was pretty and a good sport”* (Act 3, pg 52) which shows how he used her to **satisfy his own sexual desires**.

- By describing her as *“pretty and a good sport”*, Eric **objectifies** her. She is presented as prey or something to be conquered rather than a willing participant. Here, *“Good sport”* implies she only tolerated him.
- By *“insist[ing]”* and *“threaten[ing]”* her, (Act 3, pg 51-52) it is clear that Eric has forced her into a position she didn’t want to be in.

The consequences of their relationship are much more serious and permanent for Eva than they are for Eric which shows how **the exploitation of working class women caused long-lasting trauma and damage for them**.

Exploitation of Eva

The Inspector summarises how Eric exploited Eva to satisfy his own urges, saying he *“just used her for the end of a stupid drunken evening, as if she was an animal, a thing, not a person,”* (Act 3, pg 56). This shows how he used Eva as **a means to an end**, and didn’t consider her own feelings.

As it was out of the question for people of different classes to marry, Priestley shows how Eric was able to use her as a *“thing”* without committing to marrying her or ever seeing her again. It is implied he **dehumanised** her because she was of a lower class.

Furthermore, as she was a working class girl, no one would take her seriously if she tried to accuse him - as demonstrated by Mrs Birling’s own actions. Priestley likens the upper classes’ exploitation of the working classes to the treatment of *“animals”*, showing how they were **treated inhumanely** and barbarically.



Gender

Gender is pivotal to your understanding of how and why the characters interact in the way they do. Priestley shows how the **ideas and constructs** behind **gender** and **gender roles** within society influence the ways characters interact with each other and view themselves. Priestley's main message is that **traditional gender stereotypes are damaging and actively stop society progressing**.

Development of the theme

Within the play, different female characters are used to show the **different roles women have within society** and how these women are **expected to act** within a **patriarchal society**. Equally, Priestley uses the interactions between the male and female characters within the play to comment upon **traditional gender roles** and how he thinks society should progress in the future.

Don't forget

It's important to remember that Priestley wrote the play in 1945 when women had gained many more rights than they had had when the play was set in 1912. The audience would therefore be quite shocked see the archaic views and treatment towards women in *An Inspector Calls*.

The Inspector is introduced to the family to slowly break down the gender stereotypes. Although he is male, unlike Mr Birling or Gerald he is not a **hypermasculine** character; he **"need not be a big man but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness," (Act 1, pg 11)**. Therefore, he does not have the physical attributes associated with dominant masculinity, but his presence and **"purposefulness"** present a more powerful alternative.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/mUSGgscLjDZ8CSC88>

Priestley suggests through the Inspector's behaviour that **masculinity doesn't need to depend on violence, aggression, or intimidation**. The Inspector is impressive, intelligent, compassionate, and patient - the **opposite** of typical, toxic masculinity. He takes over from Mr Birling as the **dominant male figure** on stage, foreshadowing Priestley's hopes for a more progressive future.

Womens' Roles

When Priestley was writing in the 1940s, society's **understanding** of gender had progressed massively compared to when the play is set. The two World Wars challenged **conservative notions of gender**. With so many men sent to war, women took on jobs which had previously been done by men. This **revolutionised** the way women were viewed and also made them realise how much they were able to contribute towards society. When the men returned from war they found women reluctant to go back to domestic roles.



Although society in 1945 was much more progressive than in 1912, there were still some that disagreed with these changes. They **idealised** the pre-War years, and wanted to **uphold tradition**. The **Women's Suffrage movement** had caused a lot of **hostility** towards suffragettes, with men and women disapproving of their demands because they **threatened tradition**. By focusing on the **dark side** of this era, illustrating the **conflict** and suffering that was a result of **gender stereotyping**, Priestley confronts his audience with the **harsh reality** of what it would be like if these traditions were upheld. He suggests that the open conversations had and progress made in the 1940s is **beneficial** for everyone.

Female Characters

The female characters within the play all represent different versions of women within society. Mrs Birling upholds traditional values of the **subordinate female**, Sheila develops into the '**New Woman**' with strong opinions she's not afraid to share with the men in the play and Eva is a lower class woman who is taken advantage of by men.

Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling is symbolic of the traditional 1912 woman, when in the presence of men she acts as their subordinates. Despite it being evident that she is an opinionated woman, she only has opinions about other female characters and is careful not to get involved in any men's business. It is important to note that Mrs Birling is from the class above Mr Birling but despite this, because she is a woman, she is automatically his **subordinate**.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/yqeGFJEMJHE3Gc327>



She is judgmental and strict, a **representative** of those in the 1940s who wanted to return to the old ways. Her **conservative** views uphold **patriarchal rule** (male dominance) and, like her husband, her misogyny is particularly **targeted at lower class women**.

Dependent on men

It is made obvious to the audience that Mrs Birling doesn't have any legitimate power within her life. When she introduces herself to the Inspector, she references her **"husband"** and his position as **"Lord Mayor only two years ago" (Act 2, pg 31)**. This shows the audience that a woman's status in society was dependent on her husband's position.

She also **adheres** to the **traditional view of the family** where **the man is in charge**. Indeed, once the Inspector has left, she says, **"Now just be quiet so that your father can decide what we ought to do" (Act 3, pg 61)**. Perhaps Priestley is suggesting that women



invalidate themselves and other women when they believe the **narrative of male dominance**.

Upholds patriarchal values

Mrs Birling not only adheres to strict **gender conventions** but she also actively works to suppress other women and keep them within the constraints of societal gender norms.

She tries to pass down her traditional values about women to her daughter. She teaches Sheila to be **dependent** on and **loyal** to men, suggesting **internalised misogyny** is passed on through generations of women. She explains, ***“When you’re married you’ll realise that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business. You’ll have to get used to that, just as I did” (Act 1, pg 3).*** She teaches her daughter to **resign herself to mistreatment and neglect because it is ‘necessary’**.

- The phrase ***“just as I did”*** presents it as a **tradition** through generations and it is evident that Mrs Birling thinks this is the way things should be.
- By calling it ***“important work”***, Mrs Birling implies **only a man’s work is valuable**.

Many believed that women were stupid and unable to understand practical business matters and politics, one of the many reasons why women were shut out of conversation. In addition to this, it was seen as ‘unladylike’ to comment on politics or world-affairs. Mrs Birling accentuates this belief and is keen to keep male and female roles separate. She announces, ***“I think Sheila and I had better go into the drawing room and leave you men -” (Act 1, pg 5).***

- By suggesting the women move to the ***“drawing room”***, Mrs Birling wants to physically separate the two genders.
- Men were expected to occupy the **public sphere**, with discussion of politics and business, while women were **confined** to the **private sphere** of the household. Priestley is outlining these two spheres in a visual way.

Attitude towards other women

Mrs Birling’s attitude towards other women is **mocking** and **reductive** which mirrors her husband’s sexist condescension. She refers to Sheila being ***“over-excited” (Act 2, pg 33), “a hysterical child”, (Act 2, pg 48), and “childish” (Act 3, pg 59).*** These were all terms that were commonly used by men to **undermine** women.

- She uses these descriptions to **invalidate** Sheila’s concerns, presenting her as **irrational** and **immature**. Priestley shows how women also used misogynistic or ‘gendered’ language to dismiss others.

“Hysterical” is particularly relevant to the presentation of women as **female hysteria** used to be an **official medical diagnosis**. Believed to be linked to the **womb**, it was applied to women who were **overly anxious** or **causing trouble for others** among other symptoms. It was therefore associated with the **weakness of femininity**. This means it was used to **silence** women who were **not acting in the way men wanted them to**.



Eva Smith

Eva Smith is the direct opposite of Mrs Birling, she works and isn't afraid to voice her opinion to the men. Even though Eva is a working class woman who endures a lot of hardship, **Priestley does not portray her as a weak, self-pitying victim**. Instead, she is **assertive, outspoken, determined, and righteous**. This makes her an **atypical** presentation of femininity, **subverting** the stereotypes and gender roles surrounding women.

Priestley suggests these qualities were part of the reason she was treated so poorly by the Birlings: she **defied** their expectations of working class women being respectful and **passive**, thus **angering** them.

When considering the exploitation of women within the play you should note that Eva is **symbolic of working class women as a whole**. It can be argued that each step of Eva's story **outlines a different way women are oppressed**.

Strong opinions

Eva was a ringleader of the factory strike which shows she has a strong voice and is a leader. Mr Birling says he fired her because ***"she'd had a lot to say - far too much - so she had to go," (Act 1, pg 15)***. This shows how he wanted to **cancel** her rebellious opinions.



- If Eva had ***"far too much"*** to say, this suggests Mr Birling did not like how Eva was disagreeing with him and questioning his **authority**. He views this as her **acting out of line**.
- Priestley shows how women were expected to be **demure** (reserved and modest) and **soft spoken**.

Similarly, Mrs Birling refuses to help Eva because she acted with ***"impertinence" (Act 2, pg 43)***, suggesting she was not as kind and respectful as a woman should be. Also, she claims Eva's choice not to take stolen money was because of ***"ridiculous airs [...] elaborate fine feelings and scruples" (Act 2, pg 46)***, suggesting **women shouldn't make moral decisions or show any independent thought**. She expected Eva to follow the path given to her by taking the money and not causing any problems for others.

Pregnancy outside of marriage

Eva's experience with Eric and then Mrs Birling allows Priestley to explore all the **taboos** and **stigmas** women had to **contend** with due to pregnancy outside of marriage. Unmarried women were viewed differently to married women, and having a child as an unmarried woman was a **huge scandal**. Eva's story about a ***"husband who'd deserted her"*** was an attempt to make her story sound more **respectable** and **pitiable**. If she admitted to being pregnant without being married, others would view her as **lustful** and **irresponsible**.



Mrs Birling recalls how ***“She had to admit, after I began questioning her, that she had no claim to the name, that she wasn’t married, and that the story she told at first - about a husband who’d deserted her - was quite false,” (Act 2, pg 44)***. This outlines various **societal views on marriage and motherhood**.

- Eva had **“no claim to the name”** of the Birling family, but felt she **needed** to introduce herself as **“Mrs Birling” (Act 2, pg 43)** to improve her chances of receiving aid. This reflects **women’s dependence on their family for security**.

While Eric, an upper class man, could sleep with a working class girl and not face consequences, Eva was left with a baby she couldn’t support. Priestley shows how **the stigmas surrounding unmarried women and marriage between classes** meant **many women were trapped without help**.

Sheila

Sheila’s character acts as a bridge between the conservative Mrs Birling and the assertive Eva Smith. During the play we see Sheila’s **transformation** from a **stereotypical upper class girl** into a woman who is **assertive, self-assured, and independent**.

The Inspector enables Sheila to construct and voice her own opinions, by doing so she becomes self aware. This **empowers** her, showing how respecting women and their intelligence gives them **autonomy** and a **confident sense of self**. Priestley suggests the ways in which society treats and portrays women makes them appear weak and **two-dimensional** because they haven’t been allowed to explore their own **identities**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/1ennZHN4VPKrpXRT7>

Her character arc can be seen to **imitate the progression of Women’s Suffrage from 1912 to 1945**. She can be seen as a representation of the **New Woman**.

Beginning of the play

At the beginning of the play, Sheila is presented as **naive, materialistic, and spiteful - all traits that would be typical of female characters in literature**. Her fascination with clothes and jewellery, as well as being stereotypically feminine, suggests she is **greedy** and **shallow**.

- She is excited to an almost unbelievable extent by her engagement ring, declaring, ***“It’s wonderful! [...] Mummy - isn’t it a beauty?”*** and claiming, ***“Now I really feel engaged,” (Act 1, pg 5)***. The use of **“Mummy”** **infantilises** her, furthering her role as the stereotypical naive girl of the upper classes.
- However, her materialistic behaviours may be used by Priestley to show how women were **conditioned** to rely on clothes and jewellery for pleasure and **self-expression**. Priestley suggests women were so **restricted** in their lives that they had to rely on material possessions.



Sheila's treatment of Eva

Women, particularly in the early twentieth century, only had **worth** if they were **deemed beautiful**. They couldn't get an education or work for a high wage, so they had to rely on attracting a husband to support them. Priestley demonstrates how **men made beauty something women had to compete for**, pitting them against each other in order to get a husband and be **financially secure**. Sheila's jealousy towards Eva is a result of being taught that she needed to be the most beautiful in any room. Eva, as a working class woman, was the only person Sheila could be angry with in a **socially acceptable** way.

When she describes how she was ***"in a furious temper"*** and took it out on Eva because she was ***"jealous"*** (Act 1, pg 23-24), this seems to present women as **petty** and **cruel**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/YHCakovN2R7TWIL8>

On the other hand, it can be interpreted as another example of how women are **conditioned** by society to act in a certain way. Women couldn't take out their anger on men or in public, so they had **limited outlets**. Sheila admits how Eva ***"was the right type for it, just as I was the wrong type. She was a very pretty girl too [...] if she'd been some miserable plain little creature, I don't suppose I'd have done it,"*** (Act 1, pg 24). This implies she viewed Eva as a **threat** because of her beauty.

Sheila's interaction with Gerald

Sheila's interactions with Gerald reflect the progress she makes in finding her own voice within the play. Initially, Priestley shows how Sheila has to **repress** her own feelings to appear **respectable** and **conform to societal norms**. At the start she speaks ***"with mock aggressiveness"***, and when interrogating Gerald about last summer, she does it in a way that is ***"half serious, half playful"*** (Act 1, pg 3).

- The way she interacts suggests she is afraid of questioning the men.
- The **duality** in ***"half"*** may also connote **internal conflict** between wanting to be assertive but also being unable to be assertive due to being a woman.
- Priestley suggests she uses a **mask** to disguise her true feelings, ensuring she remains **likeable**.



In contrast, after her interrogation with the Inspector, she is no longer **restrained**. She voices her frustration with Gerald, ***"Why - you fool - he knows. Of course he knows"*** (Act 1, pg 26), suggesting she will no longer **tolerate** his lies. This behaviour would be



particularly shocking because she is challenging the dominance and intelligence of her fiancé, which goes against the values of patriarchy.

Priestley describes how ***“She looks at him almost in triumph. He looks crushed”*** (Act 1, pg 26), suggesting the power in their **relationship** has **shifted**. By facing the truth, Sheila is **liberated**, and Priestley shows how this empowers her, making her **stronger and more capable than those who are still trapped in their lies**.

Sheila and her family

Sheila starts to **challenge** the systems she had previously **obeyed**. When her family try to excuse her from the conversation, she refuses, explaining, ***“I want to understand exactly what happens when a man says he’s so busy at the works that he can hardly ever find time to come and see the girl he’s supposed to be in love with,”*** adding that she is ***“supposed to be engaged to the hero”*** of the story (Act 2, pg 34).

- Priestley suggests she has recognised her own **self-worth**, as she is determined to hold Gerald accountable for his actions rather than excusing him.
- The **sarcastic** **“hero”** suggests she no longer respects Gerald, and sees him for the pretender he is.
- The **repetition** of ***“supposed to be”*** presents their engagement as a **hollow myth or obligation**.

When she ***“hands him the ring”*** (Act 2, pg 40), this is a symbol for how she is **rejecting his lies and his control over her**. Priestley suggests Sheila is able to **see through patriarchal inventions**, such as marriage, to see that they are **tools to control women**. Priestley illustrates how **these systems of inequality depend on the silence and compliance of the oppressed in order to survive**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/MYjk9bv416K2mV4i6>

New Woman

The progression of Sheila’s character can be interpreted as an **allegory** for Women’s Suffrage. Her **newly gained independence and sense of self** also show how the **conventions** and stereotypes surrounding gender can **change with time**. Sheila and Eric break away from their parents’ beliefs, showing how traditions can be **reforged**.



The Male Characters

Like the female characters in the play, Priestley uses the male characters to explore the reasons behind male behaviour and also the ways in which men can treat others in society.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling is a **symbol** of **traditional patriarchy** and **sexist values**. He expects to be **unchallenged** in everything he does, emulating the **dominance** men had in 1912. He treats women in a **condescending, disrespectful manner**, even with his own daughter. Priestley shows that Mr Birling's **misogyny** blinds him to the cruelty of his actions towards Eva Smith, because he doesn't recognise her as a human of equal worth.

Men as equals

Priestley demonstrates how Mr Birling **prioritises** the interests of his fellow men over the interests of the female characters because he only sees men as his **equals**.

During his celebratory toast, Mr Birling addresses Gerald directly rather than Sheila. This implies he cares more about Gerald's happiness than his daughters or that he's more comfortable talking to Gerald as his **peer**. He tells Gerald, **"Your engagement to Sheila means a tremendous lot to me. She'll make you happy, and I'm sure you'll make her happy," (Act 1, pg 4).**

- As well as ignoring his daughter, he makes her engagement all about himself which suggests he has **ownership** over her actions and successes. It also conveys his **narcissism** (self-obsession).
- The phrase **"she'll make you happy"** alludes to the belief that a wife's **only duty** was to please her husband, and suggests Mr Birling views Sheila as a **gift** he is giving to Gerald. Because he references Gerald's happiness before Sheila's, Priestley suggests Mr Birling is only concerned with pleasing Gerald. He doesn't think the relationship should be **mutual** and **equal**.

Loyalty to men

After learning of Gerald's affair, it is evident that Mr Birling sides with Gerald. He doesn't care that his daughter has been hurt as the engagement is the most important factor to consider.

It is evident that he doesn't think a woman should have the **right** to object to a man's desires. He says: **"I'm not defending him. But you must understand that a lot of young men -" (Act 2, pg 40).** This **perpetuates** the idea that women should **tolerate their husband's mistreatment of them rather than standing up for themselves**.

- Mr Birling's reference to **"a lot of young men"** shows how society believed men had an **uncontrollable sex drive**, and so men's **infidelity** was an **accepted part of culture**.



- Priestley shows how **male dominance and male solidarity isolated and ignored women**, and that society has taught women to always be subservient to men and their flaws.

His treatment of women

Mr Birling treats women in a **condescending manner** which reflects the misogynistic culture of the 1910s. He explains to Eric, ***“Clothes mean something quite different to a woman. Not just something to wear - and not only something to make ‘em look prettier - but - well, a sort of sign or token of their self-respect,” (Act 1, pg 9)***. This portrays women as **superficial** and **materialistic**.

- The phrase ***“token of their self-respect”*** suggests a woman’s worth is dependent on how she looks.

Sexualisation of Eva

Mr Birling’s treatment of women is shown to be **hypocritical**. He **sexualises** Eva Smith when he recalls, ***“She was a lively good-looking girl - country-bred, I fancy,” (Act 1, pg 14)***, suggesting her appearance was more important to her identity than how good a worker she was.

- The **adjective “lively” infantilises** her, while ***“country-bred”*** portrays her as an animal or livestock, not a human being.
- The phrase ***“I fancy”*** suggests Mr Birling is **fantasising** about her as a sexual object.

Protection of Sheila

In contrast, he attempts to exclude Sheila from all discussions of Eva’s death and Gerald’s affair in order to protect her. This reflects how the treatment of women **varied based on their class**. He declares, ***“There isn’t the slightest reason why my daughter should be dragged into this unpleasant business,” (Act 1, pg 17)***. He is happy for Eva to be sexualised and left out on the streets, but wants to **preserve** his daughter’s **innocence**.

- The **adjective “unpleasant”** and the **verb “dragged” connote** filth, showing his fear about **tainting** Sheila’s naivety.

His attempted **censorship** of sex and prostitution and his focus on Sheila being a ***“young unmarried girl”*** reflects how society **obsessed over female purity, virtue, and chastity**. Priestley suggests upper class women were only respected if they were still **‘pure’** - typically, whether they were **virgins** or faithful in marriage. Lower class women were viewed as prostitutes, so were abandoned.

Eric

As the son of Mr Birling, Eric is a symbol of how **the younger generations of men were taught the misogyny of their fathers**. Priestley presents misogyny as **a tradition that is sustained to benefit men**. At the same time, Priestley uses Eric and his relationship with his father to examine the **damaging effects of masculinity**.



Priestley explores how the **tension** between Eric and Mr Birling is caused by the **pressures** of masculinity. These interactions suggest the pair are **competing for power**. The two clash often:

- When Eric suggests they should ***“drink their health and have done with it”*** and Mr Birling replies, ***“No, we won’t,” (Act 1, pg 4).***
- Mr Birling tells Eric, ***“Just let me finish, Eric. You’ve a lot to learn yet,” (Act 1, pg 6).***

Mr Birling objects to the way his son is **challenging his authority**, and views him as **inadequate** and **inexperienced**.

We see how Mr Birling is **unimpressed** and **disappointed** with his son for **not conforming to his standards of successful masculinity**. He asks ***“What’s the matter with you?”*** (**Act 1, pg 11**) when Eric objects to his joke with Gerald, and calls him a ***“hysterical young fool”*** (**Act 3, pg 55**) when he gets upset over Eva’s death. This suggests he is **judging** Eric for showing emotion and being too **sensitive**.

- The **adjective** “*hysterical*” **emasculates** (takes away his manliness) Eric because of its connotations of weak femininity.

In return, Eric accuses Mr Birling of “**not**” being “***the kind of father a chap could go to when he’s in trouble***” (Act 3, pg 54), suggesting the **emotional detachment** and **aggression** Mr Birling views as masculine has **distanced** them from each other. Priestley implies **toxic masculinity** prevents men from supporting each other, and instead makes them fear others.

Marriage

Marriage was seen as a major life goal, and made men the head of their own households, so was viewed as a **symbol of manhood**. Priestley shows how Eric has crumbled under the pressure he feels to get married and make his father proud. To explain why he slept with Eva, Eric explains, ***“Well, I’m old enough to be married, aren’t I, and I’m not married” (Act 3, pg 52).***

Eric's treatment of Eva

Eric's treatment of Eva is an **allegory** for how most upper class men treated women and viewed sex. Priestley shows how men **abused** and **exploited** women, particularly prostitutes, and how they took advantage of **desperate** situations some women were in.

- Eric recalls how Eva ***“wasn’t the usual sort,”*** (Act 3, pg 51), later clarifying, ***“I hate these fat old tarts round the town,”*** (Act 3, pg 52).
- This is a **bigoted** description of women, with the **profanity** ***“tarts”*** showing how he shames women for **sex work and displaying sexuality**.



The audience knew by this point that it was his family's fault Eva Smith was on the streets. Eric is therefore blaming the **"tarts"** for the situation he contributed to. He describes Eva as not the **"usual sort"** to justify why he slept with her, suggesting she was a more respectable, 'tasteful' option, but his actions show how **hypocritical** he is. Priestley demonstrates how upper class men **condemned prostitutes while simultaneously using them**. He suggests women, particularly lower class women and sex workers, were **scapegoats** that men used to disguise their own mistakes or flaws.

Alongside his bigotry, Eric **objectifies** and **sexualises** women. He describes Eva as **"pretty and a good sport"**, (Act 3, pg 52), suggesting his attraction to her was **superficial**. **"Good sport"** connotes kindness or generosity, implying Eva tolerated Eric while he took advantage of her. **"Sport"** can also refer to a hunting game, presenting women as **prey for men**.

The Inspector emphasises how Eric **dehumanised** Eva when he describes how he **"just used her for the end of a stupid drunken evening, as if she was an animal, a thing, not a person,"** (Act 3, pg 56), showing how men's desires were treated with infinitely more value than women's.

→ Eric insists **"it was all very vague"** (Act 3, pg 52) and he **"was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty,"** (Act 3, pg 51). This shows how he didn't, and won't, take responsibility for his actions, because his violence was **natural** for a **"chap"** and he couldn't **restrain** himself. Priestley shows how **society treated violent masculinity as if it were natural or even desirable, and so couldn't be helped**.

Gerald

Whereas Eric's masculinity is crude and imperfect, which makes him a disappointment to his father, Gerald is a **symbol** for the **refined, cultured masculinity of the upper classes**. He isn't a dandy, but he is well-liked and well-respected about town, making him the perfect **respectable gentleman** and the perfect son-in-law.

Although he is polite and charming, Priestley reveals how his misogyny is **insidious** (subtle but harmful). He is shown to be **manipulative** and **selfish** in his behaviour towards women, showing how even the most respectable men are corrupt.

Silencing of Sheila

Priestley shows how Gerald uses **gender stereotypes** to his **advantage**. He tries to **silence** Sheila when she discovers his affair and tries to remove her from the dining-room by saying, **"I think Miss Birling ought to be excused any more of this questioning. She's nothing more to tell you. She's had a long, exciting and tiring day - we were celebrating our engagement, you know - and now she's obviously had about as much as she can stand,"** (Act 2, pg 27). By **speaking for her**, Gerald suggests he knows her



<https://images.app.goo.gl/YXuFMWR9Rbj1HTFHA>



mind better than she does, symbolising how **men stole women's voices**. This exchange epitomises the way **women were erased from conversations that concerned them**.

- His tone is **patronising** and **belittling**. The **adjectives** **"long, exciting and tiring"** present women as **delicate** and **childlike**. They also allude to **female hysteria** - Gerald is trying to **invalidate** her before she reveals his secrets.
- Priestley illustrates how **sexist stereotypes were invented and used to benefit or protect men**.
- The aside **"we were celebrating our engagement"** **stakes his claim over her** as her husband-to-be.

Hypocritical views about women

Like Mr Birling and Eric, Gerald's views on women are shown to be **hypocritical**. Firstly, he believes **"young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things"** (Act 2, pg 27), but the Inspector rightfully points out, **"We know one young woman who wasn't, don't we?"** (Act 2, pg 28). This suggests Gerald has **double standards** for upper class and working class women.

- Priestley accuses men of **abandoning lower class women** in **"unpleasant and disturbing"** circumstances while **pretending to care about women's fragile innocence**. It appears that Gerald pretends to care about Sheila's state of mind in order to remove her from the conversation.

Objectification of women

Later, he explains how the Palace bar is **"a favourite haunt of women of the town"** but he didn't intend to stay long because he **"hate[s] those hard-eyed dough-faced women"**, (Act 2, pg 34), portraying prostitutes and working class women as **grotesque** and **hostile**.

- **"Hard-eyed"** and **"dough-faced"** refer to the women's **appearance**, implying if a woman doesn't look the way Gerald wants, he will avoid her. Her personality is irrelevant.
- In contrast, he recounts how Eva **"looked quite different"** and was **"altogether out of place down there"**, but was **"very pretty [...] young and fresh and charming"** (Act 2, pg 34-35).

As he is purely attracted to her appearance it is clear he sees her as a **sexual object**. The **adjectives** **"young and fresh"** may refer to her **virginity**. Sleeping with her would be a **sexual conquest**, as taking a woman's virginity was seen as a sign of **masculine strength**. By claiming she was **"different"** and **"out of place"**, Gerald tries to argue she was different from the other **"women of the town"**. Like Eric, he defends his attraction to her, and tries to show that his tastes are more distinguished than other men's. Therefore, **he condemns others for their sexual desires while celebrating his own**.

Eva as his mistress

Through keeping Eva as his mistress, Gerald has **objectified** her and used her as a **physical token of his masculinity**. The Inspector asks him if he **"decided to keep her - as [his] mistress"** (Act 2, pg 36), as if he were making a decision about a pet not a person. Sheila summarises how he **"set her up as his mistress and then dropped her when it suited him"** (Act 2, pg 41).



- The **verbs** “*keep*”, “*set up*” and “*dropped*” all portray Eva as an **object** that Gerald **controlled**.
- Furthermore, “*keep*” implies she was his **possession**, while “*dropped*” connotes **carelessness** or dumping rubbish.

He supposes their affair was “*inevitable*” because she was “*young and pretty and warm-hearted - and intensely grateful,*” (Act 2, pg 37). These descriptors portray Eva as the **ideal submissive woman**.

- The **adjective** “*inevitable*” presents **masculine desire** as **irresistible** and **unyielding**. Furthermore, he admits he “*adored*” being “*the wonderful Fairy Prince*”, arguing “*nearly any man would have done*”, (Act 2, pg 38), suggesting his **selfish exploitation** of Eva’s “*intense*” gratitude was a **natural** part of his masculinity.

Priestley shows how Gerald used Eva to **nurse his own ego**, as she made him feel “*important*” and **powerful**. He suggests **masculinity is fragile and depends on the submission of women for validation**.

Things to note

Gender and sexism are not the main focuses of Priestley’s play. Unlike with other main themes, the characters aren’t confronted about their bigotry and misogyny, and they **don’t explicitly repent**. Priestley possibly did this to avoid making the play more controversial than it already was.

Regardless of the characters’ awareness of the influence gender has on them, **gender politics is a constant undercurrent in their dialogue**. Priestley does this to show how **inequality** in society is **multifaceted** and is not dependent on one thing. Eva Smith is treated poorly because she is working class **and** because she is a woman. Only if society **addresses all of its prejudices and biases will social equality be possible**.



Generations: Young vs. Old

The idea of **age** and **generational identity** runs throughout the play. The Birling family is split into two generations: the parents and the children. The **generational divide** doesn't just refer to the relationship between a parent and their child in a **familial context**. Priestley examines how your **life experiences** and the **era** you grow up in **affects your morals and political identity**.

There is a clear **distinction** between how the children react to the Inspector's visit and how the parents react. The way each generation views the other is also a key aspect of the family's **dynamic**.

- ❖ Gerald is an **outlier** as he belongs to an older, landed family which makes him ultimately sympathise with the parents.

Context

Generational divide

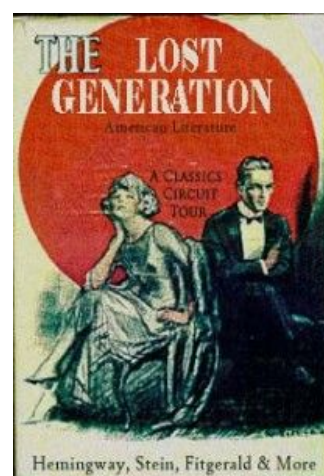
The generational divide in Britain in 1945 was possibly the most **severe** it had ever been.

- There were those who **had fought in either of the World Wars**, those who had been **too young to fight**, and those who had been **too old to fight**.
- There were those who had known life **before war** (as they had reached adulthood before 1914) and those who **had only known war**.
- Priestley was born in 1894, making him a member of this latter generation - often called **the Lost Generation**.

The Lost Generation

The Lost Generation refers, widely, to those born between **1883 and 1900**, meaning they **reached adulthood during or just after the end of the First World War**.

Many had fought in the Great War and found **living in the new postwar era difficult**. In the early postwar years, the war's survivors felt **confused** and **aimless**. The values they had **inherited** from their elders were no longer **relevant** and as others tried to return to **'normalcy'** many members of the Lost Generation found everyday life **materialistic** and **emotionally meaningless**. Eric and Sheila would also be members of the Lost Generation, but it's important to note that when the play is set the War hadn't happened yet.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/WS9iUSfMzZkEMjFz8>



How Priestley portrays the generations

It is within these **drastic variations in experience and generational identity** that Priestley explores through the parents and children of the play.

- He presents the older generation as being **stuck in their old ways**, used to their **comforts** and **conservative values**. The parents refuse to **be self-aware or accept responsibility**, caring only for themselves.
- In contrast, the younger generation are **curious** and **compassionate**, and quick to **rectify their ignorance**. He suggests **the younger generations should learn from the mistakes of their elders in order to create a more peaceful and progressive future for Britain**.

Development of the Theme

Structure and form are important to this theme because of how Priestley uses them to **emphasise the divide between the generations**. The way the dialogue is organised, the scenes where either the parents or children **dominate** conversation and how each character reacts differently to the Inspector's visit means the theme goes beyond Mr and Mrs Birling's age-based insults.

This theme is also a good example of how characters are **constructs** which are used by Priestley to **serve a particular purpose**. Priestley makes **each generation a symbol of a different outlook and political orientation**.

Exam Tip

When reading the play, look at how Priestley switches focus between the two generations, or examine when a character seems to be an **emblem** for their generation rather than a self-contained individual.

Beginning of the play

At the beginning of the play, the family appears to be a **unified front**. There are small disputes and disagreements, but overall they are all on the same page. They all occupy the **same role** in society as **ignorant, complacent, upper class people**.

The younger generation seem to be curious and inquisitive, but they don't want to challenge their parents' authority. Instead, they want to **emulate** (imitate) them.

However, the profound effect of the Inspector is to **split the family permanently down generational lines**. The two sides and their respective ideologies can't be **reconciled**. This may mimic the **drastic impact the World Wars had on society**. Priestley suggests society is at a **crossroads or tipping point, where change has to happen and a choice has to be made**.



Character development

Both Eric and Sheila undergo character arcs, starting with an **immature desire** to follow their parents and ending with a **mature understanding of the real world**. They are out from under their parents' shadows, capable of independent thought.

Their incredible transformations are contrasted with the **stasis** of the older generations. As Sheila notes, Mr Birling, Mrs Birling, and Gerald are all prepared to continue in the same way once the Inspector has left. Gerald even offers Sheila her ring back, as if he never cheated on her and broke her trust.



<https://everymantheatre.org/inspector-calls>

Considering how dramatic and shocking the Inspector's revelations about the family were, the older generations' **determination** to return to the way things were before suggests **an incredible level of delusion**. **Morality and integrity mean nothing to them**. They would rather have the appearance of a happy, successful family than actually trust each other.

Ending

The play ends how it started - the family gathering is interrupted by a phone call to say an Inspector is coming to the house. On the surface the **mirroring** suggests that nothing much has changed, however the audience knows that the family has **divided and changed since the first act**.

Furthermore, the **cyclical structure** could allude to the two World Wars, evoking the same idea of **"pretend[ing] all over again" (Act 3, pg 65)**. Priestley suggests **history will keep repeating itself until people learn**.

Mr Birling

As the **patriarch** of the Birling family, Mr Birling is a **symbol of the older generation's power and influence in society**. He has made his own money (**nouveau riche**) instead of inheriting it like Mrs Birling and Gerald and is very **satisfied** with his accomplishments. He is **resistant** to **criticism** and gets angry with anyone who challenges his opinions or authority. He believes his life experiences make him **wise** and **infallible**, meaning he thinks poorly of the younger generation whom he thinks are **foolish** and **naive**. A large part of his **identity** in the play is his **capitalist** views and **loyalty to business and wealth over community**.



Mr Birling as a teacher

Priestley shows how Mr Birling thinks of himself as a **teacher** to the younger generations because of his age and experience. At the beginning of his toast, he tells his children and Gerald, ***“Now you three young people, just listen to this - and remember what I’m telling you now,” (Act 1, pg 7)***, showing how **seriously** he takes his own advice.

- The **imperatives** **“listen”** and **“remember”** emphasise Mr Birling’s **desire for attention** and for his children to be his **disciples**. He wants to have an **impact** on the younger generation.

He repeats this idea several times during this speech, saying, ***“You youngsters just remember what I said,” (Act 1, pg 7)***, and ***“Take my word for it, you youngsters - and I’ve learnt in the good hard school of experience,” (Act 1, pg 10)***.

- The phrase ***“good hard school of experience”*** suggests he thinks knowledge and intelligence can only come with age, and that ***“experience”*** is the **ultimate form of education** - shown by the **metaphor** of a ***“school”***.
- The use of ***“young people”*** and ***“youngsters”*** shows how Mr Birling is **fixated on age and superiority**. The **nouns** are **patronising** and **mocking**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/rsoW62Qiphetgn79A>

Priestley shows how the older generation were **arrogant** and **controlling**, as they wanted to influence the younger generation.

Arrogance of the older generations

In a similar way, Priestley suggests the older generations were **overconfident**, particularly the men. He claims ***“We don’t guess - we’ve had experience - and we know,” (Act 1, pg 7)*** which shows that the possibility of being wrong is completely foreign to Mr Birling.

- As he has grown up in a successful era he believes **his generation paved the way to a better world**, and he trusts it wholeheartedly.

His **hubris** (excessive self-confidence) leads him to make bold claims. He tells his family, ***“Some people say that war’s inevitable. And to that I say - fiddlesticks!”*** and ***“I say there isn’t a chance of war,” (Act 1, pg 6)***. He presents his predictions with **absolute certainty** even though he is no expert, showing how men were taught their opinions were always valuable.

- Priestley uses the **dramatic irony** in these claims to express how **deluded** the **ego** of the older generations was. He implies **arrogance** and **overconfidence** caused these disasters, as they **refused to see them coming**.

Struggles to accept change

Priestley presents Mr Birling’s **critical, patronising** view of the younger generations to show how **the older generations struggled to accept the changes of modern life**. He says, ***“You don’t know what some of these boys get up to nowadays. More money to spend***



and time to spare than I had when I was Eric's age," (Act 1, pg 9), suggesting he believes that life is **easier** than when he grew up. He implies the younger generation are **spoiled** because they have more **"money"** and **"time"** to themselves and Priestley implies the older generation perceived the younger generation as **weaker** and **less worthy** because of it.

→ The **noun "boys"** is **infantilising** and **belittling**, showing how he doesn't take the younger generation **seriously**.

Equally, he tells Eric and Gerald, **"I don't want to lecture you two young fellows again.**



<https://images.app.goo.gl/PEur5Kf9bZZ6tiSr7>

But what so many of you don't seem to understand now, when things are so much easier, is that a man has to make his own way," (Act 1, pg 9). This shows how the older generation feared that the values and comforts of modern life were killing off the old traditions and ideals they had been raised with.

→ The **verb "lecture"** presents Mr Birling as an **educational** figure, suggesting he sees it as his **duty** to **rectify the mistakes of the young and set them on the right path**. He thinks the younger generations can only prove themselves if life is harder on them, perhaps thinking an **"easier"** life is **emasculating**.

Here, Priestley shows how **changes in lifestyle, culture and experience make it more difficult for people to appreciate and respect each other**.

Older generation and capitalism

Finally, Priestley uses Mr Birling's businessman **persona** to associate the older generations with **selfishness** and **right-wing conservatism**. His toast and **"lecture"** to Eric and Gerald are introduced at the start of the play to establish the **capitalist ideologies** of the family to the audience.

Mr Birling tells them, **"The way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive - community and all that nonsense [...] a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own," (Act 1, pg 10)**. This suggests the older generations were focused on **self-preservation** and **privacy** rather than community.

→ Furthermore, the use of **derogatory** (insulting) words like **"cranks"**, **"bees in a hive"**, and **"nonsense"** show how Mr Birling actively **mocks** socialists, rather than just disagreeing with them.

Priestley suggests the older generations did not **respect** Socialism as a **valid political system**. This presents them as **cruel** and **narrow-minded**.



Mrs Birling

While Mr Birling is used to present capitalism as an **invention** of the older generations, Priestley uses Mrs Birling's character to explore the older generations' **denial** and **resistance to change**. Mrs Birling is a very **conservative**, **traditional** character who is **unrepentant** about her **prejudices**. This shows how the older generations were **stubborn** and stuck in their ways and Priestley implies that as time went on their denial and stubbornness got more and more **outdated**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/jhQVTy5uzipD714x8>

Obsession with appearance

In the opening scenes, Priestley outlines Mrs Birling's obsession with **appearances, manners, and social etiquette**. She objects to her husband's comments about the cook saying "**Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things**" (Act 1, pg 2) which shows how **anxious** she is about seeming **respectable**. Priestley implies the older generations prioritised social conduct over genuine interaction, encouraging **repression** and **secrecy**.

She also reacts to Sheila using the **slang term** "**squiffy**" with, "**Really the things you girls pick up these days!**" (Act 1, pg 3). This suggests that she, like her husband, **disapproves** of modern culture. She thinks "**the things [...] girls pick up these days**" are **rude** and **unladylike**, **threatening the tradition of femininity**.

Priestley suggests the older generations did not **trust** the younger generations to act in an **appropriate manner**. The lives of the older generations were **dictated** by **arbitrary rules** and a desire to appear sophisticated, rather than living freely. These values **isolated** and **deterred** others.

Stubborn

Throughout the play Mrs Birling doesn't listen to the opinions of others which reinforces the idea that the older generations are deliberately **ignorant** and **obstinate** (stubbornly refusing to change one's opinion).

When Sheila warns her about "**beginning all wrong**", Mrs Birling replies, "**I don't know what you're talking about,**" (Act 2, pg 29), and, when Sheila talks about not building a "**wall**", Mrs Birling declares, "**I don't understand you,**" (Act 2, pg 30). This shows how she **refuses to listen to the younger generations**.

→ The **repetition** of "**don't**" suggests the older generations were **incapable of entertaining the suggestions of others**.



Moreover, she tells the Inspector, ***“I don’t understand you, Inspector,” (Act 2, pg 41)***, and claims, ***“You have no power to make me change my mind,” (Act 2, pg 44)***. Her stubbornness isn’t just reserved for the younger generations: Mrs Birling rejects any view that opposes her own.

- She is impatient, and the **repetition** of ***“I don’t understand you”*** may imply she **isolates** herself from others.
- The use of the **noun** ***“power”*** could suggest she doesn’t want to change her mind because it is a sign of **weakness** or **submission**. Priestley suggests the older generations saw any alternative suggestions as a **challenge** to their authority.

Reaction to Eva

Priestley reveals Mrs Birling’s **prejudices**, especially **classism**, in her reaction to Eva Smith coming to the charity for help. She describes Eva introducing herself as ***“Mrs Birling”*** ***“simply a piece of gross impertinence - quite deliberate,” (Act 2, pg 43)***. It is clear she doesn’t want to hear her name used by a working class girl and she chooses to interpret Eva’s introduction as a **purposefully disrespectful** act. This suggests to the audience that Mrs Birling aims to see the worst in people in order to villainise them.

She continues, ***“Naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case,” (Act 2, pg 43)*** which shows how she is **shameless** in her **bias**. She feels she is **entitled** to think the way she does and describes her reaction as ***“natural”***.

Furthermore, ***“one of the things”*** implies more aspects of Eva’s identity prejudiced Mrs Birling against her, most likely her class and gender. This is also implied when she calls Eva’s reasons for not wanting to accept stolen money ***“a lot of silly nonsense!” (Act 2, pg 46)***, and insisting, ***“As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!” (Act 2, pg 47)***.

- The use of **exclamation marks** shows Mrs Birling’s disbelief, showing how **consumed** she is by her prejudices. She refuses to **trust** and **respect** Eva even when the evidence is right in front of her. Priestley suggests the older generations were so **blinded** by their **intolerance** that they couldn’t see how **ruthless** they were being.

Eric & Sheila

As the children of the family, Eric and Sheila represent the **changing face** of British society. They are roughly the same age as Priestley would have been in 1912 so he probably relates to these characters the most.

Though at the beginning they are **mouthpieces** for their parents’ beliefs, they quickly break free and think independently. They accept **responsibility** for their actions and try to **encourage others to do the same**. Their characters are largely linked with **Socialist ideologies**. Priestley shows how the younger generations are capable of starting a **revolution**.



The children are presented as **empathetic** and **compassionate** which shows the audience how the younger generation are more capable of **taking care of others** (and enacting **socialist policies**).

Eric

The character of Eric is used by Priestley to show how the younger generations **suffer** under the **pressure** placed on them by their elders. Eric was conscious he hadn't met **expectations** in terms of being married and describes how this drove him to act out. He uses this to justify sleeping with Eva: ***"I'm old enough to be married, aren't I, and I'm not married," (Act 3, pg 52).***

- Here Priestley shows how **the lives of the younger generations were already set out for them**. He also shows the younger generations' silent suffering under the high expectations of the older generations.

Wanting to impress his father

This **pressure to conform to tradition** is also evident in Eric's exchanges with his father. At the start of the Inspector's visit, Eric is **eager** to agree with his father's views and **impress** him.

- When Mr Birling asks, ***"We'd all be in an impossible position, wouldn't we?"***, Eric answers, ***"By Jove, yes. And as you were saying, Dad, a man has to look after himself -" (Act 1, pg 14).*** This shows Eric is keen to follow in his father's footsteps and how younger generations are likely to **adopt and maintain traditions and values**.
- The **verbatim** (word for word) repetition of his father's words may imply Eric is **incapable of thinking for himself**, as if the younger generations were **conditioned** to **mindlessly follow the older generations**.

However, Priestley shows how Eric's opinions were **never really his own**. Once the Inspector has left, Eric revisits Mr Birling's lecture once more but instead ***"laugh bitterly"*** at it and criticises him. Here, he suggests the younger generations have the ability to think for themselves and expose the **hypocrisies** of their parents.

Challenging his father

As well as being more **generous** than his father, Eric is willing to **challenge** the decisions his father makes. These exchanges show the audience that the younger generation have the ability to go against tradition and therefore change the future.

- When Gerald claims Mr Birling ***"couldn't have done anything else"*** about firing Eva, Eric disagrees. He says: ***"He could. He could have kept her on instead of throwing her out." (Act 1, pg 15).*** This suggests that while the older generations see no possibility of forgiving others, the younger generations are open to acts of **understanding** and **mercy**.
- Furthermore, Eric asks, ***"Why shouldn't they try for higher wages? We try for the highest possible prices," (Act 1, pg 16).*** showing he recognises how **the Capitalist system is selfish and exploitative**. He sees the workers don't **benefit**



from the company's high **profits**, implying Mr Birling has **unjustified** in denying their request.

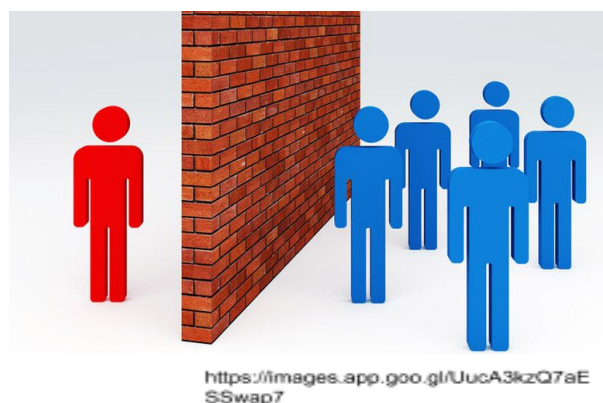
Sheila

Sheila admits and **learns from her mistakes** and is therefore able to identify lessons that the other characters need to learn. She wants to help others realise their wrongs - their inability to see their mistakes means that Sheila quickly becomes **vocal** and **distressed**.

Sheila and her parents

As the play progresses Sheila becomes more vocal against her parents. She isn't afraid to call them out for their continued **snobbery** and **denial**.

- She warns her mother against ***"beginning all wrong"*** (Act 2, pg 29), and ***"build[ing] up a kind of wall"*** between them and Eva (Act 2, pg 30).
- She refers to her family's ***"silly pretences"*** (Act 2, pg 32) and portrays them as **foolish** or **childish** people who aren't convincing anybody.
- She tells her mother ***"Impertinent is such a silly word"*** (Act 2, pg 31) which implies the Birlings' air of **superiority** is false.
 - ◆ Here, Sheila criticism of her mother's use of the **adjective "impertinent"** is ironic as this is the word she used to complain about Eva to Milwards (resulting in Eva getting fired). By criticising it now, Priestley shows how Sheila has **broken free of her mother's opinions**.



Like Eric, Sheila also questions her father's actions.

- She thinks her father's decision to sack Eva was a ***"mean thing to do"*** (Act 1, pg 19) and a ***"rotten shame"*** (Act 1, pg 19). Though these phrases sound childish they portray Sheila as **sympathetic** and **well-meaning**.
- She also points out that ***"These girls aren't cheap labour - they're people"*** (Act 1, pg 19). Here she explicitly goes against capitalist ideas as workers being purely **"labour"** and instead shows the audience that ***"they're people"*** which is more reflective of **left-wing politics**.

Priestley, uses her shrewdness (good judgement) to **expose the ridiculousness of the older generations' facades**. Through these exchanges Priestley encourages his audience to view their elders with **cynicism** and realise they are **performing** rather than being genuine.



Sheila and Gerald

Sheila doesn't just stop at criticising the older generation, she also tries to show others her age that they are wrong too.

- She tells Gerald, ***"I expect you've done things you're ashamed of too"*** (Act 1, pg 23), meaning she no longer views him as **perfect and virtuous**.
- When Gerald claims he doesn't ***"come into this suicide business"*** Sheila responds, ***"I thought I didn't, half an hour ago [...] You'll see. You'll see,"*** (Act 1, pg 26). She sees through Gerald's denial and realises that it is likely that he is also involved in some way.
 - The **ominous refrain** ***"you'll see"*** could imply Sheila is desperate for them to have their **lies** and **pretences broken down**.

Priestley perhaps uses her to suggest that the younger generations are more **realistic** and thus able to avoid future mistakes. Indeed, she **identifies the mistakes she and those before her made and tries to stop the cycle**. Priestley suggests the younger generations are able to identify the **injustices** committed by their elders and **rectify** them because they are more kind hearted. He also shows how they can **introduce** a new political ideology to society.

Fights and Clashes Between Generations

As well as presenting the parents and the children in certain ways, Priestley examines the **direct conflicts between them**. This mimics the **tensions** and **divides** in British society, and explores the **dynamics** of the generational divide. The ways the parents **insult** their children present the older generations' **scornful** view of the younger generations. The way the two generations interact and argue shows how the two sides **view each other**.

Why is there tension?

It is evident that some of the tension between the generations is because the older generation thinks the younger generation have an easier life than them (you can still see this kind of thinking today).

- Mr Birling frequently references Eric's ***"easier"*** upbringing and later accuses him of being ***"spoilt"*** (Act 3, pg 54). It is possible Mr Birling **resents** Eric for having the lifestyle he couldn't have when he was young.

Mr Birling is ***"rather angry"*** after Eric questions his claim that ***"it's a free country"***. He tells him, ***"It's about time you learnt to face a few responsibilities. That's something this public-school-and-Varsity life you've had doesn't seem to teach you,"*** (Act 1, pg 16).

- There is some **hypocrisy** in Mr Birling's insults because, as Eric's father, he would have been responsible for **spoiling** him.

Priestley suggests the older generations are **incapable of respecting the younger generations**. They expect them to go through the same hardships they did, which is



impossible. This suggests that the generations' different life experiences make it hard for them to understand each other.

Mr and Mrs Birling silencing their children

Mr Birling's **monologues**, which dominate the opening scene, shows how the voices of the older generations were given so much respect in society that they were rarely questioned. Going against the status quo and questioning opinions causes disputes between Eric and his father who becomes **dismissive**, showing an **impatient view of the younger generations**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/mQSSbjdhT8PRUoFFA>

Eric tries to debate with his father about the likelihood of war and after his opinion is dismissed he tries to reenter the conversation with **"Yes, I know - but still -"**. Despite this Mr Birling interrupts him again: **"Just let me finish, Eric. You've a lot to learn yet," (Act 1, pg 6).**

→ Mr Birling commanding **"just let me finish"** suggests the older generations **craved attention and respect**. Men were taught to be **aggressive and domineering**,

possibly presenting this exchange as a **competition for authority**.

→ Mr Birling dismisses Eric's opinion because he has **"a lot to learn yet"**, showing how the younger generations weren't taken seriously because of their youth. The country did not want **the benefit of a new perspective**.

Similarly, when Eric criticises his father, Mr Birling orders, **"I don't want any of that talk from you," (Act 3, pg 52)** and **"Don't talk to me like that," (Act 3, pg 54)**. This focus on what Eric can and can't say shows how the older generations **silenced and censored any resistance or opposition**, giving **the illusion society was happier than it really was**.

On different occasions, Mrs Birling commands Sheila, **"Please don't contradict me like that," (Act 2, pg 30)**, and **"Sheila, don't talk nonsense," (Act 2, pg 35)**, making her appear **irritable** and **vain**. By telling Sheila she can't **"contradict"** her, Mrs Birling seems to **ban** people disagreeing with her, presenting the rule of the older generations as a **strict dictatorship**.

Priestley gives examples of how Mr and Mrs Birling react to their children's **protests** and **defiance**. He conveys how the older generations **wanted to stay in control** and **expected their children to honour this pecking order**.

Mr and Mrs Birling dismissing Sheila

Mr and Mrs Birling continually dismiss Sheila's reaction to the Inspector's visit, thereby implying her reactions are wrong. Upon seeing Sheila's **"wild"** and **guilt-ridden** state, Mr Birling asks, **"What's the matter with that child?"**, to which Mrs Birling replies,



“Over-excited,” (Act 2, pg 33). They don’t see her reaction to the Inspector’s visit as **natural**.

- By suggesting something is the **“matter”** with her, they imply she is **delirious, ill, or insane**, thereby **dismissing her worries and insights**.
- **“Child”** and **“over-excited”** further **invalidate** her **perspective** and show how the older generations **patronised** young adults.

Later, Mrs Birling accuses Sheila of **“behaving like an hysterical child,” (Act 2, pg 48)**, and Mr Birling calls Eric a **“damned fool”** and a **“hysterical young fool”**, (Act 3, pg 54-55), presenting the younger generations as **irrational, sensitive, and stupid**. They



<https://stageandcinema.com/2019/02/05/an-inspector-calls/>

aren’t **sympathetic** to their children’s actions and feelings, choosing to **ignore** them. This allows them to **maintain** their own beliefs, such as their **supposed innocence in Eva’s death**.

→ By associating being a **“fool”** or **“hysterical”** with being **young**, Priestley shows how the older generations made **reductive generalisations**. Their insults allude to a **hierarchy** where the older generations were automatically superior to the younger generations.

She thinks Sheila is talking **“nonsense”**, implying the idea of being at fault is **preposterous** to her. However, Sheila responds with a warning similar to the one she gave Gerald: **“You wait, Mother,” (Act 2, pg 35)**. Ignoring her mother, Priestley suggests Sheila **no longer fears her mother or recognises her power**.

Furthermore, when Sheila exposes Eric’s drinking problem, Mr Birling says, **“If you’d had any sense of loyalty -” (Act 3, pg 50)**, trying to **guilt** Sheila for putting the interest of truth over her family’s **reputation**. **“Loyalty”** is a question of **traditional honour**, and Priestley suggests the older generations used it to **justify keeping secrets and maintaining lies**.

The Final Scenes

The scene that unfolds once the Inspector leaves emphasises the **generational divide**. The most **immediate, notable impact of the Inspector’s visit is to split the family irreversibly**, with the two generations **turning on each other**. Two options face the family: **either they change their ways, or continue as they were**. The children choose the first option, the parents the other.

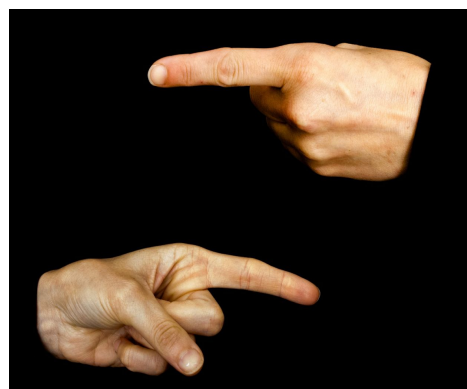


By showing this rift, Priestley suggests that the beliefs of the parents - selfishness and denial of responsibility - **belong in the past**, in 1912, while the children's attitudes - their willingness to accept blame and to change - **belong to the future**.

Reaction to the Inspector leaving

Each character's **initial reaction** once the Inspector exits is very revealing, and is **indicative** of how the **family dynamic will be for the remainder of the play**.

Both parents are quick to **point fingers** at others. Mr Birling is the first to speak, he says ***"You're the one I blame for this"* (Act 3, pg 57)** to Eric. Mrs Birling adds, ***"Eric, I'm absolutely ashamed of you,"* (Act 3, pg 57)**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/cxpoF9JBn4a1iG1D6>

- Through blaming others they ensure they aren't **burdened** with any responsibility themselves and shows the audience **they don't learn** from the Inspector's message. They are the same people who sat down for dinner before Act 1.
- Priestley presents how the older generations are **stuck in their ways, are selfish, and pass responsibility onto others**.
- This may be an **allusion** to how, in 1945, the younger generations were left by their elders to **recover from the damage the World Wars and the Great Depression had caused, despite not being the ones who started them**.

On the other hand, Eric and Sheila are able to identify the **shared guilt** of the family. Eric's response to his parents' accusations is ***"I don't blame you. But don't forget I'm ashamed of you as well - yes both of you,"* (Act 3, pg 57)** shows how he is willing to **accept blame for his own actions while not forgetting what part others played** in Eva's death.

Likewise, Sheila says, ***"I behaved badly too. I know I did"* (Act 3, pg 57)** before criticising her parents' actions.

Priestley shows how **accepting responsibility is the first step to changing your ways**. Because of this, he suggests **only the younger generations** are capable of **improving society**. The older generations want to **continue living a life of ignorance and denial**.

Who was the Inspector?

One of the biggest points of **controversy** is how **important** the Inspector's true nature is.

The younger generation are in agreement that whether he was ***"really a police inspector"*** or not doesn't ***"make any real difference"* (Act 3, pg 58-59)**. This shows the younger generation as a **moral and conscientious generation who recognise other people's feelings over their own**.



In contrast, Mr and Mrs Birling firmly believe ***“it matters a devil of a lot” (Act 3, pg 58)*** if the Inspector wasn’t a real police officer, and they are ***“excited”*** to know he was ***“a fake” (Act 3, pg 62)***. Priestley implies Mr and Mrs Birling are concerned with what the Inspector **can use against them** and the impact this will have on their **reputation** rather than with their actions themselves.

This **juxtaposition** reveals what each generation cares about more. Mr and Mrs Birling are **used to their comfortable life in high society and want to protect it**, meaning they care more about what can be taken to ***“court” (Act 3, pg 60)*** and the effect this would have on the family’s reputation.

Mr Birling is frustrated by his children’s views.

- He complains that ***“They’re so damned exasperating. They just won’t try to understand our position or to see the difference between a lot of stuff like this coming out in private and a downright public scandal” (Act 3, pg 65)***, showing how the two generations are on different pages.

Conversely, Eric and Sheila only care about **how poorly they treated others**.

- Eric says, ***“The money’s not the important thing. It’s what happened to the girl and what we all did to her that matters” (Act 3, pg 65)***. By rejecting ***“money”*** and focusing on Eva (a working class girl) Eric **rejects capitalism and classism - the values of his elders**.

Priestley presents the divide between **morality and legality** to show the **differing priorities** of the older and younger generations. He portrays the younger generation as **the more socially responsible, caring generation**.

Pretending nothing had happened

The **recurring motif** of the closing scenes is about the parents **acting like nothing has happened**. Sheila immediately identifies the issue, telling them, ***“But now you’re beginning all over again to pretend that nothing much has happened,” (Act 3, pg 57)***. This suggests that as soon as the **proof** of their wrongdoings, the Inspector, is out of sight, Mr and Mrs Birling are able to **act freely and forgive themselves**.

- The verb ***“pretend”*** suggests **willful ignorance**, in order to **protect and comfort** themselves.
- The phrase ***“nothing much has happened”*** shows how the children feel as if the Inspector’s visit was a **life-changing, revelatory event**, whereas the parents see **no reason to change their mindset**. The phrase, alternatively, may suggest Mr and Mrs Birling have been encountering this their whole lives, so are **used to it**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/sdSTEDo824y7S3Mr6>



The accusation repeats throughout the scene:

- ***“You’re beginning to pretend now that nothing’s really happened at all,” (Act 3, pg 64),***
- ***“You’re just beginning to pretend all over again,” (Act 3, pg 65),***
- ***“You’re pretending everything’s just as it was before,” (Act 3, pg 71).***

The repetition of **“pretend”** suggests society is a **performance**. **“Pretend”** also connotes **childishness**, suggesting **this way of living is not sustainable**. The phrase **“all over again”** shows this is not the first time it has happened, portraying history as **a cycle of ignorance** and possibly alluding to the **two World Wars Priestley and his audience had just witnessed**. Priestley accuses society of **not learning from its mistakes**, allowing the Second World War to happen. His audience would understand how **dangerous and life-threatening Mr and Mrs Birling’s pretences are**.

Was a lesson learnt?

The final exchanges between the parents and the children leave the audience with a **lasting impression of the generational divide**. Sheila tells her parents, ***“You began to learn something. And now you’ve stopped. You’re ready to go on in the same old way,” (Act 3, pg 71)***, showing how **she disapproves of the older generations and their traditions**. This accusation again implies that throughout history, society has had the chance to **“learn”** from its mistakes but has failed to do so each time, perpetuating war, bloodshed, and poverty.

We know that **“the same old way”** will eventually lead to **another Eva Smith scenario**. Sheila says she isn’t prepared to **“go on in the same way”**, explaining, ***“I remember what he said, how he looked, and what he made me feel. Fire and blood and anguish. And it frightens me the way you talk, and I can’t listen to any more of it,” (Act 3, pg 71)***. Sheila **heeds** the Inspector’s warning and understands the **gravity** of the situation. By saying her parents **“frighten”** her, this presents the older generations as a **threat**. She decides to not **“listen to any more of it”**: Priestley uses this as **a symbol of the younger generations’ rejection of the older generations**.



However, her parents are **“amused”** by her anxiety (**Act 3, pg 71**), showing how they don’t **recognise the importance of the situation**. Their humour appears **insensitive**. Mr Birling mocks his children, saying, ***“Now look at the pair of them - the famous younger generation who know it all. And they can’t even take a joke,” (Act 3, pg 72)***. This is a **microcosm** for how the older generations have perceived the younger generations throughout the play. The younger generations were **celebrated** for being the future, but Mr Birling suggests they don’t **“know it all”**. He doesn’t take them seriously, and thinks they are **weak and oversensitive**. Priestley uses this final exchange to suggest **the generational divide can never be resolved, but it is up to the younger generations to**

correct the mistakes of their parents. The older generations will be stuck in the past.



Importance of understanding

The idea of “**understand[ing]**” appears a lot in the context of the generational divide, and shows how the two generations can’t accept each other.

Sheila tells her father, “**Gerald knows what I mean, and you apparently don’t,**” (Act 2, pg 40), Mrs Birling tells Sheila, “**I simply don’t understand your attitude,**” (Act 3, pg 50), and Eric “**almost threatens**” his mother with, “**You don’t understand anything. You never did. You never even tried,**” (Act 3, pg 55). This **motif** shows how **incompatible** the two generations are. Priestley suggests there exists a **divide they cannot overcome**. He also suggests the two generations don’t attempt to “**understand**” each other.

With every mention of understanding, we see how the two generations **feel completely isolated from each other**. The younger generation feel **abandoned** by their parents, the older generation feel **betrayed** by their children.



Social Class

Social class influences a lot of what happens in the play. In 1912, **class divided Britain**. The land and factory owners were wealthy and powerful, while their workers lived in poverty. The two classes **rarely interacted**. The Birlings' treatment of Eva is a result of their being an upper class family and her being a working class woman.

However, the World Wars **dismantled** the British class system. **The war effort brought people together**, and **rationing** meant the different classes had to live **similar lifestyles regardless of wealth**. Despite this, **class inequality** still existed and this is what Priestley wanted to emphasise to his audience. The attitudes and prejudices that class hierarchy created were still **ingrained** in society, particularly in the minds of the upper class. The upper classes **scorned** (viewed with hatred) and **mocked** their working class peers.

By revealing the **destructive** impact class hierarchy had in 1912, Priestley encourages 1940s society to **move forwards towards social equality** instead of returning to the old ways.

The Setting

The **upper class Birlings** initially live in blissful ignorance of others' suffering. When the play begins, the **stage directions** describe the lighting as **"pink and intimate"** (**Act 1, pg 1**), symbolising the Birlings' optimistic, **rose-tinted perspective**. The audience are **forced to see life through the same lens**. The **"intimate"** atmosphere shows how they are **undisturbed** by the troubles of others.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/shA5s4QqmW5iZTC26>

The family are described as being **"pleased with themselves"** (**Act 1, pg 2**), revealing their **complacency**. They are free to feel **confident** and **satisfied** with themselves. Priestley implies the upper classes lack a **conscience**. They are not **confronted** with what their happiness costs others.

The Class Divide: the Birlings

Priestley uses the play to emphasise the **divide** between the rich and poor. The **differences between classes** make huge **impacts** on the characters and their experiences. Priestley shows how social class **alienates** the two groups so that neither interact, and this is emphasised by how we only ever see one working class character on stage.

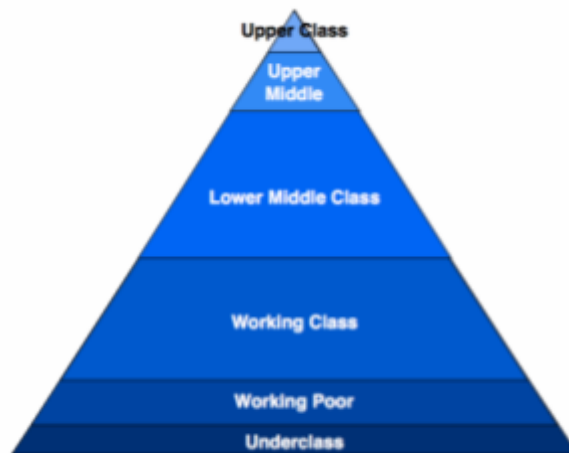


Why is there a class system?

Priestley argues that the upper classes **maintain** the class system because it **benefits** them, allowing them to live in **ignorance** of how the working classes struggle. We also see how the capitalist system **increases the gap between the rich and the poor**.

Mr Birling's claims that the country is ***"in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity"*** (Act 1, pg 6) and ***"there'll be peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere"*** (Act 1, pg 7) which overlooks the poverty, disease, and physical labour endured by the lower classes.

- He doesn't consider that such ***"prosperity"*** and ***"progress"*** **relies on the hard work of others**.



<http://tenlittlesoldierboys.weebly.com/class-barriers.html>

Priestley suggests that authorities and politicians don't realise that it is possible for one group to succeed and prosper while the other experiences a severe decline. Success for some does not mean success for all.

Ignorance of the plight of the working class

Likewise, by showing how the Birlings fixate on the impact the Inspector's visit has on their own lives, Priestley reveals how lower class struggles are dismissed or ignored as **inconveniences**.

Like Sheila, Mr Birling accuses the Inspector of ruining their evening. The contrast between what each character says emphasises their views to the audience

- Mr Birling says, ***"We were having a nice little family celebration tonight. And a nasty mess you've made of it now, haven't you?"*** (Act 1, pg 21).
- However, the Inspector replies, ***"That's more or less what I was thinking [...] when I was in the Infirmary looking at what was left of Eva Smith. A nice little promising life there, I thought, and a nasty mess somebody's made of it,"*** (Act 1, pg 21).

This direct **juxtaposition** emphasises how **selfish** and **petty** Mr Birling's complaint is. He is aware of Eva's death, but still mourns his own party before he mourns her.

The echoing of the harsh, crude ***"nasty mess"*** alongside the **adjective** ***"promising"*** shows how tragic Eva's death is, and how distressing it is for Mr Birling to put his own minor troubles first.



The Characters

Eva - a symbol of the lower classes

Eva Smith is **symbolic of the lower classes as a whole**. As Eva Smith never appears on stage the audience's perspective of her is **altered** by the Birlings' **classist** remarks and personal **bias**. The audience must decide what is reasonable and what is untrue. Through this, Priestley shows how easy it is for the upper classes to **influence the narrative surrounding the working classes**. The Birlings, and Mrs Birling in particular, can describe Eva in their own terms without being challenged, forming a **new reality**.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling is a member of the nouveau riche, which means he made his own money instead of inheriting it. He is the one in the family who is **most concerned about his social class**. Wanting to climb the **social ladder**, he is insecure about his standing, but despite this he feels **entitled** to respect and power. He is a **symbol of class conflict and the upper classes' reaction to this conflict**.

Mr Birling is **a symbol of upper class privilege**, showing how the upper classes used their positions to **evade conflict and responsibility**. Upon meeting the Inspector for the first time, Mr Birling tells him, ***"I was an alderman for years - and Lord Mayor two years ago - and I'm still on the Bench," (Act 1, pg 11)***. He details his career history to **boast** his power and **respectability**. The positions he lists are **white-collar jobs** that were greatly respected

in society and associated with the upper classes. He expects his class will impress the Inspector.



Furthermore, Mr Birling expects to be treated differently by the Inspector because he is a **"public man"**, but the Inspector informs him, ***"Public men [...] have responsibilities as well as privileges," (Act 2, pg 41)***. This shows how Mr Birling is a member of the council and an attorney so that he can enjoy the

"privilege" of being **favoured** by law enforcement. Because the Inspector has to remind Mr Birling about his **"responsibilities"**, this implies Mr Birling and other **"public men"** have been **neglecting their duties**.

Treatment of the lower classes

When he says, ***"If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be for the earth," (Act 1, pg 15)***, it becomes even clearer that he thinks it is his personal obligation to put the lower classes in their place. The **hyperbolic metaphor** ***"they'd soon***



be asking for the earth” implies the lower classes are **greedy** and **unreasonable**, meaning **someone needs to keep them in check**. Priestley shows how the upper classes viewed any attempt by the lower classes to stand up for themselves as an outrageous, disrespectful act. He demonstrates how they purposefully **perpetuated** (continued) the **cycle of poverty** and **widened the class divide**. They do this as a result of their own vanity, as they are under the illusion they are being righteous.

Gerald Croft & Mr Birling

Priestley includes the interactions between Mr Birling and Gerald to demonstrate how social class makes people act with **ulterior motives** and causes **divisions** where there doesn't need to be any.

Nouveau riche vs old money

Gerald Croft comes from a family that is of a **higher class** than the Birlings (Gerald is from old money whereas Mr Birling is considered nouveau riche).

In the early twentieth century, the increase in factories and business meant people who didn't come from noble families could **become wealthy**. This 'new money' was judged as less pure or respectable than the 'old money' of Britain's upper classes, who had been **rich for generations and owned property**. These are the **“old country famill[ies]”** and **“landed people”** Mr Birling refers to.

These differences are highlighted through the tensions between Mr Birling (nouveau riche) and Gerald's family. While both families are rich and successful, the Crofts are of a higher class because of their **“old country” heritage**. The difference in class between the engaged couple (Gerald and Sheila) causes tension.

- Mr Birling is keen for the two to marry because it will help him **climb the social ladder and grow his business**.
- On the other hand, the Crofts are reluctant because the Birlings' lower social status will **degrade** them.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/INMgyGjPeYNymHpvK8>

Mr Birling is not subtle in his attempts to **flatter** and **impress** Gerald. His ulterior motives are revealed when he says, **“Your father and I have been friendly rivals for some time now - though Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company - and now you've brought us together,”** (Act 1, pg 4). This shows that he wants the couple to marry to improve his own **business prospects**.

→ His confession that **“Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company”** shows how he **respects** the Crofts as



a more **elite** family, and wants to please them. He is not happy for Sheila, only for himself.

Priestley implies that social class makes people **selfish**. People are only able to be motivated by opportunities to improve their own **social position**. Even Mr Birling is aware that the Croft family is not particularly happy about the engagement. Mr Birling tells Gerald, ***"I have an idea that your mother - Lady Croft - while she doesn't object to my girl - feels you might have done better for yourself socially -"*** (Act 1, pg 8). The Crofts believe they are better than the Birlings, and don't want their **family line** to be **tarnished** by the lower, industrial classes. Social class is more important to them than their son's happiness or love.

It is evident that Gerald's mother Lady Croft doesn't approve of Gerald's engagement to Sheila. Mr Birling justifies her view: ***"She comes from an old country family - landed people and so forth - and so it's only natural"*** (Act 1, pg 8).

- Here Priestley shows that even Mr Birling is a victim to class prejudices, which makes his treatment of Eva ironic.
- He also suggests these attitudes are **universally accepted** and **"only natural"**, leading to **permanent divisions within communities**. This shows people didn't question the logic behind social class, meaning **tension and inequality became British traditions**.

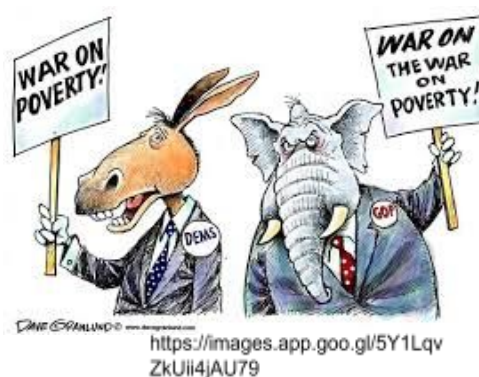
Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling is the **epitome** of upper class prejudice. Her **"cold"** demeanor and social superiority make her particularly **judgemental** and **blunt**.

Charity

Mrs Birling makes **assumptions** about Eva because she is a working class girl, and these lead her to deny Eva any help from the charity. Before she hears what the Inspector has to say, Mrs Birling declares, ***"I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class -"*** (Act 2, pg 30), showing how different she thinks the working class are.

- The **verb** **"understand"** suggests the working class are so **different** that their actions are incomprehensible to the upper class. This means Mrs Birling won't even be **empathetic** to them, and doesn't **want** to try to **"understand"** them.
- The **noun** **"girl"** **infantilises** her and portrays her as **weak** and **foolish**.
- She **generalises** all **"girls of that class"**, and doesn't believe Eva **deserves any of her time or attention**. Priestley intends to show how **ingrained** prejudice was in



society, and how **deliberately dismissive** the upper class were of their lower class peers.

Lower class stereotypes

Mrs Birling believes all lower class people are **immoral** and **money-hungry**, and she is not afraid to admit it. These beliefs make her overreact, as she sees every small flaw as **confirmation** of her bias.

When she recalls how Eva introduced herself as *“Mrs Birling”*, she adds, *“I think it was simply a piece of gross impertinence - quite deliberate - and naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case,”* (Act 2, pg 43). She is **outraged** because she thinks it will **sully** or **taint** her name if it is used by a working class girl.

- The phrase *“gross impertinence - quite deliberate”* demonstrates her **insistence** that Eva intentionally stepped out of line and **disrespected** her. The words themselves are **excessive** and **pretentious**, giving her a **superior air**.
- The **adverb** *“naturally”* implies she is **justified** in her *“prejudice”*, even though she should be **impartial** and compassionate as a member of the charity. Priestley implies the upper classes were determined to find any excuse to disgrace and discredit the working classes.

Opinion about Eva

When Eva shows her **strong moral compass**, Mrs Birling refuses to trust her. She claims Eva *“was giving herself ridiculous airs”* and *“claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position,”* (Act 2, pg 46), suggesting **she can’t believe a working class girl would act in this way**.



She says Eva had *“some fancy reason”* for not taking the money, adding, *“As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!”* (Act 2, pg 47), showing how she is convinced Eva is a **thief** and **scrounger** (someone who gets money at the expense of others). The **adjectives** *“ridiculous”*, *“elaborate”*, and *“fancy”* emphasise how **outlandish** she finds Eva’s claims, as she intends to **humiliate** Eva for acting *“above her station”*.

Even when she is confronted with someone who disproves her prejudices, Mrs Birling **holds onto her own stereotypes**. She is fixated on how Eva is a *“girl of that sort”* and in that *“position”*, implying there is a **specific way Eva should act**. These phrases are also **pointed euphemisms** that intend **to mock Eva without compromising Mrs Birling’s own respectability**.

Priestley shows how **dedicated** the upper classes were to their **preconceptions** of the lower classes. These prejudices **actively cause more suffering**, as the Inspector retorts, *“Her position now is that she lies with a burnt-out inside on a slab”* (Act 2, pg 46). He suggests that Mrs Birling’s unwillingness to respect or help a *“girl in her position”* has **directly led her to being in a worse one**.



Sheila & The Inspector

British politics in the 1940s took a **leftist** turn after the war, resulting in Britain voting for a Labour government. The impact the war had on the social class system provoked a more **concerted effort** to dismantle it completely, with many left-leaning people highlighting how the class divide was maintained. The Inspector is a voice for this movement.

Sheila

Sheila is the **epitome** of **upper class ignorance**. Unlike her parents and brother, she hasn't had to face conflict or class struggles. When she hears about Eva's death, she says, ***"I can't help thinking about this girl - destroying herself so horribly - and I've been so happy tonight. Oh I wish you hadn't told me,"*** (Act 1, pg 17), exposing her **selfish naivety**.

- The phrase ***"I wish you hadn't told me"*** shows how she views **herself** as the **victim**, not Eva, and she would rather continue to live in ignorance than be troubled by others' misfortunes.
- As Eva and Sheila are both **young women**, Priestley draws a clear **comparison** between them. That one woman can be so **"happy"** while another is **"destroying herself so horribly"** is an obvious **indictment** of **class inequality** (proves it is a bad system).

He suggests that **social class enables hypocrisy and double standards**. He shows that the **expected standard of living for one class is not upheld for the other**.

However, once Sheila is educated by the Inspector she also becomes a socialist mouthpiece. Between them, Sheila and the Inspector **identify** and **expose** the ways in which the Birling family **contribute** to the class divide.



<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WesternAnimation/TheInspector>

Mr Birling

The Inspector **challenges upper class entitlement and superiority**. When Mr Birling claims, ***"If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be asking for the earth,"*** (Act 1, pg 15), the Inspector remarks, ***"But after all it's better to ask for the earth than to take it,"*** (Act 1, pg 15). This is a **veiled insult** to the upper classes, as he implies they **"take"** the earth. This presents the upper classes' **entitlement** as **selfish** and **destructive**.

- The upper classes **owned most of the land in Britain**, so it may refer to the **unquestioned control** they had over others. They had the ability to **deny others land or money while keeping it for themselves**.
- His conclusion that it is **"better to ask"** than **"to take"** suggests that while Mr Birling has been **demonising** the lower classes, accusing them of being **spoilt**, he has been doing something far worse.



Gerald

In the same way, when Gerald objects to the Inspector's treatment of them because ***"We're respectable citizens and not criminals," (Act 1, pg 22)***, the Inspector denies his claim. He explains, ***"There isn't as much difference as you think [...] I wouldn't know where to draw the line," (Act 1, pg 22)***.

- Gerald's objection shows how the upper classes see a clear division between themselves, the **"respectable"** ones, and the **"criminals"** of the lower classes.
- The **adjective "respectable"** implies it is the **approval** of **society** that matters, not their **true characters**.
- In contrast, Priestley implies **the elite are criminals**. This could be because of explicitly criminal acts they commit in secret and cover up.
- Alternatively, Priestley may intend to show that the **existence** of an elite class is **naturally criminal**, and so all its members are too, because of the **neglect, oppression, and poverty they cause**.

Because of the millions who lived in poverty or died as a result of the **World Wars** or **Great Depression**, Priestley shows that the acts of the upper classes are more **destructive** and **horrific** than any individual criminal's. Therefore, he suggests that the trust society puts in **"respectable citizens"** is **misplaced, influenced by reputation** and not true character. This, Priestley argues, means **the power they have is abused**.

Class barriers

Sheila and the Inspector draw the audience's attention to the **barrier** the upper classes **construct between rich and poor**.

Sheila tells her mother, ***"You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl," (Act 2, pg 30)***, showing how **desperate** the upper classes were to **distance** themselves from others.



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/opensourceway/5009661582>

- The **metaphor** of a **"wall"** demonstrates the extremity of the separation, and implies there was a **physical boundary** that kept the lower classes in poverty.
- Sheila identifies how her mother **"build[s]"** a **"wall"** to desensitise herself, allowing her to remain unsympathetic and untroubled.

The **imagery of a barrier** is also used when the Inspector tells Mrs Birling, ***"You slammed the door in her face," (Act 2, pg 45)***, implying the upper classes were deliberate and violent in their rejection of the lower classes.

- **"The door"** is a **symbol** for the systems and establishments that allow the upper classes to exclude or deny the lower classes. For example, Mrs Birling is able to influence her charity to reject Eva's case. Priestley conveys the hostility of the upper classes.



Maintaining their social respectability

As well as **pushing the lower classes down the social ladder**, the upper classes use **appearances** and **masks** to improve their own positions.

Priestley uses Sheila to **break the upper class facade of respectability**. She tells her family, ***“We’ve no excuse now for putting on airs,” (Act 2, pg 41)*** and ***“We really must stop these silly pretences,” (Act 2, pg 32)***, showing how the Birlings present themselves as more **innocent** and **flawless** than they actually are.

→ The words **“excuse”** and **“silly”** suggest their lies are **unrealistic**, requiring **willful ignorance** from the Birlings for them to truly believe them.

Sheila understands that the most harmful aspect of the facade of respectability is that her family are **fooled by their own lies**, so they are shocked to discover each other’s flaws. Priestley presents the facade of respectability as an **invention by the upper classes for the upper classes**. He suggests the upper classes become convinced they are perfect, and this leads to a **delusion of grandeur** that contributes to the class divide.

Development of the Theme

As mentioned before, we only ever see **one working class character on stage**: Edna, the maid. She has few lines, and her only role is to serve the Birlings. This intensifies the impression that **all working class people have no purpose beyond their subservience** (being willing to obey without question) **to the upper classes**. Priestley uses this to show his audience how **difficult** life was for the lower classes. They had **no voice**, and **no one cared for them**, apart from the Inspector, who is a symbol of a more **hopeful future**.

As the plot unravels and the Birlings’ actions are revealed, the **oppression** of the lower classes becomes more and more apparent. The plot has a **cumulative** effect, with each family member’s offence seeming worse than the last. This makes the **absence** of Eva, or any other working class character, more **conspicuous**. The family experiences a **fall from grace**, with Priestley showing how **elitism** and **classism** are **disguises for immorality**.

When it is revealed that Eva Smith was most likely different women, Priestley draws his audience’s attention to the matter of social class. Eva is a **symbol of all lower class people**: it doesn’t matter who she is, just that she was treated immorally. The real tragedy is that **every single member** of this upper class ‘respectable’ family has acted cruelly towards the working classes. Thus, every member of the elite is culpable



<https://shameshameshameshame.com/2018/02/17/an-open-letter-to-working-class-women/>



and implicated in the oppression of the lower classes.

At the beginning of the play, Priestley outlines the **values** of the upper classes. We learn how they protect their own, believe themselves to be superior, and view the lower classes as criminals. By the time the Inspector leaves, these values have all been **challenged**. The Birlings are not a perfect, **“well-behaved”** family. They turn against each other.

In the end, Eva Smith - the working class girl - is **more moral** than any of the Birlings. She refuses to take money from others, especially stolen money, and chooses to protect Eric rather than save herself. Priestley suggests that **not only are the upper classes wrong in their prejudices, but really they are worse than the ones they distance themselves from**. He implies the Birlings should follow Eva's example. Their fall from grace at the hands of the Inspector presents a possible future where **the wrongs of the upper classes will be exposed**.



Social Responsibility

Social responsibility is the most obvious theme in 'An Inspector Calls'. The Inspector goes to the Birlings' to encourage them to be **accountable** for their actions, and to **take responsibility for others**. Many people in society are **vulnerable** or mistreated **through no fault of their own**, just like Eva Smith.

Priestley shows his audience that **all actions have consequences**, and it is **impossible to live in isolation**. This means by being **mindful** of your own **actions**, you help take responsibility for others. By looking after others, Priestley suggests society as a whole will **benefit**.



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:YourCountryNeedsYou.jpg>

The play **condemns** those in **power** for not protecting the people they were supposed to, and for **leading the country into war without considering whom it would affect**. These teachings are in keeping with the **Socialist** direction society was taking in the 1940s after the war, when the standard of living was so low. Priestley uses the theme of social responsibility to advocate for a **Welfare State**.

Because social responsibility is such an important theme in the play, it links to all the other main themes Priestley explores.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling represents the **antithesis** of Priestley's message on social responsibility. He **only cares about himself** and always puts himself first, even when this means **harming others**. He is also completely **oblivious** about what other people go through, or how his actions impact others. No matter what, he **never accepts responsibility**. As he is an upper class, Capitalist businessman, Priestley suggests his lack of **compassion** and responsibility are **tied** to his **class** and **Capitalist ideologies**.

Capitalism vs Socialism

The first time Priestley raises the idea of shared responsibility, it is through Mr Birling. He tells Eric and Gerald, ***"The way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive - community and all that nonsense."*** (Act 1, pg 10). His **intolerance** of Socialism reflects the **political climate** of the 1910s, and suggests he is **narrow-minded**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/YpsFapuXRPEvBGxb7>



- His **harsh and insensitive language** - “*cranks*” and “*all that nonsense*” - would have made Priestley’s audience recognise him as **heartless**. It seems like he is **disgusted** by the idea of looking out for others.
- The **simile** “*like bees in a hive*” implies social responsibility is **primitive** and **demeaning**. The phrases “*you’d think*” and “*as if*” show Mr Birling finds the idea **preposterous**. His comments on the Titanic and war have already **discredited** him, so the audience knows his statements on “*community*” will also be challenged.

Priestley conveys Capitalism’s inherent **negligence** through Mr Birling’s interest in money. When he says, “*We employers at last are coming together to see that our interests - and the interests of Capital - are properly protected,*” (Act 1, pg 6), Priestley implies Capitalists feel they have a responsibility to make profit but **not a responsibility to their workers**.

- The protection of the “*interests*” of businessmen and Capital would be particularly **shocking** to Priestley’s audience, who knew of the horrors society endured because of Capitalist greed and neglect.
- It becomes more shocking still when the audience learns of Eva Smith’s death: she was not “*protected*” by the Birlings or her society.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/GxRE75q764e1JBALA>

He tells the Inspector, “*It’s my duty to keep labour costs down,*” (Act 1, pg 15), implying his business pursuits require him to **exploit** his workers. He feels a “*duty*” to his business but not his society. Priestley shows **neglect and inhumanity are a part of business**.

Importance of family honour

Priestley shows how Mr Birling **prioritises** himself over his **duty** to others. His **motto** about **family loyalty** is repeated several times, as he tells Eric and Gerald, “*A man has to make his own way - has to look after himself - and his family too,*” (Act 1, pg 9).

- The repetition of “*a man has to*” reveals Mr Birling believes men are **born with an obligation to themselves alone**.
- The delay before “*and his family too*” even suggests his family comes as an **afterthought**.

Rejection of responsibility

When faced with the **consequences** of his actions, Mr Birling **refuses** to accept any blame. He declares, “*Obviously it has nothing whatever to do with the wretched girl’s suicide,*” (Act 1, pg 13), believing his actions must be **irrelevant** because he fired her “*two years ago*” (Act 1, pg 17). He thinks the two events can’t **link** because they happened so far apart. Priestley implies this interpretation of responsibility is **simplistic** and **self-serving**, allowing people to **excuse** themselves of blame.

- “*Wretched girl*” reveals his lack of **compassion** and **patience**, suggesting he won’t take responsibility because he doesn’t **sympathise** with Eva.



Mr Birling's continued rejection of responsibility seems to be a result of **arrogance** and **disrespect for others**. Accepting blame would be seen as a sign of **weakness** and **imperfection**.

As Eva's story is revealed, Mr Birling insists he's innocent, saying, **"I can't accept any responsibility," (Act 1, pg 14)**. He doesn't want to be **accused** of making a mistake in his judgement, and doesn't want to be **burdened**.

→ The **modal verb** **"can't"** suggests accepting blame goes against his **nature**.

Even after the family have been taught about the consequences of their actions, Mr Birling claims, **"There's every excuse for what both your mother and I did - it turned out unfortunately, that's all," (Act 3, pg 57)**.

→ The **noun** **"excuse"** connotes a pathetic, worthless reason, suggesting Mr Birling is **desperate to excuse himself of blame**.

→ The words **"unfortunately"** and **"that's all"** convey his heartlessness, suggesting the upper classes **trivialised and dismissed the lower classes' hardships**.

→ Eva's death is merely an unforeseen tragedy, an **inconvenience**, and **not worthy** enough to make Mr Birling accept responsibility.

Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling **personifies** the upper classes' **contempt** towards the poor and authorities' **neglect** of those in need. Like Mr Birling, she is **committed** to the idea of her own innocence, refusing to accept the smallest bit of the blame. Priestley uses her to suggest the hatred of social responsibility comes from **classism and prejudice**, as the upper classes didn't want to associate themselves with the lower classes.



Responsibility

Priestley shows how the **conventional** ideas of duty and responsibility in the upper classes are **corrupt**. Mrs Birling is willing to condemn the anonymous father of Eva's unborn child, saying, **"He should be made an example of [...] Make sure he's compelled to confess in public to his responsibility [...] I consider it your duty," (Act 2, pg 48)**. She claims to have a firm **moral code**, valuing responsibility and just consequences for wrongdoings.

However, she regrets this instantly when she finds out Eric is responsible, **retracting** her previous demands: **"But I didn't know it was you - I never dreamt," (Act 3, pg 50)**. Because she readily **sacrifices** her beliefs about duty to protect her son, it seems she never fully meant them. Priestley suggests the upper classes' idea of duty is **superficial** and **hypocritical**.



Class prejudice

Priestley blames **class prejudice** for people's refusal to accept responsibility for others. She vouches for her innocence before she has heard who Eva is: **"Naturally I don't know anything about this girl," (Act 2, pg 32).**

- The **adverb "naturally"** implies she is **automatically above suspicion** because of her **social standing**. She believes Eva's life is completely **separate** from her own, so she can't be involved.
- This is **situational irony**, as her involvement is soon revealed. Priestley thus **challenges** the way the upper classes **assume their own innocence** to avoid responsibility.

Mrs Birling is happy to admit her **prejudices** against Eva, saying, **"I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class -" (Act 2, pg 30),** and **"Naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case," (Act 2, pg 43).** She thinks Eva's **lower social status** is a **justifiable** reason to abandon her.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/VxUWUQ2jcX5C61tS9>

- **"Understand"** and **"naturally"** show she believes there is an **intrinsic barrier** between social classes, and that she is **entitled** to act unfairly towards the lower classes.
- Priestley suggests the upper classes, particularly the older generation, are **governed by bigotry** and unrepentant in their **actions**.

Neglects social responsibility

As a **"prominent member" (Act 2, pg 42)** of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation, Mrs Birling has a **duty of care** to those who come to her. She blatantly **neglects** this responsibility, as Priestley shows **all institutions that are supposed to help others are intrinsically corrupt**. **"With dignity"**, Mrs Birling **boasts** to the Inspector, **"We've done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases," (Act 2, pg 42).**

- This **semantic field of virtue** suggests her charity work brings her a **false sense of moral accomplishment**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/FAzkppvHa3SxJ3i3A>

- She enjoys the **recognition** she gets, but doesn't actually **care** for those who come to her, calling them **"girl[s] of that sort" (Act 2, pg 47).**

- The **adjective "deserving"** **foreshadows** her prejudice and **harsh judgement**.

Priestley argues that institutions of care are run by the upper classes, who despise the poor and care only about their own status, meaning **the lower classes will never get the help they need**. Mrs Birling's refusal to take responsibility suggests she is **insincere** and **callous**. The purpose of her charity is to be an organisation **"to which women in**



distress can appeal for help,” (Act 2, pg 42), but Mrs Birling refuses to help Eva, and this leads in part to her death.

Moral duty

Despite hearing of Eva’s suicide she says ***“I consider I did my duty [...] I’ve done nothing wrong,” (Act 2, pg 44)***. This shows her **ignorance** as it was her **“duty”** to give Eva help, not judge her. Here, Priestley suggests Mrs Birling thinks her duty is to **judge the monetary worth** of women’s cases and stop the working class telling ***“pack[s] of lies” (Act 2, pg 46)*** to **cheat** the charity of money. It is evident that she thinks her role in Eva’s life ended when she left the room. She is **unmoved** by Eva’s suffering, signifying the **heartlessness** of the upper classes.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/Fsx41kPFBtdq2Xyn7>

Contrast with Sheila

Mrs Birling’s **uncaring attitude** is **juxtaposed** with Sheila’s empathy, with Priestley welcoming **direct comparisons** between the two women.

- When Mrs Birling says she blames ***“the girl herself”*** for her death, Sheila ***“bitterly”*** retorts, ***“For letting father and me have her chucked out of her jobs!”***, (Act 2, pg 47).
- Priestley demonstrates how the older generation are **content** to **blame** the poor for their own problems, while the younger generation understand that the lower classes are **subjected** to events **beyond their control**.

Equally, when Sheila sarcastically says, ***“So nothing really happened. So there’s nothing to be sorry for, nothing to learn. We can all go on behaving just as we did,”*** Mrs Birling responds, ***“Well, why shouldn’t we?” (Act 3, pg 71)***. Priestley presents the older generation as **remorseless**. Mrs Birling knows they won’t face any **consequences**, so sees **no reason to change her ways**. Priestley conveys this attitude to his audience to highlight **the importance of holding the authorities accountable**. Without challenging those in power, **there will be no change**.

The Inspector

Priestley uses the Inspector to show that the **values of Socialism** - such as **sharing, equality, community/the greater social good, and cooperation** - can be applied outside of economic theory. He proposes that people should aim to **fulfill** these values in all their actions, ensuring they are looking out for their community. He uses the Inspector as his **mouthpiece**, to show the **importance of universal responsibility** in protecting the vulnerable and benefiting everyone.



Teacher

The Inspector **teaches the family to split responsibility between them**. He understands that this makes guilt **easier to bear**. When he tells Sheila, **“You’re partly to blame. Just as your father is,” (Act 1, pg 23)**, he holds her responsible **without pardoning Mr Birling of his role in Eva’s death**. This introduces the idea of **shared blame**.



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/ground-group-growth-hands-461049/>

He tells them, **“We have to share something. If there’s nothing else, we’ll have to share our guilt” (Act 2, pg 29)**, demonstrating how sharing responsibility **brings communities together and comforts people**. The longing to **“share”** and reference to **“guilt”** may be an **allusion** to the two **World Wars**, suggesting social responsibility will help the country **recover**. Through this, Priestley presents the Inspector as **compassionate and understanding, encouraging his audience to side with him**.

Taking responsibility

The Inspector’s teachings of shared responsibility criticise the **laissez-faire** government that was in power in 1912. Mrs Birling believes it wasn’t her responsibility to help Eva because she wasn’t the father of the child, but the Inspector tells her, **“That doesn’t make it any the less yours. She came to you for help,” (Act 2, pg 45)**. People should take responsibility for others **regardless of their own involvement**. Priestley suggests **failing to offer support** is itself an act of **cruelty**. Those who are capable of giving help have a **responsibility** to do so. This includes the **government’s** responsibility to set up a **Welfare State**.

Throughout the play we see the Birlings, particularly the parents, **blame Eva Smith** for getting herself into trouble and killing herself. Their **prejudices** lead them to believe she was **foolish** and **self-destructive**. Her suicide is a **symbol** for the way the lower classes were **blamed for their own suffering**.

- The Inspector’s declaration that, **“This girl killed herself - and died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her,” (Act 3, pg 55)** contradicts this **culture of scapegoating**.
- Just because they didn’t personally make Eva drink disinfectant, **it doesn’t mean they are innocent in her death**. Priestley wants the authorities to confront their own **culpability** in the poverty and suffering of the lower classes.

Sense of duty

Priestley **contrasts** the parents’ view of duty with the Inspector’s. Because Mr Birling feels a duty to himself and his business, and Mrs Birling is hypocritical, Priestley implies their sense of duty is **empty of meaning**. Conversely, the Inspector takes his role in society seriously and **successfully fulfils his duty of care** to others.



When his first action is to decline Mr Birling's offer of alcohol because he is **"on duty"** (*Act 1, pg 11*), Priestley establishes a **distinction** between the Birlings and the Inspector. The Birlings are **unconcerned by rules**, whereas the Inspector is **strict and mindful**.

When the Birlings protest to his **"manner"**, he asks, **"Apologise for what - doing my duty?"**, (*Act 2, pg 41*), and he overstays his welcome so that he can wait for Eric's return and **"do [his] duty"** (*Act 2, pg 49*). He is **dedicated** to his job, even when it is **controversial**. This is the **ideal** of duty that Priestley supports. He shows that people should be **loyal** to others and do what is **right** even if it means **going against authority**.

The Inspector's Final Speech

The Inspector's closing speech is the **direct opposite** of Mr Birling's opening lecture. While Mr Birling supported the Capitalist ideal of **self-preservation**, the Inspector says, **"We are responsible for each other,"** (*Act 3, pg 56*).

- **"We are members of one body"** shows everyone is **connected** on a deep level, where **society is the result of everyone's combined actions**.
- By stating, **"We don't live alone,"** (*Act 3, pg 56*), Priestley presents a **moral duty** to look after others. He suggests ignoring this is not only selfish, but **delusional**.

This is also shown when the Inspector says, **"There are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives,"** (*Act 3, pg 56*). This **semantic field of connection** dismisses all the **societal divisions**, including **class and wealth**, that people such as the Birlings used to avoid responsibility. Priestley shows that, ultimately, **we are all the same**. Shared responsibility is the inevitable outcome of living side by side.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/5uBriCriRcNcvU6W9>

Before he leaves, the Inspector's final words create a **lasting image of grief and pain**. **"If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish"** (*Act 3, pg 56*), is an **allusion** to the **World Wars** that Priestley had just **fought in and lived through**. He suggests that war is a **consequence** of the **neglect** of others.

- This prediction is **prophetic**, almost **Biblical** in its imagery, lending the statement more weight.
- The **"fire and blood and anguish"** of warfare is a large scale **parallel** to the **"fire and blood and anguish"** experienced by Eva as her insides were **"burnt"**, and of the **"fire and blood and anguish"** experienced by everyone who suffers at the hands of selfishness.



Sheila

Sheila is the first member of the Birling family to truly **grasp** the concept of **shared responsibility**. She is the first to **repent**, and takes it upon herself to **continue the Inspector's message**. She represents the way society can **improve**, and is a symbol of the compassionate, Socialist **younger generation**.

It's important to remember that Sheila does not start as a compassionate and responsible person. Instead she is **shaped** by the Inspector, probably in a similar way Priestley hoped the play would shape the audience. It is Sheila's **character development** which is central to the play.

At the beginning

Sheila is one example of how people **fail to consider the consequences** of their actions. She asks, ***"How could I know what would happen afterwards? [...] It didn't seem to be anything very terrible at the time," (Act 1, pg 24)***, showing people are **unable to predict the significance of their actions**. This means they need to act **responsibly**, being mindful of everything they do.

Only after Sheila learns of Eva's death can she realise the **extent** of what she caused. Priestley illustrates how the upper classes have the **luxury** of behaving **however they wish** and living in **ignorance** of the consequences, while the lower classes are **left to cope with the aftermath in silence**. This could also be a criticism of the government for **enabling tragedy** by not foreseeing it, such as by not setting up a Welfare State.

Transformation

Sheila's readiness to learn from the Inspector, and her transformation because of it, shows that though accepting blame is difficult, **it can and must be done**. She is initially **"miserable"** because she is **"really responsible"** for Eva's death **(Act 1, pg 23)**, acknowledging that **guilt goes against our instincts**. She **still** owns up to her wrongs: ***"It was my own fault," (Act 1, pg 23)***, and unlike her parents, she **pledges** to change her ways of her own accord, promising, ***"I'll never, never do it again to anybody," (Act 1, pg 24)***.

Because she recognises her whole family's involvement in Eva's death, Sheila shows how guilt and blame are **important tools** in society. She predicts, ***"Probably between us we killed her," (Act 2, pg 35)***, which is a direct **confession** of guilt. She sees that blame can be **split** between them. This statement's **honesty** and **bluntness** is a refreshing change from her parents' deceit and ambiguity.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/vmeoD2bu857Ue6e7A>

The **metaphor**, ***"He's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves," (Act 2, pg 33)***, is very **macabre** (disturbing because it concerns death), revealing her shaken state of mind and the **severity** of the situation. The allusion to **execution** acknowledges both the



Inspector's role in bringing justice and the Birlings' part in causing their own **fall from grace**. Priestley suggests those in power **incriminate** themselves, and the younger generation have the **responsibility** to hold them **accountable**.

Eva's Death

The **ambiguity** surrounding Eva's death at the end of the play **challenges** Priestley's audience to consider **when they should take responsibility**, and **what they should take responsibility for**. He argues that **actual consequence** should be **irrelevant** in whether people take responsibility for their actions, **preventing** the suffering of others rather than **regretting** it. Does the fact no one died make the Birlings less guilty? Does it make their actions seem better? Does it matter at all what happened to Eva?

What does Eva's death symbolise?

Initially, Eva's death is used to demonstrate how **impactful one person's actions can be**, and how **destructive the thoughtless upper class are**.

Eric and Sheila know that, even if the family won't face **prosecution** for their crimes, they should still **learn** from Eva's death. They ask, **"This girl's still dead, isn't she? Nobody's brought her to life, have they?" (Act 3, pg 64)** and **"That won't bring Eva Smith back to life, will it?" (Act 3, pg 65)**.

- This **refrain of resurrection** shows that actions and their consequences can't be **reversed**, meaning it is important to be **thoughtful** and **responsible before** doing anything.
- The Inspector's true nature doesn't change the **reality** of the situation. Eva's death is a **manifestation** of the **family's wrongdoings**, and a **symptom** of the **widespread mistreatment** in Priestley's society.
- **"We all helped to kill her," (Act 3, pg 65)**, suggests society **as a whole is responsible** for her death.

Gerald

Gerald's theories about the Inspector and Eva allow him and the parents to **excuse** themselves from the situation. They won't face legal action, and her death is the **only thing tying them to their actions**. Gerald's statement, **"Either there's a dead girl or there isn't," (Act 3, pg 69)**, shows how his guilt and the urgency of the situation **depends** on her death.

- It **oversimplifies** the **nuances** of social responsibility.
- The **straightforward parallel phrase "or there isn't"** suggests, if she isn't dead, then everything is fine.

Does the fact no one died make the Birlings less guilty?

When he reveals no girl died at the Infirmary, Priestley **challenges** his audience to consider **whether it makes any difference** to the Birlings' guilt. The older generation are **relieved** and want to celebrate, **learning nothing**. On the other hand, the children are **haunted** by



the visit. Sheila explains, ***“Everything we said had happened really had happened. If it didn’t end tragically, then that’s lucky for us. But it might have done,”*** (Act 3, pg 70). Her death doesn’t **change** what they did.

Priestley wants his audience to come to the same conclusion. The older generation’s belief that ***“everything’s all right now,”*** (Act 3, pg 71) shows that **tragedy** is required for the authorities to **pay attention**. By removing the existence of a **“dead girl”**, Priestley **asks his audience whether the Birlings’ selfish, negligent acts are any better morally because no one died**. He suggests responsibility goes beyond the law or fatal consequences. Responsibility is **permanent**.

Development of the Theme

Before introducing his audience to the Inspector, and the ideal of responsibility he represents, Priestley **exposes them to Mr Birling’s attitude**. Mr Birling **rejects Socialist ideology** and mocks the idea of **“community”**. He is Priestley’s **antithesis**.

- His character **associates** Capitalism with **selfish** and **irresponsible behaviour**, proving **change needs to happen**.
- By showing his audience how society used to be, they can understand why that mindset was wrong and what work needs to be done to change it.

Although Mr Birling doesn’t represent Priestley’s ideals, Priestley does **present the theme of social responsibility at the very start of the play**. This indicates to the audience that it will be a **key point of conflict**, and that it is one of the playwright’s main focuses.

The Inspector’s influence

Once the Inspector arrives, the play’s dialogue **revolves** around the argument of social responsibility. Mr and Mrs Birling **dismiss** social responsibility but the Inspector **confronts** them with the reality of it. They are stubborn, but the Inspector has the **last word**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/crJsPx34yzMyG8Zj8>

Priestley makes it clear **who is in the right** and **who wins the argument**. The conflict continues after the Inspector leaves, with the children **taking his place**. The final twist that a girl has died in the Infirmary after all signals the Inspector’s **triumph**. The focus on this conflict is an **allegory for the hostility in 1940s Britain**. He suggests the question of social responsibility should be at the **forefront of politics**. The Inspector’s **perseverance** and **symbolic triumph** show Priestley believes **change can happen**.

At the start of the play, only the Inspector acts as Priestley’s **mouthpiece**, the only one with a clear view on social responsibility. However, Sheila and Eric eventually side with him. They



have a much clearer idea about their own political beliefs once he leaves, showing how the younger generation needs to be **educated**. Change is possible through them.

As the play continues for a significant length of time after the Inspector leaves, we know Priestley's intention is not only to communicate the Inspector's message. He examines the family's reaction to it. The children uphold his values, as Priestley argues **the lessons learned from the World Wars need to be remembered**. Part of social responsibility is **educating the young and thinking of tomorrow**.



Wealth and Materialism

Wealth is one of the Birlings' main interests and influences all of their interactions with others.

- Mr Birling won't raise his workers' wages so that he can make a bigger **profit**.
- Sheila is a **wealthy customer** and enjoys spending money in **upmarket** shops.
- Gerald uses money to support Eva while she is his **mistress**.
- Eric **steals** money
- Mrs Birling **refuses** to give Eva money to help her.

Wealth brings each family member **power** over others and this power seems to make them forget that **the poor are human** too. Priestley uses the Inspector to try and change how the characters and audience feel and act towards the lower classes.

Class system

Priestley suggests that wealth **corrupts** people and **society as a whole**. He shows how **social hierarchies determined by wealth**, alongside **Capitalism**, lead to **materialism** (believing money, material possessions, and physical comfort are the most important things in life) and **greed**.

In a Capitalist class system, wealth leads to **increasingly** more **power** and **success**. Priestley argues that this means people seek out material possessions and money as **symbols of their own worth in society**. Consequently, they **lack emotional and moral intelligence**, and cannot **connect** with others. Priestley also presents how those at the bottom of the hierarchy are **dehumanised** and **objectified** as a result.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/NtL8ChvcU6HGHHrW6>

When Priestley wrote the play in 1945, the country had just witnessed **two World Wars and the Great Depression**. The economy was struggling, and many people had lost money as well as their homes. This means his audience would already **understand how dangerous it is to rely so much on money**. He encourages them to look out for each other, and to **appreciate love and friendship rather than wealth**.

Development of the theme

Wealth and materialism appear as themes in the play **right from the start**. The **setting** of the play and the **appearances** of the characters means the audience would **recognise the**



Birlings as a wealthy family. They **surround** themselves with **signs of their money**, showing how **important** it is to them.

Even as the play continues and they learn of the **destructive consequences** of wealth, the setting **remains the same**. The luxury of their surroundings becomes more **intimidating** and **grotesque**, but the characters **can't escape** and nor can the audience. Priestley uses this to show how wealth is such a **fixture** in society the **reality** of its role in Eva's death must be **confronted**.

The **continuity** of the setting also reflects how the elder Birlings refuse to learn or change their ways. When the Inspector leaves they can **return to the comforts of their money without losing anything**. The Birlings are held accountable for their actions by the Inspector but when he leaves they still have money, which is all they care about.

The Inspector's role is to slowly **take apart** the Birlings' greed and materialism. By telling Eva's story and focusing on the **motives** behind the Birlings' actions, he shows how **their greed caused her death**. With every revelation about each character's involvement in her death, their **extravagant** surroundings become even more **morbid** and **horrifying**. **They are able to live in luxury and comfort while Eva Smith is dead in the Infirmary**.

The Opening Scenes

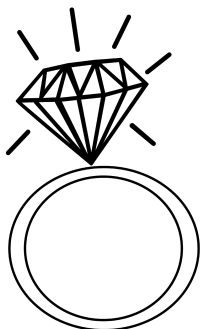
The Setting

Priestley sets the play in the Birlings' home which is a **physical manifestation** of **upper class materialism**.

- It is a **"fairly large suburban house, belonging to a prosperous manufacturer"** with **"good solid furniture"** (Act 1, pg 1).
- The **"Champagne glasses"**, **"port"**, and a **"cigar box"** (Act 1, pg 1) are all indications of their **excessive wealth**.
- The **"fairly large"** size of the house and the **"good"** quality of the furniture show the Birlings live in comfort, **wanting nothing**. The **adverb "fairly"** and **adjective "prosperous"** suggest they are climbing the **social ladder**.

While the **"substantial and heavily comfortable"** home connotes **luxury** and **decadence**, Priestley specifies it is **"not cosy and homelike"** (Act 1, pg 1). The setting is **unwelcoming**, and may even **intimidate** an audience which represents the **untouchable position of the rich**. Moreover, as it is not **"homelike"**, Priestley implies the family are missing **emotional connection**. They can fulfil all their **material** desires but their money cannot bring them **emotional contentment**. Priestley suggests **materialism prevents people from finding love and intimacy**.





<https://images.app.goo.gl/is9SibbwMf5EQw1V9>

Sheila's engagement ring

Equally, Sheila's excitement over her engagement ring - ***"Isn't it a beauty? Oh - darling -"*** (Act 1, pg 5) - suggests the **physical token** of her engagement brings her more joy than the engagement does. Her declaration, ***"Now I really feel engaged,"*** (Act 1, pg 5), implies a material possession is needed for the engagement to be **real**. The gift of a ring is the thing that connects her to Gerald, rather than love. Priestley presents **the issues of a society that places too much importance on physical possessions**.

Mr Birling's focus on money

Priestley shows how a focus on wealth means **people cannot recognise other sources of pleasure or happiness**. Money is the **only thing of worth** to the Birlings.

Mr Birling refused to pay his workers a **slightly higher wage** because of his **greed**: it was too **"heavy"** a **"price"** for his business. The Inspector reminds him, ***"She wanted twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and sixpence. You made her pay a heavy price for that,"*** (Act 3, pg 56). Realistically, raising their wages was **within his power**, and **would not have destroyed his business**. In contrast, the **"price"** Eva was forced to pay was **losing her life**.

- The **metaphor "price"** alludes to economy and trade, implicating **Capitalist greed as the direct cause of her death**.
- Priestley **contrasts** Mr Birling's interpretation of a **"heavy price"** with the **"heavy price"** Eva experienced to show how **greed blinds people to others' needs and humanity**.
- Priestley suggests that what is in reality of **small consequence** to the upper classes, who own **fortunes**, is of **huge consequence** to the lower classes.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/gLpyjiWm4N9HEA>

Eva Smith's poverty

Priestley suggests the rich think the lower classes' only weakness or hardship is their shortage of money. When confronted with Eva's poverty and hardship **all three upper class men offer her money**. It is evident from this that they believe **money can solve everything**.

- Gerald **"allowed"** her money over the summer and **"insisted on a parting gift"** of **"money"** (Act 2, pg 39).
- Eric **"insisted on giving her enough money to keep her going,"** (Act 3, pg 53)
- Mr Birling swears ***"I'd give thousands - yes, thousands -"*** (Act 3, pg 56).



By offering her money but still **abandoning** her they **reduce** her to an **object they can throw money at**. She is **dispossessed** of her **humanity** purely because she lacks **material possessions**.

Through the men's interactions with Eva, Priestley implies **capitalism** turns people and forgiveness into **things that can be bought**. It is evident that the men don't understand what else they can offer Eva, such as **love, support, or kindness**. They don't understand that their acts of cruelty or their prejudices also have an impact and are ignorant of **social isolation and oppression**. Priestley's audience would learn to value **emotional connection and fellowship** over wealth.

