

An Inspector Calls

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Plot Summary

One of the most vital and helpful things you can do in preparation for the exam is to 'know' the plot of An Inspector Calls thoroughly. Once you know the text well, you should be comfortable and familiar with key events that you can then link to larger ideas. Having an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the text will help you to gain confidence to find the most relevant references to support your response.



An Inspector arrives at the Birlings' home. Arthur admits sacking Eva Smith from his factory

AN INSPECTOR CALLS PLOT STORYBOARD



Sheila confesses she was responsible for Eva losing her job in a dress shop



Gerald admits to having had an affair with Eva last summer



Sybil admits to having refused Eva's request for financial aid through her women's charity



Eric confesses he got Eva pregnant and stole money from his father's firm



Arthur is informed an inspector is on his way to make inquiries about a dead girl

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Overview



An Inspector Calls is a three-act play with one setting: the dining room of the Birling family. The play is set in 1912 in the fictional city of Brumley, in the north of England. Arthur and Sybil Birling, their two children, Sheila and Eric, and their visitor, Gerald Croft, have just finished a celebratory dinner following Sheila's engagement to Gerald.

A police inspector arrives at the Birlings' house and informs them that a young girl, Eva Smith, has committed suicide after having swallowed disinfectant. It is revealed that Eva used to work in Arthur Birling's factory and had subsequently been dismissed for her participation in a pay strike. The Inspector further reveals that Sheila was also responsible for having Eva dismissed from her next job as an assistant in a dress shop, after making a complaint about Eva's conduct towards her. When the Inspector reveals that Eva had changed her name to Daisy Renton, Gerald confesses to having had an affair with her. Sheila returns her engagement ring to him.

Sybil Birling is also forced to confess to having known Eva. Sybil had refused Eva's application for aid from her charitable organisation after she discovered the girl was pregnant. Eva had refused to marry the father of the child, who is revealed to have been Eric. Eric admits to having got Eva pregnant and having stolen money from his father in order to help her. The Inspector **rebukes** the Birling family and Gerald for their involvement with Eva and how their actions have led to her death. The Inspector leaves.

Gerald learns that the Inspector appears to have been a fraud, prompting Arthur to ring the Chief Constable who confirms their suspicion. Mr. and Mrs. Birling and Gerald rejoice on having avoided a public scandal regarding Eva, while Sheila and Eric are distraught over their poor behaviour toward the girl. Arthur rings the **Infirmary** and is informed there are no recent admission records of a girl who has died from suicide. As Gerald attempts to return the engagement ring to Sheila, the telephone rings. A police inspector is on his way to the house to make inquiries about a girl who has just died on her way to the Infirmary, having swallowed disinfectant.

The play ends.

Act-By-Act Plot Summary

Act I

- Act I begins in the Birlings' dining room where the audience is introduced to the Birling family (Arthur, Sybil and their two children, Sheila and Eric) and Gerald Croft
- Arthur delivers a **pompous** speech but is interrupted by Inspector Goole who wishes to inquire about a girl who died in the **Infirmary** several hours ago, having swallowed disinfectant
- Arthur is instantly **dismissive** of the Inspector but when shown a photograph of the girl, he admits she was a former employee of his
- Arthur admits that the girl, Eva Smith, had been dismissed from his factory two years previously for her participation in a strike for higher pay
- The Inspector **insinuates** Eva's dismissal from the factory may have resulted in her suicide
- Sheila confesses she was responsible for Eva losing her next job in a dress shop
- The Inspector reveals Eva changed her name to Daisy Renton, which **disconcerts** Gerald



- The Inspector exits the dining room, leaving Sheila and Gerald alone
- Suspecting Gerald had an affair with Eva, Sheila confronts him and he confesses
- The Inspector returns and the scene ends

Act II

- Gerald attempts to persuade Sheila to leave before he confesses to the Inspector about his affair
- The Inspector interrupts them and instructs Sheila to stay
- Sybil enters the dining room and attacks the **impertinence** of the Inspector
- Eric's heavy drinking is exposed by both Sheila and Gerald and Arthur returns to the room
- The Inspector interrogates Gerald and he admits to having had an affair with Eva/Daisy the previous summer and that he had kept her as his mistress for several months
- Gerald admits he was not in love with Eva but merely enjoyed the situation
- Despite having some respect for Gerald's honesty about the affair, Sheila returns the engagement ring to him
- The Inspector allows Gerald to go out for a short walk
- Arthur leaves to look for Eric and the Inspector begins to question Sybil
- Upon his return, Arthur informs them that Eric has gone out, while the Inspector continues his questioning of Sybil
- Sybil confesses she met Eva/Daisy two weeks ago and refused her request for financial aid at a meeting of the Brumley Women's Charity, of which she is the Chair
- Sybil admits to being incensed when the girl presented herself to Charity by the name 'Mrs. Birling', revealing she was pregnant but having refused to marry the father of the child
- Sybil **chastises** the unknown father of the child, insisting he must be made to publicly acknowledge his responsibility
- After her rant, Sybil finally realises that Eric is the father of the child
- Eric enters the dining room and the scene ends

Act III

- Eric confesses to having met Eva in a bar last November when he was drunk
- He admits to having got her pregnant and to have stolen money from his father's firm to help support her
- Eric learns that his mother had refused help to Eva and becomes furious
- The Inspector interrupts them and delivers a dramatic speech
- The Inspector exits the stage and Sheila and Eric attack their parents' lack of guilt
- Sheila begins to doubt whether the Inspector was a real police inspector



Your notes

- Arthur **rebukes** Eric and Sheila for having confessed too much
- Gerald returns from his walk and reveals he has learned the Inspector may have been a fraud
- Arthur telephones the Chief Constable who confirms there is no Inspector Goole
- Arthur, Sybil and Gerald rejoice on having avoided a public scandal, while Sheila and Eric **chastise** them for their poor behaviour towards Eva
- Gerald suggests that the photograph of Eva may have been of several different girls
- Arthur rings the Infirmary to check whether a girl had been admitted and it is confirmed there has been no such admission
- As Gerald attempts to return the ring to Sheila, the phone rings
- A police inspector is on his way to the house to make inquiries about a girl who has just died on her way to the Infirmary, having swallowed disinfectant.



Themes

Exam responses that are led by ideas are more likely to reach the highest levels of the mark scheme. Exploring the ideas of the text, specifically in relation to the question being asked, will help to increase your fluency and assurance in writing about the play.

Below are some ideas which could be explored in An Inspector Calls. This list is not exhaustive and you are encouraged to identify other ideas within the play. Below you will find sections on:

- **Responsibility**
- **Capitalism versus socialism**
- **Generational divide**
- **Guilt**
- **Class**
- **Gender**

Responsibility



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Responsibility is one of the most **prevalent** themes within the play and the role of the Inspector is to highlight that all actions have consequences. He demands that the other characters be accountable for their actions and that they take responsibility for others. This message is also intended for the wider audience and for society in general.

Knowledge and evidence:

- The Inspector demands each character be held accountable and admit **personal responsibility** for the chain of events which led to Eva's death:
 - Each character had an individual connection with Eva, regardless of how **fleeting**, and their actions will have influenced her fate
- Sheila is the first character in the play to accept responsibility for her actions, which demonstrates her courage and **empathy**

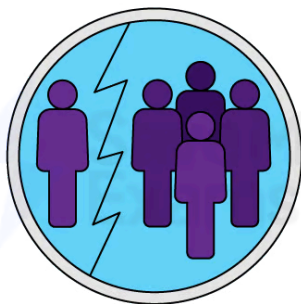


- Eric initially offers marriage to Eva which shows some attempt at responsibility:
 - However, as the father of her child, he ultimately fails in his duty to protect both of them
- The Inspector urges the characters (and the audience) to consider their **social responsibility**, arguing individuals have a civic duty to ensure their actions must benefit the whole of society:
 - Through the Inspector, Priestley argues that members of a society have duties and obligations towards the welfare of others
 - He suggests they have a collective and **social responsibility** to take care of each other
- As Arthur and Sybil hold prominent positions within society, the Inspector suggests they have an even greater duty of care towards others:
 - While the Inspector **alludes** to ideas of responsibility and duty, Arthur and Sybil also repeatedly use these words though they interpret them in very different ways
- In contrast, Priestley presents Eva as having a greater sense of moral responsibility than all of the other characters
- A pivotal part of Act III is when the Inspector leaves, as it provides an opportunity for the characters to reveal if they have learned anything from his message:
 - Only Eric and Sheila have grasped Inspector's message; Arthur, Sybil and Gerald are blind to it

What is Priestley's intention?

- Priestley emphasises the importance of both **personal** and **social responsibility**:
 - He insists this extends beyond the confines of a family unit and spreads to society as a whole
- It could be argued that some of the acts committed by the Birlings and Gerald may not individually seem to have been so terrible to drive Eva to suicide:
 - However, Priestley emphasises that individual actions may well begin a chain of events which may have devastating consequences

Capitalism versus socialism



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An Inspector Calls is a play that deals with ideas of fairness and inequality. Priestley used the play to argue that the economic system of **capitalism** prevented equality and social justice and that another system, **socialism**, which aims to share out wealth, would be fairer for all.

Knowledge and evidence:

- Priestley presents a powerful social message in An Inspector Calls which is explored through the competing concepts of **capitalism** and **socialism**:
 - While **capitalism** seeks to benefit the individual, **socialism** is focused on benefiting society
- Priestley depicts the comfortable, **affluent** life of the Birlings who thrive on **capitalism**:
 - This is contrasted with the distressing account of Eva, who is forced to live a wretched life due to their greed
 - Despite being a good worker, Eva is exploited and **marginalised** by those within the privileged **capitalist** system
- Priestley maintains that such a system creates and **perpetuates** inequalities in society and prevents social mobility:
 - Eva is trapped in a cycle of poverty and despite her attempts to improve her situation, she cannot overcome it
- The Inspector's **moralistic** tone serves to condemn the **entrenched capitalist** views of the group:
 - His message that "we are all part of one community" is firmly established
- Arthur is resistant to this message and insists his responsibility is to protect the interests of his business, by making as much profit as possible:
 - He has no sense of responsibility or concern that his workers may need higher wages to live
 - He treats the pay strike at his factory with contempt since it threatens his profits

What is Priestley's intention?

- Through the Inspector, Priestley presents the Birlings and **capitalism** in a negative light:
 - They are **individualistic**, self-centered and amoral, placing profit and greed above the rights and concerns of others
- Priestley seeks to expose this selfishness and to encourage others to look after one another and to work towards a society where all members are treated more equally and fairly

Generational divide



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Your notes

Priestley explores the idea of generational change in *An Inspector Calls*: younger characters are more open to social and economic change, and as a result are in conflict with their parent's generation, who are stuck in their ways.

Knowledge and evidence:

- Priestley attempts to reveal the inadequacies of Arthur and Sybil as parents:
 - They fail to acknowledge Sheila and Eric as adults and offer little support during the evening's proceedings
 - They ignore Eric's alcoholism which may in part be due to their indulgence
 - They attempt to shield Sheila from hearing sordid details about "women of the town", despite Sheila being already aware of such realities
- Priestley portrays Arthur, Sybil and Gerald as fully entrenched in upper-class notions of superiority and unable to change:
 - Arthur and Sybil mock the foolishness of Sheila and Eric for having been so affected by the Inspector
 - Eric and Sheila do not share the sense of relief as the others when the Inspector is discovered to be a fraud, as this is irrelevant to them
- The Inspector shows the audience that all of the characters have had an opportunity for **redemption**, though only Sheila and Eric have embraced it:
 - While he displays genuine remorse for his treatment of Eva, by the end of the play he reverts to his original stance
 - The older generation is more concerned with protecting their social positions and continues to perceive themselves as upstanding members of the community
 - Gerald falls between the younger and older generations:
- In contrast, the younger generation is used to demonstrating their capacity for change and their acceptance of social responsibility:
 - Sheila challenges her parents for not learning from the Inspector, thus illustrating a greater capacity to learn from her mistakes
- The younger generation present a symbol of hope

What is Priestley's intention?



- Through Sheila and Eric, Priestley offers optimism to the audience that the younger generation is capable of change:
 - Priestley depicts the younger generation as more compassionate and empathetic which suggests they will no longer avoid their social responsibilities
- Priestley suggests the younger generation will avoid the errors of the previous generation:
 - He suggests the selfish and exploitative **Capitalist** system will be replaced with a more **Socialist** agenda

Guilt



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For Priestley, guilt is the result of accepting personal and social responsibility for one's actions. It is noteworthy that younger characters in *An Inspector Calls* express guilt, but not the older generation, suggesting that they are not willing to see their own flaws, or those of the society they live in.

Knowledge and evidence:

- The Inspector contends that if the characters are to learn anything from his message, they must express their guilt:
 - For the Inspector, the admission of guilt requires self-reflection and this is an important step in encouraging the characters to change
- For Priestley, their guilt is both individual and collective:
- At an individual level, he believes each character compromised their morals in their treatment of Eva
- At a collective level, they represent the upper classes who have enabled the lower classes to be exploited and mistreated for their own gain
- Sheila is the first character to express her guilt and it is instantaneous:
 - While Sheila acknowledges her guilt, the Inspector insists that the guilt, as well as the responsibility, must be shared by all
- Similarly, Eric eventually expresses his guilt, though he is only willing to do so in the last act:



- While he could appear to express a stronger sense of guilt than the others (through his emotional outburst), his immaturity may suggest he is unable to feel it as keenly as his sister
- While Gerald appears to express sincere and honest regret during his confession about Eva, his guilt is only temporary:
 - He attempts to justify his actions towards Eva to make himself appear less culpable
 - When he realises there are no consequences for his behaviour, he no longer cares
 - This could be contrasted with his confession to Sheila over his affair with Eva, as he appears more concerned that his affair has been found out, rather than having betrayed his fiancée
- Arthur and Sybil are the only two characters who refuse to express any guilt for their treatment of Eva:
 - They continue to fail to see or acknowledge that they have done anything wrong

What is Priestley's intention?

- For Priestley, the guilt felt by the characters and society as a whole must be personal and collective, if the change is to occur
- At an individual level, Priestley suggests we are responsible for our personal conduct toward others
- At a collective level, Priestley suggests we should ensure all groups are treated fairly and equally

Class



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Priestley uses the characters in *An Inspector Calls* to criticise the inequality and unfairness of the British class system and argues that the privilege of class blinds people to their immoral behaviour.

- Class plays a significant role in *An Inspector Calls* and is a major influence on many of the characters and events
- The immense inequality between the classes is firmly established at the start of the play:
 - The description of the Birlings' **opulent** home is sharply contrasted with descriptions of the workers in Arthur's factory



- Sybil could be viewed as making incorrect assertions about the working classes (of whom she has no knowledge) and views them as morally and socially inferior:
 - She ignorantly links class with morality and cannot believe Eva, as a working-class girl, would refuse stolen money
- Sybil's **hypocritical** stance means she overlooks her own selfish and immoral actions and those belonging to her class:
 - She believes her class affords her the superiority to decide who is and is not deserving of charity
 - She overlooks Gerald keeping a mistress and ignores her son's immoral conduct with Eva
- Priestley demonstrates how the working classes, especially women, could be exploited and abused by those with wealth and power:
 - Both Gerald and Eric abuse their power and status in their relationship with Eva and both men discard her when it suits them
- Gerald is entrenched in the views of his class system:
 - This prevents him from genuinely empathising with Eva's plight or that of the working classes in general

What is Priestley's intention?

- Priestley demonstrates the fixation of the upper classes on their status and their poor morals
- Priestley further conveys the hypocrisy of the upper classes and the abuse of power over the working-classes
 - This is clearest in the treatment of working-class girls by young, wealthy men

Gender



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Priestley explores the inequality between male and female characters in *An Inspector Calls* to criticise his society's suppression of women's rights and the mistreatment of women in general.

- Gender is an important element within the play and it impacts most of the behaviour of the characters



- Eva would have been viewed as 'cheap labour' and therefore more at risk of being exploited and abused by employers because of her gender:
 - Working-class women would have been one of the cheapest forms of labour available to Arthur
- Similarly, Eva is exploited by her gender (and class) by wealthy men and women:
 - Sybil and Sheila use their power to **suppress** another woman
 - Both Gerald and Eric take advantage of Eva as a working-class girl and there is an imbalance of power in respect of social position and influence
 - Gerald emphasises how Eva was in desperate need of his assistance and portrays himself as being **chivalrous** in rescuing her
- Sheila can be viewed as a woman who is redefining the role of women at a time when women's rights were being sought through the **suffragette movement**:
 - At the beginning of the play, she plays a typical role within her **patriarchal society** and is obedient to her father
 - This can be contrasted to her behaviour as the play develops and she begins to challenge her father and refuses to take back Gerald's engagement ring

What is Priestley's intention?

- Priestley uses the male and female characters in the play to comment upon traditional gender roles:
 - Sybil is presented as mainly **subordinate** to her husband, while Sheila is beginning to challenge this traditional role
 - Eva is presented as an **assertive** female character
- Priestley also highlights the **suppression** of women's rights and how men and women can abuse their power:
 - The Birlings and Gerald Croft all take advantage of Eva in different ways because of her gender

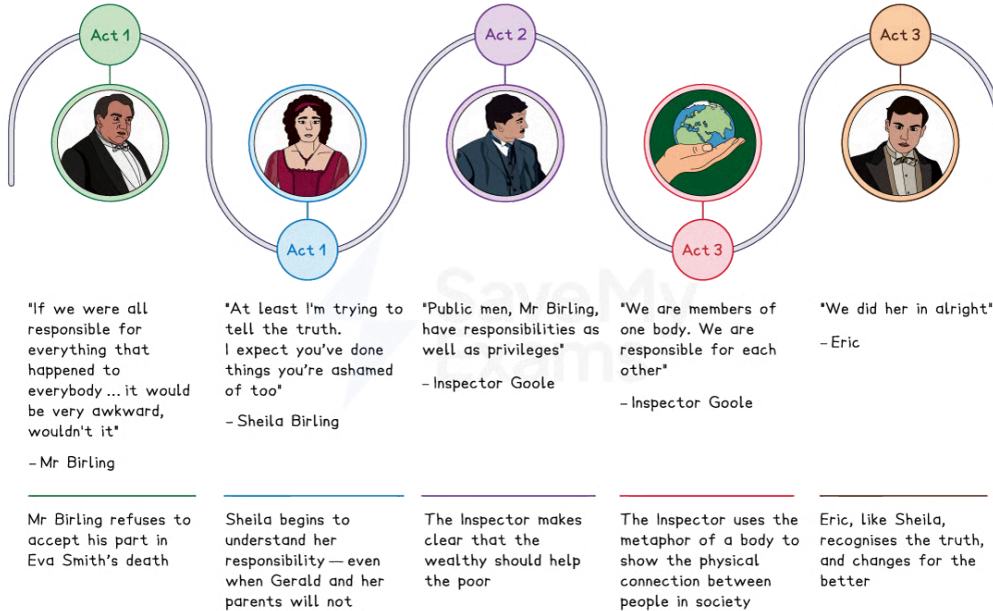


Examiner Tips and Tricks

It is crucial that you develop the skills to find your own ideas and arrive at your own meanings and interpretations to the text. Try to take a more exploratory and discursive approach to your reading of the play as the examiner will reward you highly for this approach. For instance, you could begin to develop your own interpretations by using sentence starters such as: 'Priestley may have used the character of Sheila to highlight ideas about ...'

Guilt and responsibility timeline

The themes of guilt and responsibility in each act of An Inspector Calls:



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Guilt and responsibility timeline

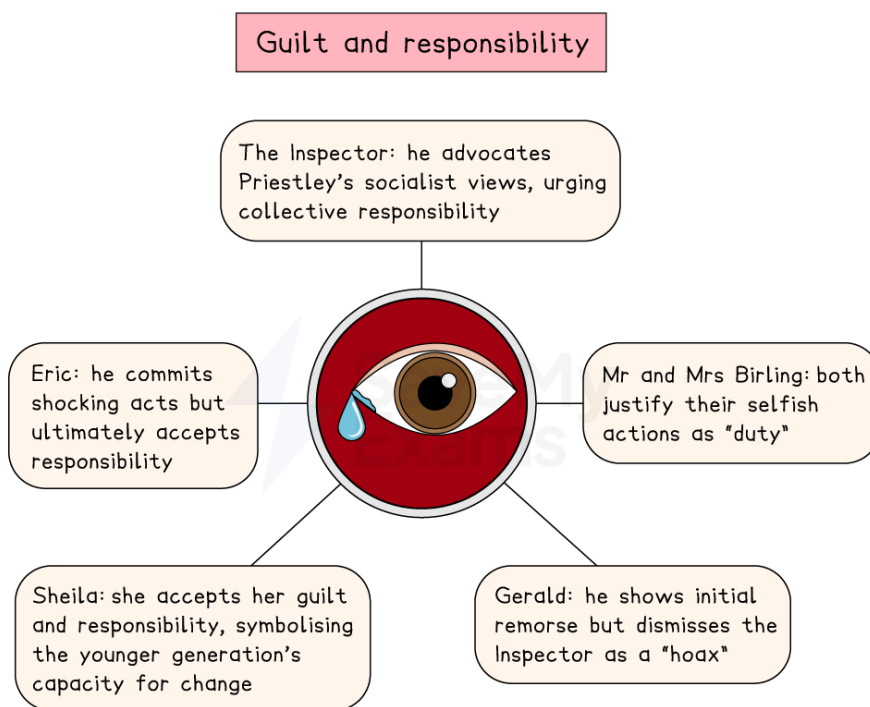
What are the elements of guilt and responsibility in An Inspector Calls?

Priestley presents the theme of guilt and responsibility in different ways through the characters. The telephone call that concludes the play is symbolic; there will be consequences for those who refuse to accept responsibility for their actions.

- **The Inspector:** He embodies social responsibility, holding each character to account for their role in the "chain of events" that led to Eva Smith's death
- **Mr and Mrs Birling:** Representing a selfish older generation, they occupy an important position in society, but fail in their duty of care towards others
- **Sheila and Eric:** Through their guilt for their behaviour towards Eva, these characters represent the potential for a more progressive younger generation to show greater collective responsibility

The impact of guilt and responsibility on characters

The play's message of responsibility contributes to its dramatic tension and structure. The Inspector systematically questions each member of the Birling family, revealing their guilt and demonstrating how their actions all contributed to Eva Smith's death.



Guilt and responsibility in *An Inspector Calls*

Character	Impact
The Inspector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Priestley uses the Inspector as a mouthpiece for his socialist ideology, emphasising personal and collective responsibility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ He argues that the wealthy and privileged have a responsibility to support the most vulnerable in society ▪ His message has a lasting, transformative effect on the younger members of the Birling family, but other characters refuse to admit guilt for their abuses of power
Mr and Mrs Birling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Arthur and Sybil Birling use the words "responsibility" and "duty" to describe their selfish behaviours but begin the "chain of events": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mr Birling fires Eva Smith and Mrs Birling abuses her power (in the Brumley Women's Charity) by refusing to support her; this cruelty leads to Eva killing herself and her unborn child
Gerald	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gerald appears contrite when the Inspector reveals his responsibility for the suicide of "Daisy Renton", but he later calls the Inspector a "hoax":



Your notes

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ When he tries to give Sheila back the engagement ring, it symbolises that he has not learnt anything
Sheila	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Sheila feels deep guilt and regret for getting Eva Smith fired:▪ She represents the younger generation's acceptance of their responsibility to others
Eric	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Eric is revealed to have raped Eva Smith, before stealing from Mr Birling to support her during her pregnancy▪ Priestley shocks the audience by revealing this after Mrs Birling's actions led to the unborn baby's death▪ He demonstrates a capacity to change and an acceptance of his social responsibility, like Sheila, by refusing to accept Gerald's "hoax" claim

Why does Priestley use the theme of guilt and responsibility in his play?

1. Setting and period

- Priestley underscores how the wealthiest in society enjoy privileges and lives of excess, while refusing to show compassion for the poorest and most vulnerable
- Demonstrates the consequences of selfishness and ignorance (such as the disaster aboard the Titanic and the labour disputes)

2. Plot driver

- The plot is structured around the Inspector's interrogations of the Birling family, revealing their guilt and responsibility one by one
- Reveals the "chain of events" that connect individuals and the importance of personal and collective responsibility

3. Audience appeal

- Sheila and Eric come to represent Priestley's 1945 audience — a more progressive and responsible generation
- Mr and Mrs Birling, and Gerald, reflect the blinkered attitudes of an older generation whose irresponsibility would have unsettled Priestley's audience

4. Dramatic device

- Creates dramatic irony: the audience realise, before the Birlings do, that each will be interrogated by the Inspector, and therefore each bears some guilt
- Leads to dramatic tension, such as the cliffhangers that end each act

Exam-style questions on the theme of guilt and responsibility

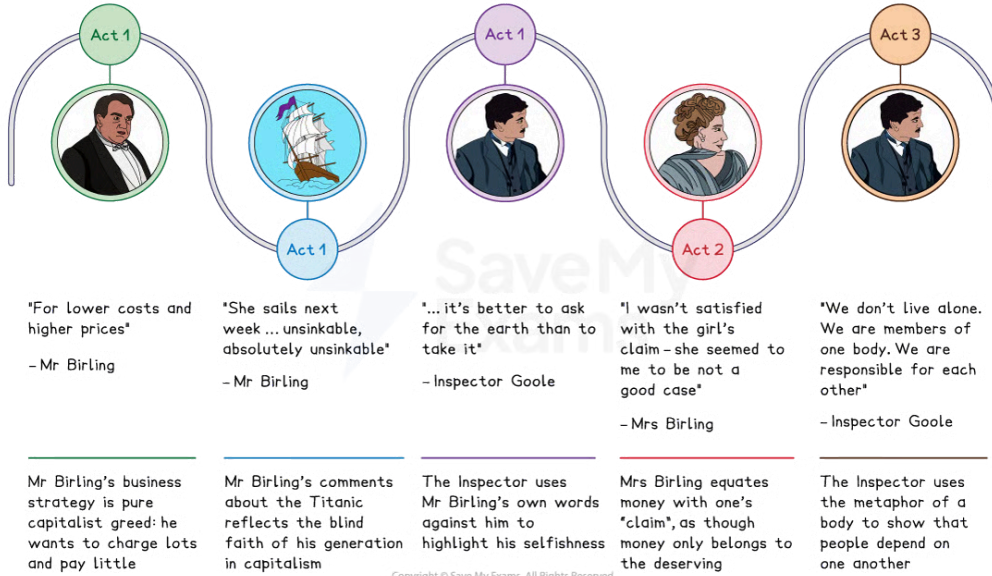


Try planning a response to the following essay questions as part of your revision of guilt and responsibility:

- Explore how Priestley presents the attitudes of Arthur and Sybil Birling towards their role in the death of Eva Smith.
- How does Priestley show that the effects of guilt and responsibility change the character of Sheila in *An Inspector Calls*?

Capitalism vs socialism timeline

The theme of capitalism versus socialism in each Act of An Inspector Calls:



An Inspector Calls capitalism versus socialism timeline

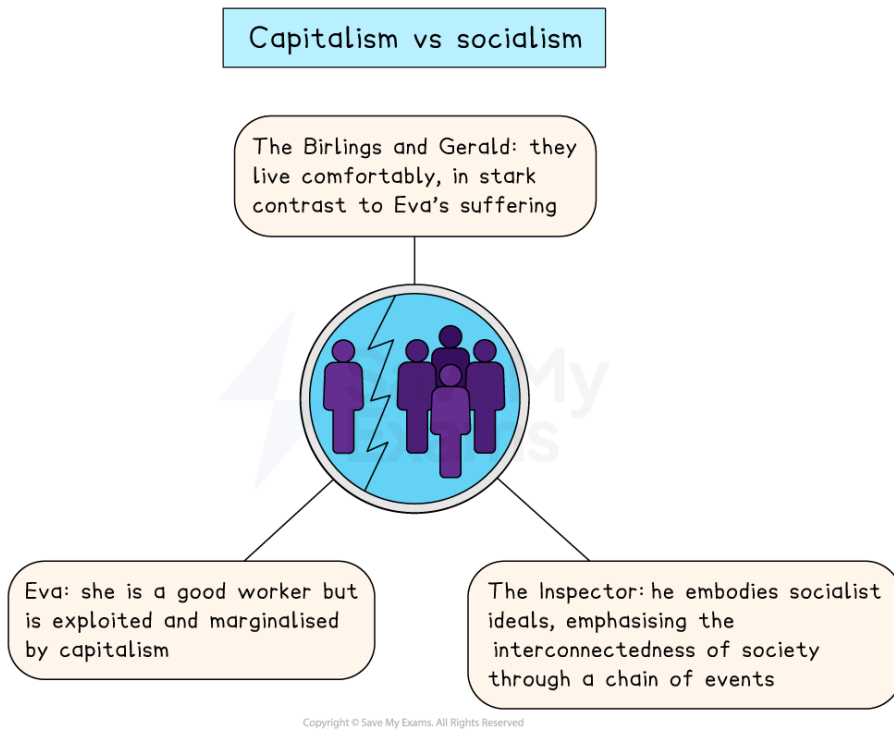
What are the elements of capitalism vs socialism in An Inspector Calls?

Priestley presents capitalism vs socialism in An Inspector Calls through his characterisation:

- **The Inspector:** Embodies socialism; his investigation and moralistic speeches condemn how the poor and impoverished are victims of capitalist greed
- **Mr Birling and Gerald Croft:** Represent the greedy industrialists who treat workers like Eva Smith as cheap labour and refuse to raise wages
- **Eva Smith:** Her tragic fate shows the destructive potential of capitalism: she was fired for seeking a living wage, and denied charity on the basis of her perceived worth

The impact of capitalism vs socialism on characters

Priestley, as a socialist, believed that wealth should be distributed throughout society, and that the wealthy and privileged have a responsibility to support the poorest in society. The play attacks the most selfish elements of capitalism by emphasising its **amoral** qualities:



Capitalism versus socialism in An Inspector Calls

Character	Impact
The Birlings and Gerald	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Priestley contrasts the comfortable, affluent life of the Birlings with the distressing account of Eva's wretched life: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gerald, son of the wealthy Crofts, also believes that Mr Birling was correct to sack a 'troublemaker' ▪ Mr Birling, resistant to the Inspector's message, protects his business to maximise profits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ He treats his workers with contempt, displaying no sense of responsibility or concern for their welfare
The Inspector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Inspector personifies socialist ideology by acting for the benefit of others rather than himself: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ His central message is that everyone is connected by a "chain of events"; the actions of the upper classes affect the less fortunate ▪ The Inspector seizes control of the Birlings' celebration, symbolising Priestley's hope that socialism could overcome capitalism
Eva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Despite being a good worker, Eva is exploited and marginalised by the capitalist system:

- Priestley, through the Inspector, maintains that such a system creates inequalities in society and prevents social mobility



Your notes

Why does Priestley use the theme of capitalism vs socialism in his play?

1. Setting and period

- Priestley underscores how the wealthiest in society enjoy privileges and lives of excess, but are blind to the effects of their actions on the less fortunate in society
- The play is a **microcosm** of capitalist society, set in an industrial city, in the home of a wealthy manufacturer

2. Plot driver

- The play's plot demonstrates what happens when powerful, greedy people prioritise money over the wellbeing of their fellow citizens
- For Priestley, Eva Smith represents "millions and millions and millions" of impoverished people, oppressed by an economic system that puts profit before people

3. Audience appeal

- Priestley's 1945 audience was a more progressive and responsible generation, aware of workers' rights and the rights of women like Eva
- Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald reflect an outdated ideology from which society was seeking to move away

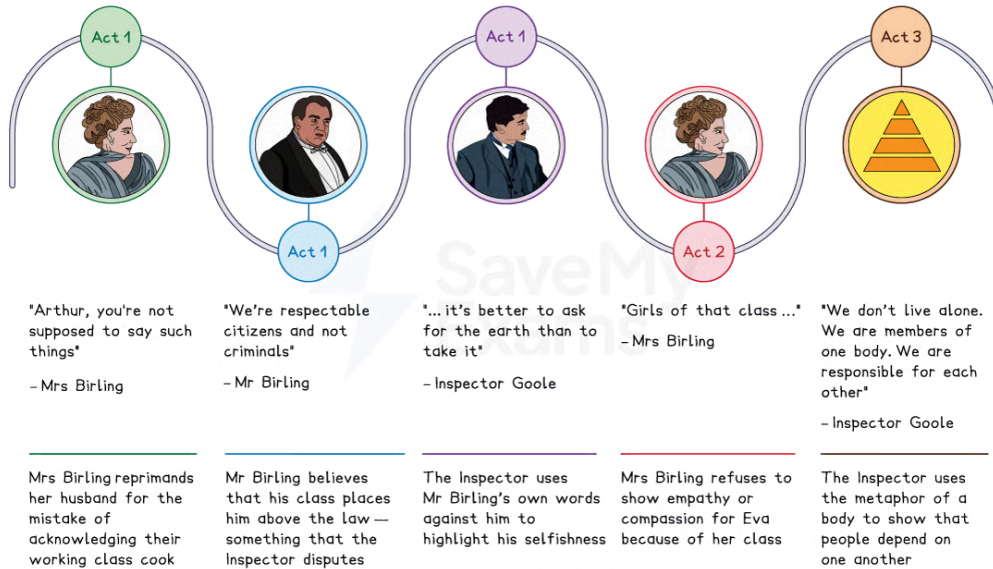
Exam-style questions on the theme of capitalism vs socialism

Try planning a response to the following essay questions as part of your revision of this theme:

- Explore how Priestley presents different attitudes towards social responsibility in An Inspector Calls?
- How does Priestley use Mr Birling to represent capitalism in An Inspector Calls?

Class timeline

The themes of class in each act of An Inspector Calls:



An Inspector Calls class timeline

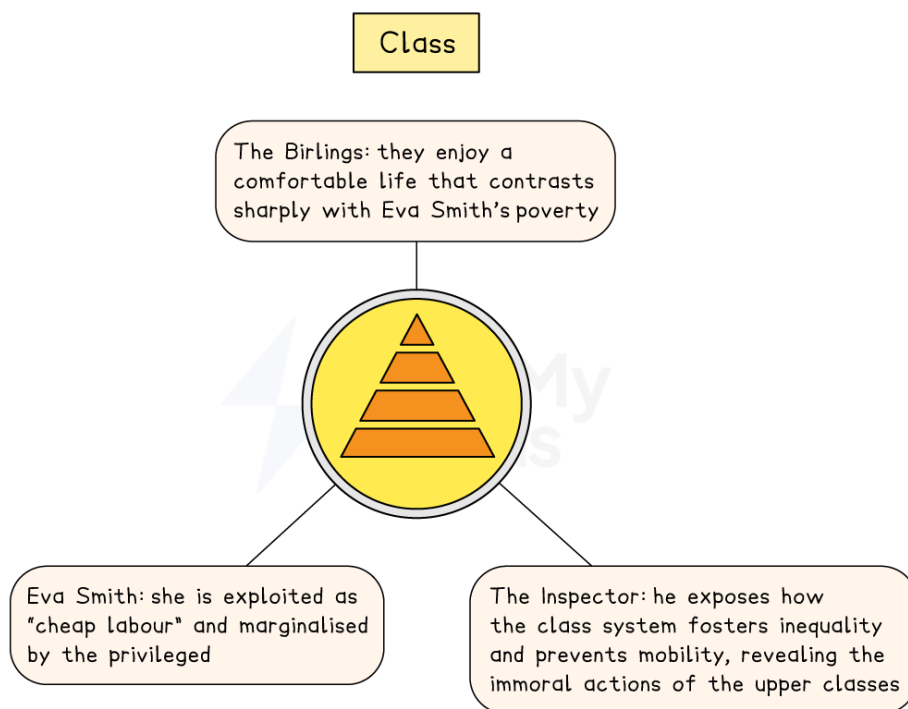
What are the elements of class in An Inspector Calls?

Priestley presents attitudes towards class in a variety of ways in the play, through symbolic settings, exploited characters and prejudiced attitudes:

- **Settings:** The description of the Birlings' **opulent** home is sharply contrasted with descriptions of the workers in Arthur's factory
- **Prejudice:** Upper-class characters frequently make incorrect assertions about the working classes and view them as morally and socially inferior:
 - The Birlings, particularly Sybil, and Gerald are entrenched in the views of their class system; they cannot genuinely empathise with Eva's plight or that of the working classes
- **Exploitation:** Eric and Gerald use their class and status to take advantage of Eva Smith while keeping their relationship with her a secret to avoid reputational damage

The impact of class on characters

Priestley uses the characters in An Inspector Calls to criticise the inequality and unfairness of the British class system and argues that the privilege of class blinds people to their immoral behaviour.



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Class in An Inspector Calls

Character	Impact
The Birlings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Priestley depicts the comfortable, affluent life of the Birlings in contrast to Eva Smith's poverty ▪ Mr Birling is concerned that the wealthier Croft family might see Gerald's engagement to Sheila, the daughter of a new money industrialist, as a social step down ▪ Mrs Birling ignorantly links class with morality and cannot believe Eva, as a working-class girl, would refuse stolen money
The Inspector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Inspector suggests that the class system creates inequalities in society and prevents social mobility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ His investigation also reveals the immoral behaviour of the 'respectable' upper classes
Eva Smith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Working class Eva Smith is considered "cheap labour" by Mr Birling and Gerald, and is exploited and marginalised by more privileged characters ▪ Class differences are a metaphorical "wall", a barrier put up by the wealthy to separate them from the impoverished and vulnerable in society:

- Sheila warns her mother not to “build up a kind of wall” between herself and Eva



Your notes

Why does Priestley use the theme of class in his play?

1. Setting and period

- Priestley underscores how the wealthiest in society enjoy privileges and lives of excess, but are blind to the effects of their actions on the less fortunate in society
- Challenges the outdated values of the upper classes through the Inspector, who speaks for Priestley’s audience when he champions workers’ rights

2. Plot driver

- The revelations about how Birling family have abused their class and social status provide a clear dramatic structure

3. Audience appeal

- The play’s action is driven by revelations about the immorality of the Edwardian upper classes
- Its contemporary 1945 audience were more progressive, responsible and aligned with its socialist values

4. Conflict between characters

- Priestley quickly establishes the theme of class conflict in the opening act

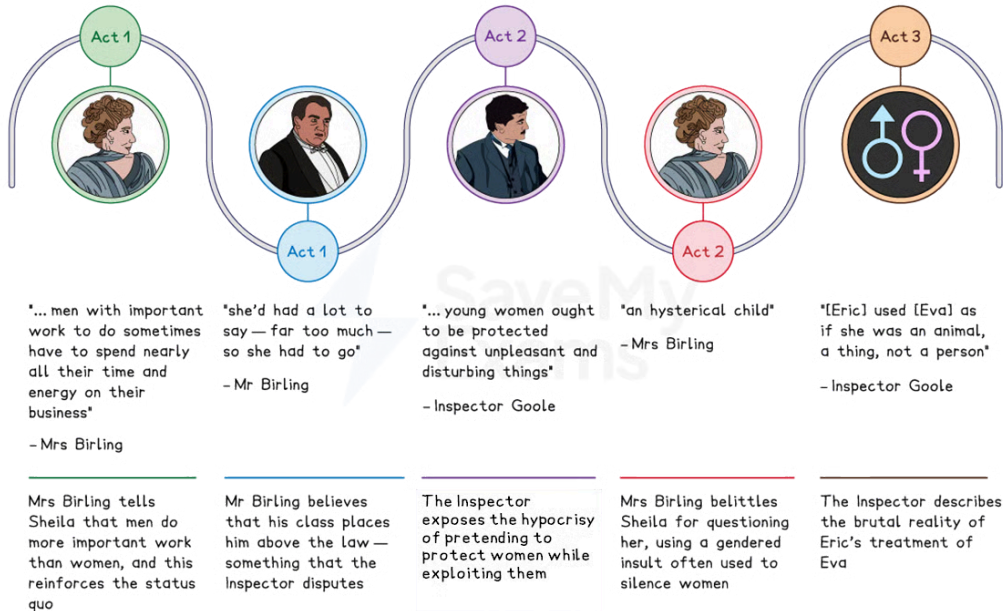
Exam-style questions on the themes of class

Try planning a response to the following essay questions as part of your revision of guilt and responsibility:

- Explore how Priestley depicts conflict between social classes in *An Inspector Calls*.
- How does Priestley present Eva Smith in order to address different attitudes towards social class in *An Inspector Calls*?

Gender timeline

The theme of gender in each act of An Inspector Calls:



An Inspector Calls gender timeline

What are the elements of gender in An Inspector Calls?

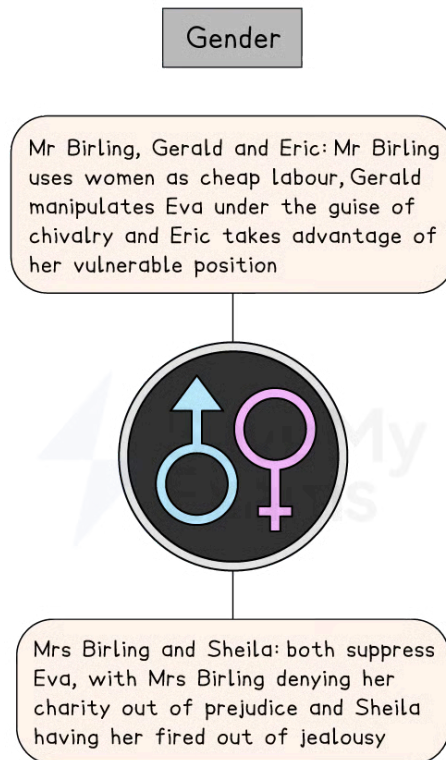
Gender is presented in An Inspector Calls in the following ways:

- **Relationships:** The relationship between Sheila and Gerald highlights the expectations of women in 1912 and their **subservience** to men
- **Exploitation:** Gender is linked closely to class in An Inspector Calls:
 - The Birlings' mistreatment of Eva is due both to her gender and her low social status
 - Eric and Gerald use their gender and status to exploit Eva Smith, sexually and romantically objectifying her
- **Oppression:** Sheila is repeatedly belittled and patronised — even by her own mother — in ways that reflect a wider silencing of women

The impact of gender on characters

Priestley explores the inequality between male and female characters in An Inspector Calls to criticise the mistreatment of women in society. Sexual discrimination is presented as a

dark undercurrent throughout the play that informs the interactions between men and women, and between women of different classes:



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Gender in An Inspector Calls

Character	Impact
Mr Birling, Gerald and Eric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Male characters are presented as exploiting female characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Arthur Birling exploits working-class women, like Eva Smith, as one of the cheapest forms of labour ▪ Both Gerald and Eric also take advantage of the imbalance of power relating to her social position and lack of influence ▪ Gerald emphasises his chivalry in rescuing her, despite his manipulation and abuse of her ▪ Mr Birling even bargains with Sheila: a marriage to Gerald presents a business opportunity
Mrs Birling and Sheila	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sybil Birling and Sheila use their power to suppress Eva Smith: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mrs Birling denies Eva charity on her prejudiced belief that “girls of that class” would refuse to accept stolen money ▪ Sheila is jealous of Eva’s looks and has her fired



Your notes

- Sheila's attitude towards women's rights and gender roles changes as the play progresses:
 - She challenges her father and refuses to take back Gerald's engagement ring

Why does Priestley use the theme of gender in his play?

1. Setting and period

- Priestley uses male and female characters in the play to comment upon traditional gender roles and emphasise how society has evolved since 1912
- Highlights the suppression of women's rights in 1912 and draws attention to the ways that men *and* women can abuse their power

2. Political commentary

- Priestley's depiction of pre-war values confronts his audience with the consequences of **patriarchal** traditions
- Eva Smith represents "millions and millions and millions" of women who are oppressed

3. Audience appeal

- Priestley's 1945 audience would have recognised the influence of gender on restricting the rights of women like Eva
- Sheila plays the role of an **audience surrogate** in the play — her growing independence represents the audience's values

Exam-style questions on the themes of gender

Try planning a response to the following essay questions as part of your revision of gender:

- Explore how Priestley presents relationships between men and women in *An Inspector Calls*?
- How does Priestley use Sheila Birling to explore gender roles in *An Inspector Calls*?



Characters

It is vital that you understand that characters are often used symbolically to express ideas. Priestley uses all of his characters to symbolise various ideas prevalent in his society, and the differences between characters reflect contemporary debates. Therefore it is very useful not only to learn about each character individually but how they compare and contrast to other characters in the play. Below you will find character profiles of:

- **Arthur Birling**
- **Sybil Birling**
- **Sheila Birling**
- **Eric Birling**
- **Gerald Croft**
- **Inspector Goole**
- **Eva Smith/Daisy Renton**

Arthur Birling



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- Birling is the **patriarch** of the family and is presented as an arrogant and **pompous** character throughout the play
- He is first described as a “heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties with fairly easy manners but rather provincial in his speech”:
 - Priestley’s description conveys Birling’s self-indulgence and self-importance, arrogantly trying to impress all around him
 - His regional accent signifies his lower-class status in comparison to his wife and Gerald Croft



- As a former Lord Major and magistrate, Birling is hoping to obtain a knighthood which reveals his obsession with public reputation, status and titles and the reassurance that they provide him with:
 - By the end of the play, Arthur faces exposure to a public scandal and loss of his reputation which would present a terrible downfall for him
- As a wealthy factory owner, Priestley presents Birling as a **caricature** of a **Capitalist** businessman which is in direct opposition to Inspector Goole's **Socialist** aspirations
- Priestley depicts Birling as merely symbolic of other wealthy employers:
 - While he is indifferent to the plight of his workers, it could be argued that there is nothing dreadfully **abhorrent** about his treatment of his workers
 - Priestley does not indicate that Arthur delights in punishing his workers but simply that any **empathy** towards them is severely lacking
- At the beginning of Act I, he delivers several lengthy **monologues** which serve to reveal his self-centredness, arrogance and **myopic** view of society:
 - He believes everyone should be responsible for themselves and is devoid of any sympathy for those less fortunate than himself
- As a character Priestley uses **dramatic irony** in several ways to reveal Arthur's short-sightedness:
 - Birling's optimism for the future is superficial and his predictions demonstrate his **complacency**
 - However, this suits him, for he has much to lose if things were to change
- As a character, Arthur contrasts sharply with the Inspector and his children:
 - He is **brusque** towards the Inspector and treats Eric and Sheila as foolish and naïve
- He refuses to accept any responsibility for Eva's death and remains unchanged by the end of the play:
 - Arthur is unwilling to change because his personal beliefs do not allow him to do this
 - He is blind to the consequences of his own actions and repeatedly defends himself, directs blame at others and tries desperately to try and cover up the tragedy
 - Arthur tries to limit the damage to himself and his family but he can only do so by distorting or minimising the truth

Sybil Birling



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- Sybil is first presented as “a rather cold woman and her husband’s superior”:
 - Her **demeanour** throughout the play is unchanged and she remains snobbish, uncaring and dismissive of others
- Priestley depicts Sybil as a symbol of the privileges of the upper classes and their selfish conduct:
 - Similar to her husband, she is extremely conscious of her high social position
 - However, she is presented as more arrogant, dismissive and prejudiced than him
 - She treats the Inspector as socially inferior
- Due to her elevated social position, she views the working class as morally inferior:
 - She refuses to believe that Eva would turn down stolen money as she is not capable of the same level of morality as the upper classes
 - She refuses to use Eva’s name and refers to her only as a “girl”, as though Eva is not worthy of being recognised as an individual
- She is portrayed as one of the least compassionate characters in the play:
 - She is a prominent member of a local women’s charity but her role is not due to a concern for others less fortunate than herself, but as a symbol of status
 - She is indifferent to the fact that she refused assistance to Eva and her grandchild and is devoid of any empathy for them
- In Act III, her **callousness** is further revealed:
- When she realises her son is the father of the child, she still maintains that the charity ought to deny assistance to people it considers undeserving of aid
- To an audience, Sybil’s appalling behaviour and cold detachment would be incomprehensible:
 - This would be heightened further as she is both a woman and a mother



- As a character, Sybil could be perceived as someone who fails fully to perceive those around her:
 - Alternatively, she may be deliberately turning a blind eye to any reality which contradicts her reassuring image of both herself and her family
 - When confronted by the revelation that she indirectly contributed to the death of Eva and her grandchild, she comforts herself by insisting that she had done her duty
 - She initially refuses to believe Eric could be the father of Eva's child and refuses to acknowledge he has a problem with alcohol
 - Both Sybil and her husband are concerned with preserving a respectable **façade**
- By the end of the play, Sybil remains deeply entrenched in her prejudiced ways and unchanged:
 - She is the least affected character by the tragedy and could be perceived to be the most resistant to the Inspector's message

Eric Birling



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- Eric is first described as being “in his early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive”:
 - Eric's description at the beginning of the play denotes his lack of confidence and social awkwardness
 - This is in stark contrast to the other characters on stage, especially Gerald
- He attempts to challenge some of his parents' views in the early stages of the play:
 - However, he struggles to confront them to any great extent and they are largely dismissive of any opinions he puts forward
- He contradicts his parents on many occasions in Act I:
- While this could be perceived to be displaying some sympathy towards the strikers in his father's factory, his **retorts** to his parents may simply be due to his hostility towards them



- Eric is presented as a weak character:
 - Eric tries to leave when he suspects the Inspector may want to question him and initially avoids taking responsibility for his actions
- Eric plays a largely insignificant role in the first two acts of the play:
 - This enables the other characters in the play to dominate proceedings
- It is not until Act III when Priestley forces Eric to confess his affair with Eva and to admit she was pregnant with his child
- He develops at the end of the play and becomes more **assertive** towards his parents
- During Eric's confession, his language is emotional ("you killed them both – damn you, damn you") and sharply contrasted with that of his parents':
 - He heavily criticises his mother's treatment of Eva Smith
- Arthur, Sybil and Gerald rejoice on having discovered the Inspector was a fraud:
 - In contrast, both Eric and his sister are at pains to focus on the lessons that they all must now learn, regardless of whether the Inspector was real
- While an audience may view Eric as a sympathetic character, his treatment of Eva reveals how he has also exploited her:
 - He reveals Eva did not want him to enter her room until he issued a threat, thus exposing the vulnerability of women
 - While Gerald hints that he may have been in love with Eva, Eric admits he was not and so his behaviour could be viewed as more cruel
 - In his confession, Eric hints at the potential for sexual violence:
- Despite being first presented as weak, Eric becomes a much more **assertive** character by the end of the play:
 - He is ashamed and regretful over his conduct with Eva
 - In part, he presents a symbol of hope for the attitudes of the younger generation

Sheila Birling



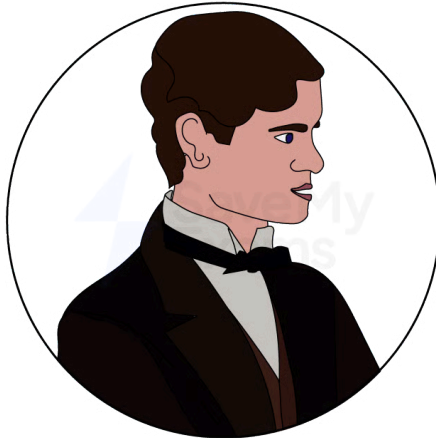
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- Sheila is first described as “a pretty girl in her twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited”, suggesting silliness and perhaps naivety:
 - At the beginning of Act I, she appears self-interested, relishing her engagement to Gerald which initially aligns her with her family’s shallow and materialistic outlook
- She is portrayed as both sympathetic and courageous as she is the first character (apart from the Inspector) to empathise with Eva Smith’s **predicament** and also the first to confess to having treated the girl poorly:
 - She dramatically exits the stage when first shown a photograph of Eva and appears genuinely regretful of her actions
 - Although many of the others refuse to accept responsibility, Sheila quickly shows a greater maturity than to how she is first depicted by Priestley
 - Further, when Gerald’s affair is exposed, she again demonstrates maturity in her understanding of his affair and applauds his honest confession
- Sheila conveys a greater sense of intuition than the other characters and her dialogue in Act I foreshadows future events in the play:
 - She comments how Gerald stayed away from her all the previous summer, **alluding** to his affair with Eva/Daisy
 - She accuses Eric of being drunk, **foreshadowing** his drinking problem
 - She is the first to suspect the inauthenticity of the Inspector, though understands this is irrelevant
- Sheila’s language becomes increasingly emotional:
 - This is sharply contrasted with the **pompous** language of her father and the **condescending** tone of her mother
 - Her dialogue reveals her sensitive nature and her compassion and empathy for others less fortunate than herself
 - Similarly, her dialogue demonstrates her increasing assertiveness toward her parents



- While both Sheila and Eric develop more than the other characters in the play, it is Sheila who is transformed more than any other character:
 - While Eric echoes many of his sister's **sentiments**, Sheila is a much more assertive and alluring character than her brother
 - By the end of the play, she refuses to continue her engagement with Gerald even though he claims "everything's all right now"
- She represents the younger generation and provides an element of hope

Gerald Croft



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- Gerald is first described as "an attractive chap about thirty, rather too manly to be a dandy but very much the easy well-bred young man-about-town":
 - Gerald's description presents him in a positive light and he is shown to be confident, amiable and polite
 - As the social superior of the Birling family, he represents immense privilege
- Gerald presents little dissension to both Mr and Mrs Birling's attitudes and behaviour:
 - He agrees with Arthur's dismissal of Eva because of her participation in a pay strike
- Despite this, he is a relatively passive character:
 - This is in sharp contrast to Mr and Mrs Birling's confrontational behaviour
- He can be viewed as a more sympathetic character:
- He is open to the Inspector's questioning and to some extent appears to present an honest account of his dealings with Eva
- He presents himself having rescued Eva, though this could be viewed as self-justification for his actions
- However, his affair could be perceived to demonstrate upper-class sexual **hypocrisy** and irresponsibility:
 - He discards Eva when he loses interest in her



- He first attempts to hide details of his affair from Sheila
- His first reaction to the dead girl is to distance himself from it though he does show empathy towards her
- Although he is still culpable, Gerald could be perceived to be the least blameworthy character in the play:
 - While both Gerald and Eric exploit Eva/Daisy, Gerald's behaviour towards her was not cruel and he appears to have been sincerely concerned for her
- While Gerald feels genuine regret for his treatment of Eva, it is short-lived and he ultimately fails to change:
 - His guilt is only temporary and he celebrates with the Birlings on avoiding a scandal
 - By offering the ring again to Sheila at the end of the play, he shows he has not learnt anything from the Inspector

Inspector Goole



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- Priestley's stage directions reveal that the Inspector "need not be a big man" but that he must create an "impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness":
 - He is presented as a powerful figure with an imposing presence
- Priestley intentionally names the Inspector Goole, which introduces an almost supernatural or ghost-like element to the play:
 - Priestley deliberately presents the Inspector as a mysterious character and this is further heightened by the series of revelations at the end the play
 - Priestley enables the Inspector to have an apparent awareness of Eva's death before it has occurred, which also adds an almost supernatural element
- His entrance in Act I makes an immediate impact and changes the tone of the evening:
 - The lighting changes from "pink and intimate" to "brighter and harder" to suggest that the Inspector will place the characters under great scrutiny
 - He exudes an air of authority through his language and actions



- The Inspector controls when each character sees the photograph of Eva, creating intrigue and suspense
- He also controls the unfolding of events and the characters themselves
- The Inspector's language is carefully composed and **moralistic** in tone
- He delivers the most important statements within the play:
 - The Inspector speaks purposefully and with great assurance which conveys an impression of great knowledge
 - All of the characters are judged by him but he offers neither punishment nor forgiveness as the characters must judge themselves and others
- Ideas relating to **social responsibility** are repeatedly interwoven throughout his dialogue:
 - The Inspector tries to prevent the group from evading responsibility
- The Inspector delivers the most significant and weighty statements in the play
- He is the catalyst in the play, bringing about some change:
 - As a character he does not change or develop

Eva Smith/Daisy Renton

- Presented as the play's victim, the audience never meets Eva Smith/Daisy Renton:
 - The audience relies on the Inspector, and his interrogation of the other characters, to reveal her character
 - The Inspector also uses Eva's diary as a device to reveal her personal feelings and intimate account of events
- She is first introduced to the audience through a graphic and horrific account of her suicide:
 - This imagery is used to shock the audience and create empathy for her predicament
 - The revelation that Eva was pregnant at the time, makes her death appear even more ruthless and pitiable
- Eva is used as a symbol of the working-classes and is presented as a vulnerable working-class woman, exploited and **marginalised** by those within a privileged **capitalist** system:
 - Eva is exploited by all of the Birling family and Gerald
 - She is presented as the innocent and principled victim
- She has higher moral standards than the Birling family and Gerald:
 - Her moral code makes her death more shocking
- While Eva is inevitably the victim of the play, it could be viewed that Priestley has depicted her as a very idealised character:

- She is presented as entirely flawless throughout the play which makes the other characters appear even worse



Examiner Tips and Tricks

In the exam, the idea of character as a conscious construct should be evident throughout your response. You should demonstrate a firm understanding that Priestley has deliberately created these characters to perform certain functions within his play.

For instance, you could begin to consider why Priestley has chosen to present the character of Eva Smith in the way that he does. As an audience, we only learn about her through fragmented information from what the other characters say about her. Try to explore reasons as to why Priestley may have chosen to present her in this way.



Your notes

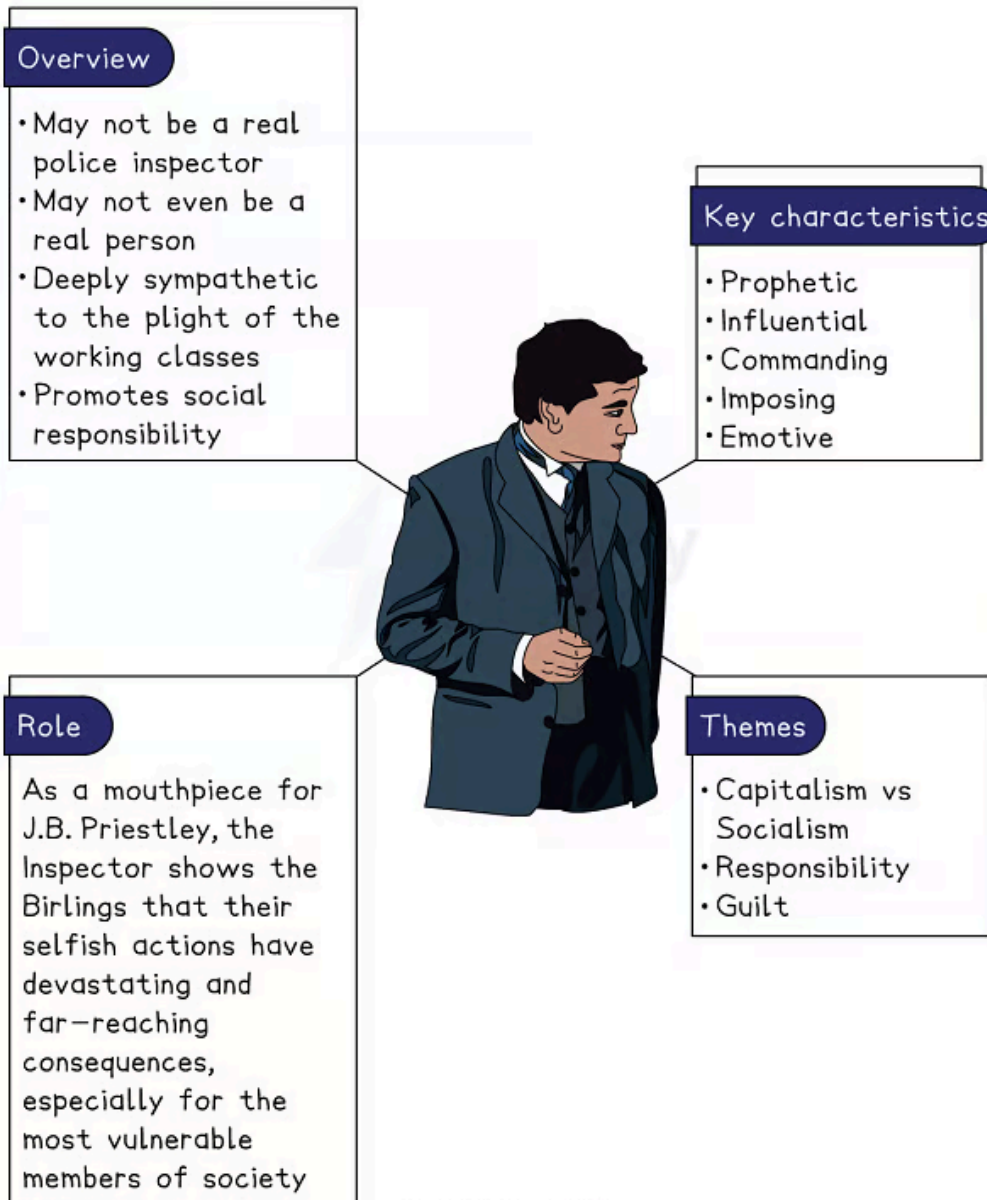
Inspector Goole Analysis



Your notes

Inspector Goole represents both J.B. Priestley's own socialist beliefs, but also the moral authority of *An Inspector Calls*, shining a light on the moral failings of the Birling family.

Inspector Goole character summary



Inspector Goole character summary

Why is Inspector Goole important?

Priestley uses the Inspector to comment on the inequalities in 1912 society and how it is organised:



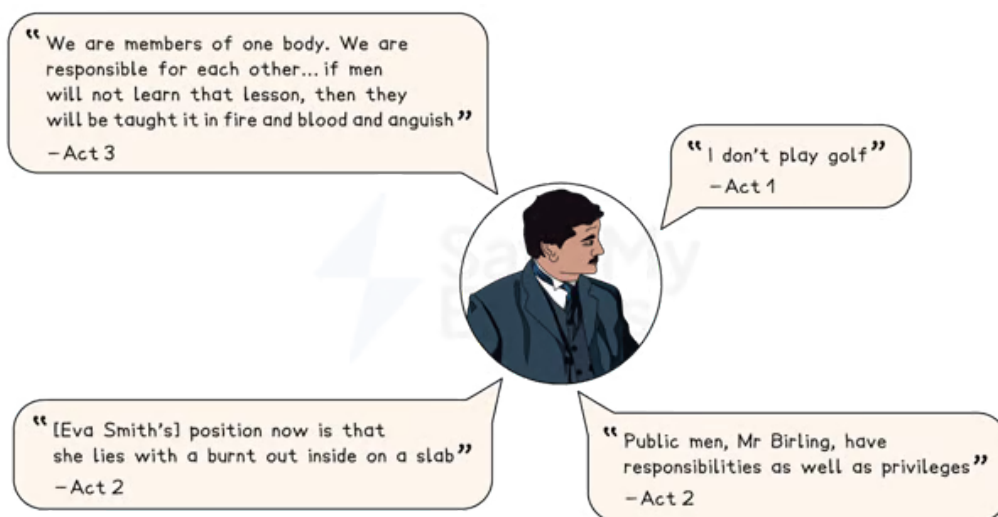
- The Inspector highlights the **chain of events** connecting individuals in society. He establishes the links between the Birlings and Eva Smith / Daisy Renton to encourage the family to accept their responsibilities and change the way they behave towards others in the future.
- He highlights **generational conflict**: while Mr and Mrs Birling, the older generation, refuse to accept the Inspector's message, Sheila and Eric, the younger generation, are open to social change and taking responsibility for one's actions.
- He speaks **on behalf of the victimised and oppressed**: because his investigation is based upon Eva Smith's diary, it is as though he speaks for Eva from beyond the grave. He forces the Birlings to consider the "millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths" who might struggle because of capitalist greed

Inspector Goole language analysis

Priestley's language, in both dialogue and stage directions, is designed to give the impression that Inspector Goole is an omniscient moral authority. The language he uses, and is used about him, is characterised by:

- **Emotive language**: the Inspector expresses anger at the lack of empathy for Eva Smith shown by Mr and Mrs Birling; his final speech makes effective use of **tricolons** to warn that those who refuse to show responsibility for one another will be taught it "in fire and blood and anguish". He describes Eva's "burnt out" corpse using gruesome imagery in order to confront the Birlings with the awful consequences of their actions
- **Contrasts**: in the **stage directions** used to describe the Inspector in Act 1, his arrival is signalled by the "sharp" ring of the doorbell that cuts off Mr Birling's speech about the importance of putting oneself first. Furthermore, when the Inspector arrives, the "pink and intimate" lighting becomes "brighter and harder", the **juxtaposition** indicating that Goole is about to illuminate the truth and expose the Birlings' secrets.
- **A sharp tone**: the Inspector's dialogue shows that he does not care for the trappings of the 1912 class system; he dismisses Mr Birling's offer of port and is unimpressed when Mr Birling claims to golf with the Chief Constable: "I don't play golf". He is also talented at using other characters' words against them to punish their lack of empathy, as when he convinces Mrs Birling to unwittingly blame Eric at the end of Act 2

Inspector Goole key quotes



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Inspector Goole key quotes

Inspector Goole's character development

The Inspector does not develop as a character over the course of the play: he begins and ends the play as its moral authority, and encourages the others to learn from him. He is, however, the catalyst for the changes we see in other characters. He carries out his investigation purposefully, interrogating one person at a time.

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3
Mr Birling and Sheila: Initially, the Inspector reveals that Mr Birling and Sheila set Eva on her tragic path.	Gerald and Mrs Birling: Inspector Goole forces Gerald to reveal the truth of his affair with Eva. He then diverges from his chronological investigation to expose Mrs Birling's cruelty towards Eva.	Eric: The Inspector reveals Eric's involvement with Eva, forcing him to admit that he raped and used Eva before stealing money for her. He leaves the Birlings with a warning about the perils of denying their responsibility towards others.

Inspector Goole character interpretations

Christianity and morality

An Inspector Calls is based on the morality plays of the late middle ages in which men are caught between the religious need for goodness and the temptations of evil. The Inspector could be seen to represent Christian ideals here, as he encourages the Birlings to confess their sins and seek repentance. He appeals to their better natures, but also warns them of the

hellish “fire and blood and anguish” that awaits those who deny his message about helping the needy.

20th-century warfare

Because the play takes place a few years before the First World War, the Inspector highlights the ignorant attitudes of men like Arthur Birling about the future and the unrest throughout Europe. His message can be interpreted as a call to action for Priestley’s 1945 audience to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

The Inspector as ghost

The Inspector might even be interpreted as the ghost of Eva Smith (“Goole”, after all, is a homophone for “ghoul”). His omniscient knowledge of her life, her story, and her feelings at various points suggests a connection between him and Eva. The idea of a ghost encouraging the living to change their ways imitates, again, the medieval morality plays that inspired Priestley, and evokes similar morality stories preaching social awareness such as Dickens’ A Christmas Carol.



Your notes

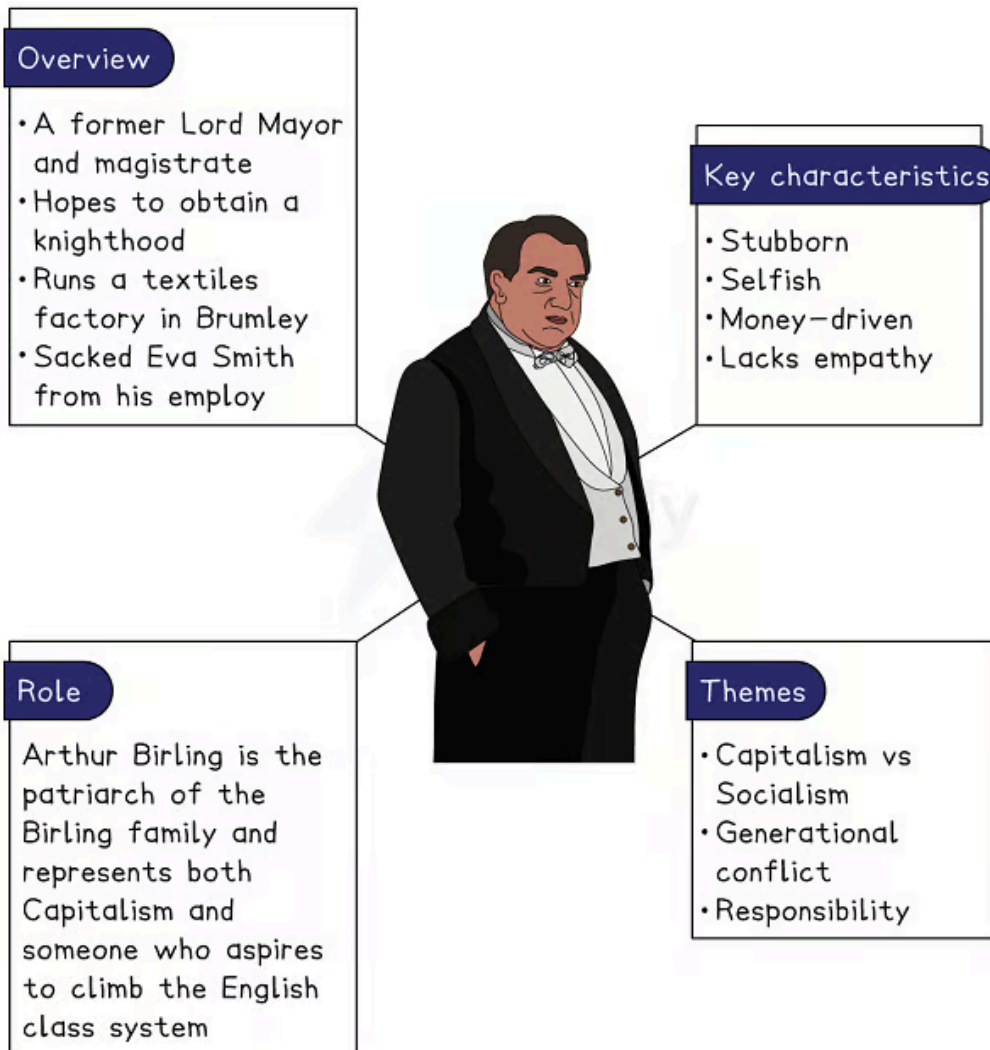
Arthur Birling Analysis



Your notes

Arthur Birling represents a caricature of a capitalist businessman, and his selfish and blinkered ideals stand in direct opposition to Inspector Goole's (and therefore Priestley's) socialist aspirations.

Mr Arthur Birling character summary



Arthur Birling character summary

What does Arthur Birling symbolise?

Mr Birling represents the greedy industrialist businessmen of the early 20th Century:

- He is a **wealthy capitalist**: he prizes money and social status above all else, framing his attitude as that of “a hard-headed, practical man of business”.
- He is a self-important **patriarch**: he represents the **power of men over women** in 1912 English society, and treats Sheila's engagement to Gerald as an opportunity to further



his own business interests.

- He symbolises the **older generation**: his refusal to change his ways and learn social responsibility contrasts with the receptiveness of Sheila and Eric, who represent the younger generation’s potential to change for the better.

Arthur Birling language analysis

Priestley uses a range of techniques to make Mr Birling an unlikeable caricature, representing the worst excesses of Capitalism. His speech is characterised by:

- **Dramatic irony**: Mr Birling’s optimism for the future — including predictions in Act 1 about the Titanic’s success and the impossibility of war — would have seemed laughable to a 1945 audience. The audience therefore know from the outset that Mr Birling’s opinions on social responsibility are not to be trusted.
- **His regional accent**: Birling’s “provincial” manner of speaking signifies his lower-class status in comparison to his wife and Gerald Croft. It also emphasises the importance of class in 1912, and adds context to his eagerness to impress Gerald, exert authority over others, and get a knighthood.

Arthur Birling key quotes

“ a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own”
– Act 1

“ The Titanic – she sails next week... unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable”
– Act 1

“ I’m talking as a hard-headed, practical man of business”
– Act 1

“ I can’t accept any responsibility”
– Act 1

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Arthur Birling key quotes

Arthur Birling’s character development

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3
Attempt to assert his dominance: Mr Birling is introduced as an arrogant, money-driven businessman. He fails to intimidate Inspector Goole, and when the Inspector reveals that Birling’s firing of Eva Smith	Birling’s defence of others: Mr Birling fails to condemn Gerald for having an affair while engaged to Sheila. He encourages Sheila to rethink after she ends her engagement to Gerald. Later, he supports his wife,	Birling learns nothing: Mr Birling is more concerned that Eric stole company money than at the news of Eric’s involvement in Eva’s tragic fate. After the Inspector leaves, Arthur fails to learn the Inspector’s lesson about responsibility. He worries



Your notes

led to her death, Birling refuses to accept any responsibility.

Sybil, when the Inspector reveals that Sybil cruelly denied Eva Smith charity.

about the damage to his reputation, and celebrates the possibility of Eva's death being a hoax.

Arthur Birling character interpretations

Generational divide

It is important to remember that Priestley's 1945 audience would have seen themselves in the younger generation represented by Sheila and Eric. To this audience, Mr Birling represents an older, pre-war generation whose interests would have felt deeply out of touch with the reality experienced by Priestley's 1945 audience. Men like Birling were responsible for withholding the right to vote from women, and their mistakes led to disasters such as the tragedy of the Titanic. Mr Birling's behaviour also contrasts sharply with that of Eric and Sheila. The receptiveness of the younger Birlings to the Inspector's socialist message aligns them with a more socially progressive audience. It is ironic that Mr Birling treats Eric and Sheila as foolish and naïve when, in reality, he is perhaps the most ignorant character of all — as demonstrated by his false predictions in Act 1.

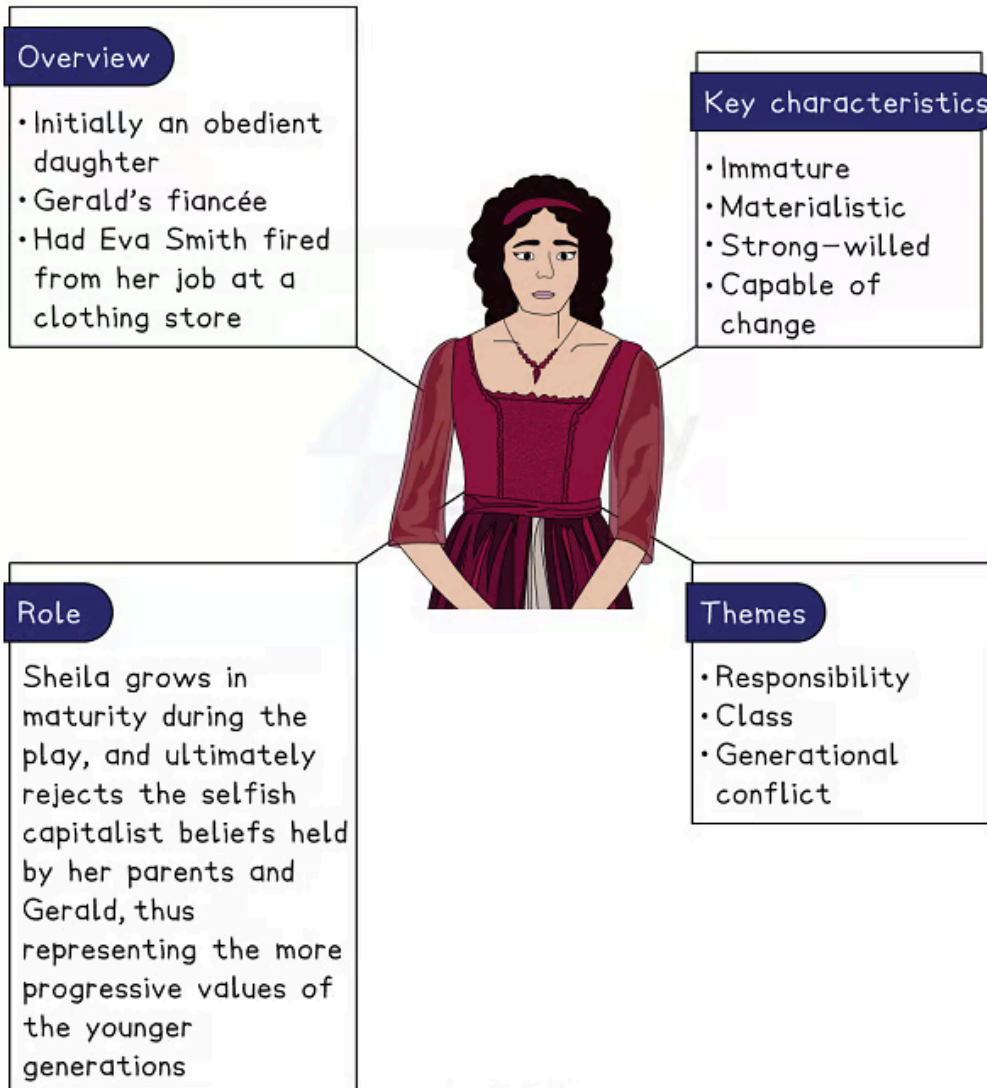
Sheila Birling Analysis



Your notes

Sheila is the conscience of the Birling family, and her redemption during the play represents hope for the younger, more progressive generation.

Sheila character summary



Sheila Birling character summary

Why is Sheila important?

Priestley uses Sheila to contrast the character of Eva: the two characters reflect how the class divide affects women from very different backgrounds. Sheila also represents the capacity of the younger generation to affect positive social change.

- She is **immature**: at the beginning of the play, she is blissfully unaware of the hardships faced by working-class women such as Eva Smith, who was her age. She is horrified to



hear of Eva's fate, which was partly caused by Sheila's petty jealousy.

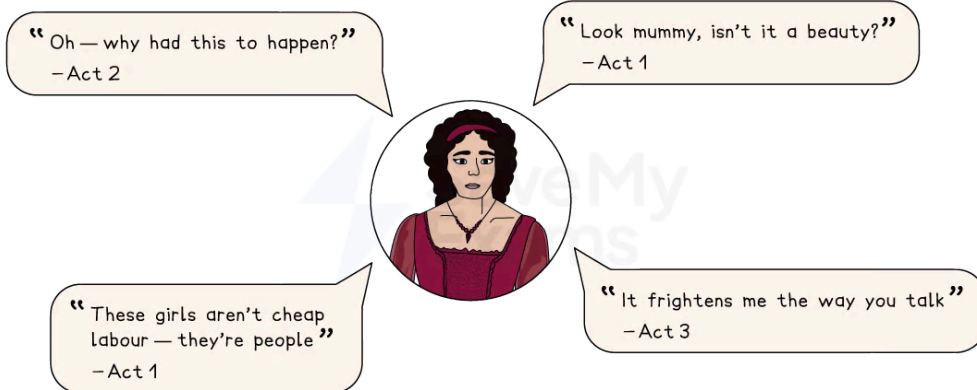
- She is **materialistic**: she judges Eva based solely on appearances, and her jealousy arises from Eva looking better in a dress than Sheila; she also disregards immediately her suspicion of Gerald's absence the previous summer because Gerald presents her with an expensive engagement ring.
- She is **strong-willed** and **capable of change**: she not only accepts the blame for her part in Eva's death, but sides with the Inspector's call for social reform, and condemns her parents' selfishness and irresponsibility.

Sheila Birling language analysis

Priestley uses a range of techniques to demonstrate Sheila's development from childlike to more independent and morally responsible.

- **Childish language**: Priestley highlights Sheila's naivety and immaturity by having her use infantile language, such as "Mummy" and "Daddy", and through her emotional outbursts, such as her response to Eva's suicide: "Oh — horrible!"
- **Descriptions of her physical behaviour**: Stage directions describing Sheila's physical behaviour illustrate the way that her character develops over the course of the tragedy. In Act 1, she is entirely obedient to her parents, and "looks attentive" as her father describes the importance of putting oneself first. In Act 2, she moves physically closer to the Inspector, demonstrating that she has fallen under his influence: "She goes closer to him, wonderingly".
- **Shift in tone**: Sheila's dialogue with her parents and Gerald is important in establishing her rejection of their selfish beliefs. She begins the play by hanging on her parents' every word, but by Act 3 she is confident enough to challenge them, even calling Sybil's use of "impertinent" a "silly word".

Sheila Birling key quotes



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Sheila Birling key quotes

Sheila character development

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3



Your notes

<p>Sheila is entitled and immature: Sheila is childish and excitable. Her view of the world is blinkered, and she has no understanding of the lives of those less privileged than herself. She is distraught when the Inspector reveals that Sheila's spite and jealousy contributed to Eva Smith's suicide.</p>	<p>Sheila becomes more mature: Sheila convinces Gerald to confess to his relationship with Eva. Sheila shows maturity in her handling of the situation: she breaks off her engagement to Gerald, but respects Gerald for finally being honest. She is the first to realise Eric's involvement with Eva.</p>	<p>Sheila's transformation is complete: Sheila sides fully with the Inspector, taking on board his message about the importance of social responsibility. She rejects Gerald's suggestion that the investigation was a hoax, and condemns her parents for not changing their ways.</p>
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Sheila character interpretation

Sheila's progressive politics

By the end of the play, Sheila's character is aligned firmly with the ideologies of Priestley's postwar audience, who would have been more socially aware. Priestley's 1945 audience would have witnessed the development of Britain's Welfare State, an increased focus on workers' rights and labour unions, and a renewed focus on community values following World War Two. Modern audiences, including that in 1945, may sympathise with Sheila's position at the end of the play.

Rights of women

Sheila also represents the social position of women in 1912 Britain, and might be seen as a victim of her environment. Her naivety and immaturity are indicative of the poor standard of education afforded to women at the time, and her excitement at Gerald's expensive engagement ring alludes to the fact that women of this period depended entirely upon men for financial stability. Her father, Mr Birling, clearly sees her engagement to Gerald as a business opportunity more than anything else. Sheila's new, socially progressive, ideas are dismissed by the selfish older generation, reflecting the relative powerlessness of women in 1912 to affect political change. Middle-class women were only granted the right to vote in 1918, and universal suffrage was not granted until 1928.

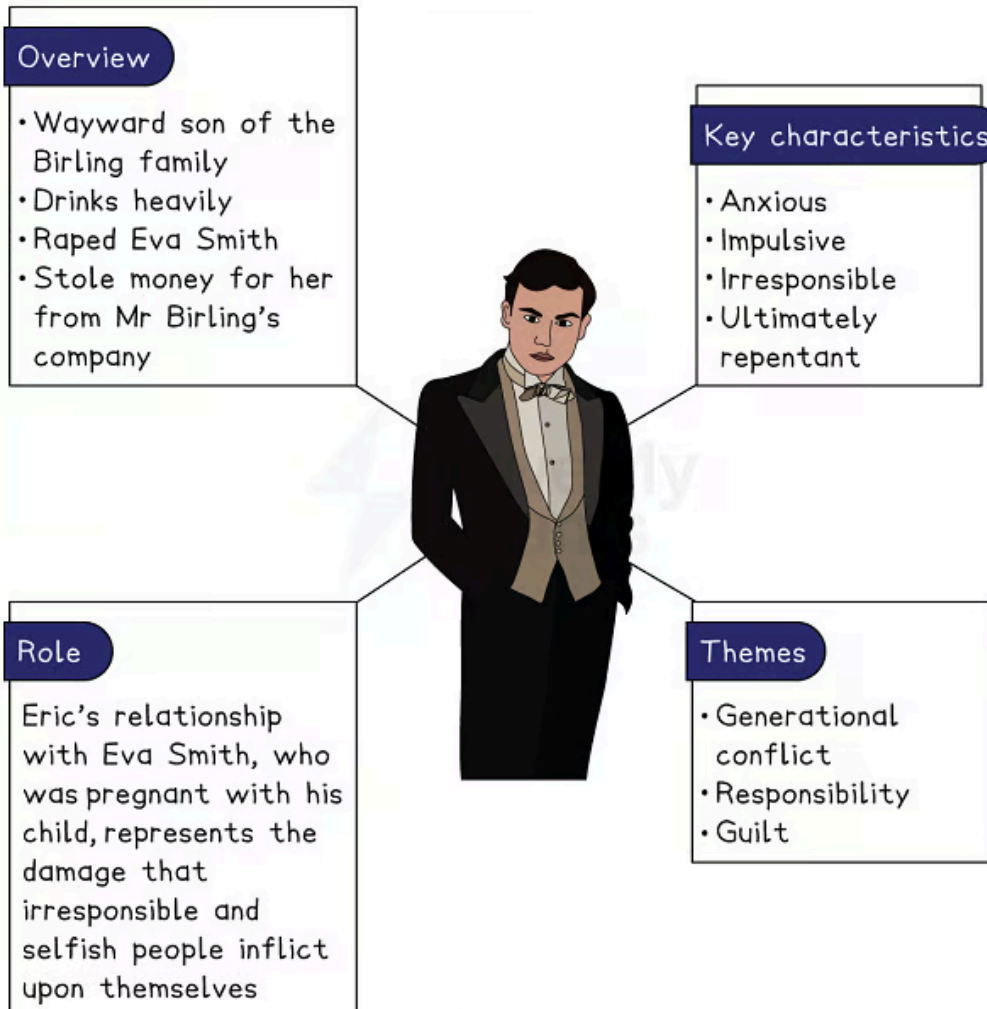
Eric Birling Analysis



Your notes

Eric represents the recklessness and misogyny of wealthy young men in the early 1900s, but his transformation into a more responsible person suggests that there is hope for the future.

Eric character summary



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Eric Birling character summary

Why is Eric important?

Eric represents both the punishment that awaits those who refuse to listen to the Inspector's message, and also the potential for the younger generation to change for the better.

- He has a **drinking problem**: he is known by his peers (including Gerald) to drink heavily, and while inebriated he can become aggressive; he forced himself upon Eva while he was drunk.
- He has a **poor relationship with his father**: he appears to be jealous of Mr Birling's respect for Gerald; he does not confide in his father when Eva becomes pregnant, and



instead steals from Mr Birling's business.

- He is **able to accept responsibility**: at the **denouement**, he and Sheila are the only characters to accept their roles in Eva's death; he is stricken with guilt, and willing to face the consequences of his actions.

Eric language analysis

Priestley uses a range of techniques to present different aspects of Eric's character:

- **Exclamatory language**: Eric is prone to sudden exclamations, such as "(involuntarily) My God!" in Act 1 and the stage direction "(bursting out)" in Act 3, both of which highlight his impulsive and immature tendencies
- **Dramatic irony**: Act 2 ends with the audience realising that Eric, who is offstage, was the father of Eva Smith's child; we know this because Eric is the only member of the family waiting to be interviewed by the Inspector. Sybil Birling does not realise this, and encourages the Inspector to punish the father of Eva Smith's child; one by one, the other characters realise that Sybil is falling into the Inspector's trap — and then, as the truth becomes obvious, Eric enters and the Act ends.
- **Confrontational dialogue**: Eric's dialogue with his father is frequently confrontational; in Act 1, he openly disagrees with Mr Birling's position that workers should not strike for higher wages, while Mr Birling often chides Eric or dismisses his remarks. Another example is Mr Birling's immediate (and incorrect) dismissal of Eric's justifiable fears of war: "There isn't a chance of war". These interactions indicate a strained father-son relationship; Eric states in Act 3 that Mr Birling is not "the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble".

Eric Birling key quotes

"I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty"
- Act 3

"Why shouldn't they try for higher wages?"
- Act 1

"This girl's still dead, isn't she? Nobody's brought her to life, have they?"
- Act 3

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Eric Birling key quotes

Eric character development

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3
Eric lacks confidence and is uneasy : Priestley	Eric is the father: The Inspector reveals Eric to be	Eric's transformation : Eric reveals his role in Eva's death,



Your notes

foreshadows Eric's drinking problem early on (Sheila calls him "squiffy"). He disagrees with his father at several points, but is not strong or sober enough to contradict Mr Birling with any confidence.

the final link in the "chain of events" connecting the Birlings to Eva Smith's death: he was the father of Eva's unborn child. This means that when Sybil Birling refused to help Eva, Mrs Birling effectively sentenced her grandchild to death.

admitting that he stole money to support her. He shows deep remorse, and argues forcefully against his parents and Gerald when they deny any responsibility. Eric and Sheila end the play changed for the better.

Eric character interpretation

Eric's redemption

Eric is guilty of atrocious behaviour towards Eva Smith, and then stole money to support her in secret rather than being honest about his behaviour. Modern audiences — and even Priestley's 1945 audience — may struggle to forgive him, but he is redeemed somewhat by guilt and willingness to accept the consequences of his actions. He therefore embodies Priestley's message of redemption, demonstrating that even the most irresponsible of individuals are capable of becoming positive forces for change in society.

Capitalism versus socialism

Eric is a vital part of Priestley's attack on the hypocrisy of 1912 and 1945 society. He openly condemns Mr Birling's capitalist principles, and reveals socialist tendencies by arguing that Eva and her fellow workers were right to strike for higher wages. He points out that Mr Birling himself praised Eva's work, and factory owners like him are always seeking to charge higher prices. In Act 3, he "bitterly" mocks his father for not telling the Inspector that it must be "every man for himself", highlighting the absence of conviction among powerful men, who behave in whatever way is most convenient.



Context

Context should inform, but should never dominate, your reading of the play. Any comments on contextual factors must always be linked to the ideas in the play. When exploring the context in which *An Inspector Calls* was written, you should consider:

- The contexts in which the text is set
- The contexts in which the text is received
- Its literary context (genre)



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Priestley wrote *An Inspector Calls* in 1945 but chose to set the play in 1912. British society changed significantly between those two periods and so both have significant political as well as societal differences. While *An Inspector Calls* carries a mark of its time, you should try to consider what the text has to say about people, human nature, societal structures etc. and recognise these as universal themes, which are just as relevant today.

For example, if you were to write about the character of Eva Smith as a working-class woman in 1912, you may also wish to consider today's society and consider how much has (or has not) changed.

Each of the below topics links directly to Priestley's ideas in *An Inspector Calls*:

- [Capitalism and Socialism](#)
- [Responsibility](#)
- [Class](#)
- [Gender](#)

Capitalism and socialism

- Within the play, two opposing political, economic and social schools of thought are presented:
 - **Capitalism** is presented as a system in which abuse and exploitation of the poor and disadvantaged are inevitable
 - **Socialism** is presented as a system which promotes equality and views society as a whole
- In 1912, England was governed by a **conservative right-wing** government where **capitalism** was the dominant theory of the day:



- By 1945, a **left-wing** government had just been elected which advocated more **socialist** values and ideals:
 - The **Labour Party** envisaged a society in which all citizens would be free from the fear of poverty
- By setting the play in this period, Priestley aims to show **capitalism** to be a morally unacceptable political view:
 - **Socialism** emerged in the 1940s in an attempt to find a more humane economic system than **capitalism**
- In 1912 workers had little or no rights and were largely unprotected by **unions** and a developed **Welfare State**, leaving them vulnerable and subject to exploitation:
 - While social welfare reforms began to evolve in the 1900s in England, it was the introduction of the **Welfare State** in the 1940s, which provided much greater protection for the social and economic welfare of citizens
 - World War II had decimated towns and cities in England and issues such as healthcare, housing, education, and employment benefits were viewed as essential policies
 - By 1945, workers' rights had been marginally improved:
 - **Socialism** is depicted as an instrument of the labour movement, making it more responsive to worker's needs
- Priestley illustrates the vulnerability of workers when Eva is dismissed for her participation in a pay strike:
 - He tries to convey the importance that all workers should be protected from unfair dismissal
- Work in industrial factories in 1912 would have been very difficult and demanding work, often with very poor working conditions:
 - Having Eva work in a factory makes her character appear even more sympathetic to the audience

Responsibility

- In 1912, little **social provision** for the poor meant financial assistance became the responsibility of charities:
 - Priestley shows how Eva is forced to apply to Sybil's charity for help, which meant that the upper classes could decide who was deserving of their assistance
- Priestley depicts the failures of charity in dealing with the problems of poverty:
 - Priestley attempts to illustrate how unfair the system was and to highlight the need for government intervention
 - Through the Inspector, Priestley argues that members of a society have duties and obligations towards the welfare of others
- In contrast, by 1945 there was a greater desire for social reform:



- A series of social welfare policies were introduced between 1945–1951, so that the vulnerable in society would be offered some protection
- The **1942 Beveridge Report** advocated a system of social insurance for every citizen regardless of income, for example, the **Family Allowances Act 1945**, **National Health Service Act 1946**
- By setting the play in 1912, Priestley is able to convey Eva's destitution in a bleaker way:
 - If the play had been set in 1945, Eva would have been afforded much more protection under the **Welfare State**
 - This further highlights the play's message of the importance of government intervention and collective and **social responsibility**

Class

- The **hierarchical class system** was very dominant in Edwardian society
- At the start of the 20th century, British society was broadly divided into three classes: upper, middle class and the working class:
 - After two World Wars, this system was no longer viewed as the only possible societal structure
 - **The Great Depression (1929–1939)** resulted in economic depression and mass unemployment throughout the world:
 - The majority of British people, especially the working class, demanded social change
- Priestley is concerned to show the social extremes of the **class system**:
 - Priestley uses the Birlings and Gerald Croft as representations of the upper classes, and Eva as a representation of the working class to highlight the immense differences between them and the unfairness of the system
 - The Birlings' home and lifestyle are sharply contrasted with descriptions of the workers in Arthur's factory and Eva's poverty
- The play is set two years before World War I and was written when World War II ended:
 - By 1945, two world wars had dramatically altered views about class

Gender

- In 1912, women were largely seen to be **subservient** to men and had significantly fewer rights
- During this period, the **suffragette movement** campaigned for gender equality for women:
 - It was an increasing time of political agitation for women's rights
- Priestley demonstrates how women, especially working-class women, could be exploited and abused by those with wealth and power:



Your notes

- Both Gerald and Eric abuse their power and status in their relationship with Eva and both men discard her when it suits them
- As a woman, Eva would have been viewed as 'cheap labour' and therefore more at risk of being exploited and abused by employers because of her gender:
 - Working-class women would have been one of the cheapest forms of labour available to wealthy business owners like Arthur Birling
- The growing agitation for gender equality is evident through the character of Sheila and she can be viewed as a woman attempting to redefine the role of women at a time when women's rights were being sought:
 - At the beginning of the play, she plays a typical role within her **patriarchal society** and is obedient to her father
 - This can be contrasted to her behaviour as the play develops and she begins to challenge her father and refuses to take back Gerald's engagement ring
- In contrast, Sheila uses her position to get another woman fired from her position, during a period when women were fighting to have greater recognition in the workplace:
 - Sheila belongs to a class where women would never be expected to provide for themselves
- Unmarried pregnant women would have been heavily **ostracised** by society in 1912
- By 1945, there would still have been significant **stigma** attached to Eva's pregnancy



Writer's Methods and Techniques

'Methods' is an umbrella term for anything the writer does on purpose to create meaning. Using the writer's name in your response will help you to think about the text as a conscious construct and will keep reminding you that Priestley purposely put the play together.

Dramatic Methods

There are a number of dramatic methods used in An Inspector Calls:

- **Dramatic structure**
- **Stagecraft**
- **Dramatic speech and language**



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Remember that the people in the text are conscious constructs, and so are the places being described, and the objects mentioned. Try to learn to notice deliberate things Priestley has done to communicate his ideas.

As you read the play, try to consider: 'why this, now'? For instance, Arthur Birling and Gerald are the first to speak in the play. Priestley may have chosen to have these two characters speak first in order to demonstrate the **patriarchal society** in which the play is set. This links to ideas about gender, equality and women's rights.

Dramatic structure

- An Inspector Calls follows a three-act structure which utilises many conventions of the detective genre, though some of these have been subverted:
 - The Inspector's speech does not provide any further revelations but simply repeats the moral message of the play
- Priestley structures the play using some dramatic devices from Greek tragedy, specifically the **Three Unities**, to create intensity and add an element of realism to the play:
 - Unity of Place: the play is set in one location
 - Unity of Time: the events are enacted in real-time
 - Unity of Action: the play has only one plot
- In the opening section of the play, Priestley has introduced the Birlings, established their social positions and gives some clues to the audience that this depiction of a happy family is not quite what it seems:



- Priestley prepares the audience for the characters' downfall
- Priestley has structured the play so that each act presents the audience with a number of gradual revelations, twists and surprises:
 - This is used to increase tension, create shock and/or add an element of surprise
- The play employs a **cyclical structure**, meaning the play ends where it began with a call from a police inspector:
 - This structure may indicate the characters will be made to repeat the events of the evening, with another opportunity of redemption for those characters who had refused to do so
 - It could also indicate that these characters are doomed to repeat the same mistakes as before and will fail to 'learn their lesson'
- In order to create suspense and shock, Priestley subverts the **denouement** of the play, by ending the play on a cliff-hanger with an unexpected twist:
 - The pattern of ending each act on a cliff-hanger will have been anticipated by the audience
 - However, the revelation that a girl has just died and a police inspector is on his way will have created a thrilling end to the play



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Understanding that a writer's methods also include stagecraft will enable you to write about Priestley's intentions on much more than just his language. Stagecraft includes:

- stage directions
- lighting
- the opening and ending of each scene and act
- how opening and closing lines are used
- dramatic irony, pace, as well as tension, suspense, surprise etc.

All of the above are deliberate choices made by Priestley, and so analysis of the above will improve your mark when exploring Priestley's methods in your essay.

Stagecraft

- The events of the play take place in the Birlings' dining room:
 - The single location of the play may signify the Birlings' relative isolation and detachment from the lower classes
 - It also adds an element of entrapment with the characters seeming unable to escape the Inspector's interrogation
- The intimate location also creates a contrast between the private and public spheres of the family:
 - The revelations exposed are at this point a private family matter, yet the impending visit of the police inspector at the end of the play will threaten to bring events into



- the public sphere
- The sharp sound effect of the doorbell when the Inspector arrives interrupts Arthur's speech about the importance of looking after oneself:
 - This forewarns the audience that his attitude is about to be challenged by the Inspector
- The lighting changes from 'pink and 'intimate' to suggest that the Inspector will place the characters under great scrutiny:
 - It may also indicate that the characters will begin to see events with greater clarity and in a new light
- Priestley uses cliff-hangers at the end of each act and begins each subsequent act where the previous one finished, which helps to maintain tension and pace
- Dramatic entrances and exits are used to create further suspense:
 - Sheila dramatically exits the stage when she is shown a photograph of Eva, showing she is distraught
- Priestley deliberately makes Eric a **peripheral** character for much of Acts I and II:
 - His repeated absences from the stage are used to delay Eric's confession until the dramatic final act
- Priestley deftly creates tension through a variety of methods:
 - The use of silence and pauses
 - Information about Eva and each of the character's involvement with her is only gradually revealed to the audience
- The use of photographs is used to great effect:
 - This assumes great importance at the end of the play when it is suspected he may have been showing a different photo to each character
- There is a strong contrast in the first half of the act compared to the second half in terms of both character and mood:
 - The first half illustrates the prosperity and smugness of the Birlings
 - The second half enables the audience to observe its destruction

Dramatic speech and language

It is important to consider the ways in which Priestley organises speech and language within the play. For example, the use of dialogue; the use of **monologues** and each character's specific use of language.



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Examiners are looking to reward what you say about the craft of the writer, not the number of technical terms referenced in your response. You do not need to display a

knowledge of literary and linguistic methods but are best advised to use simpler terminology (if any) to focus and build your argument.

Rather than highlighting literary and linguistic methods, you can instead focus on characterisation, structure and plot development. For example, the taking and then return of the engagement ring could be explored as a device used by Priestley to demonstrate the change in Sheila's character.



Dramatic Irony

- Priestley uses a great deal of **dramatic irony** throughout the first part of Act I
- Priestley deliberately uses **dramatic irony**, in part, to portray Arthur Birling as foolish when the character smugly boasts about the Titanic ship and the future prospects of peace and prosperity:
 - Arthur's optimism for the future is superficial and his predictions demonstrate his **complacency**
 - However, this suits him, for he has much to lose if things were to change
- Arthur Birling's speech also serves several dramatic purposes:
 - It presents a picture of a world safe for **Capitalism** to thrive
 - The speech also shows a man confident in his own judgement and totally self-satisfied
 - However, the audience is clearly aware of the sinking of the ship and the war which followed two years after the play was set
 - His pronouncements display him as a self-opinionated materialist whose confidence in his own judgement is a sham
- While understandably Arthur would not have been able to predict these future events, Priestley deliberately uses this device to further ridicule his character, by presenting Arthur as a character unworthy of sympathy

Moralistic Language

- The Inspector is the most important voice within the play:
 - He speaks "carefully" and "weightily" and controls the events and dialogue
 - As he is used to developing the plot, much of his speech is filled with questions and **imperatives** ("And be quiet for a moment and listen to me. ...This girl killed herself - and died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her. Remember that. Never forget it.")
- He delivers many lengthy **monologues**
- The Inspector is also dramatic in his speech:
 - Ideas relating to **social responsibility** are repeatedly interwoven throughout his dialogue
 - He continually uses the pronoun 'we' to highlight his message of **social responsibility**

Foreshadowing

Priestley uses **foreshadowing** on many different occasions in the first act of the play to hint to the audience what is about to happen:

- Sheila makes the comment to Gerald: "...except for all last summer when you never came near me, and I wondered what had happened to you":
 - This alludes to Gerald's affair with Eva/Daisy
- Sheila comments to Eric: "You're squiffy", accusing Eric of being drunk:
 - This alludes to the audience that Eric's drinking is a fairly constant feature of his behaviour
- Birling's comical remarks to the family: "we must behave ourselves, don't get into the police court or start a scandal":
 - This suggests a potential scandal is indeed about to be revealed



Examiner Tips and Tricks

In the exam, the question will involve the command word 'how' and will make reference to the author. This invites you to explore the craft of writing/the writer's methods and go beyond the 'what' of the text, to thinking about the text as a conscious construct, exploring what the writer has done on purpose to create meaning.



Your notes



Key Quotations

Remember the assessment objectives explicitly states that you should be able to “use textual references, *including* quotations”. This means summarising, paraphrasing, referencing single words and referencing plot events are all as valid as quotations in demonstrating that you understand the play. It is important that you remember that you can evidence your knowledge of the text in these two equally valid ways: both through references to it and direct quotations *from* it.

Overall, you should aim to secure a strong knowledge of the text, rather than rehearsed quotations, as this will enable you to respond to the question. It is the quality of your knowledge of the text which will enable you to select references effectively.

If you are going to revise quotations, the best way is to group them by character, or theme. Below you will find definitions and analysis of the best quotations, arranged by the following themes:

- Responsibility
- Capitalism versus Socialism
- Generational divide
- Guilt
- Class
- Gender

Responsibility

Responsibility is one of the most **prevalent** themes within the play and the role of the Inspector is to highlight that all actions have consequences. He demands that the other characters be accountable for their actions and that they take responsibility for others. This message is also intended for the wider audience and for society in general.



Arthur
Birling



“ a man has to make his own way — has to look after himself — and his family, too, of course, when he has one — and so long as he does that he won't come to much harm ”



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“... a man has to make his own way—has to look after himself—and his family, too, of course, when he has one—and so long as he does that he won't come to much harm” – Arthur Birling, Act I



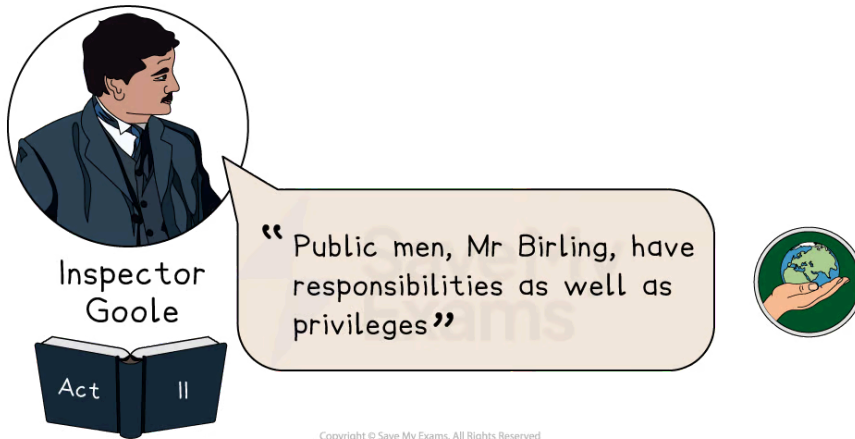
Your notes

Meaning and context

- At the beginning of Act I, Arthur delivers several lengthy monologues and this quote is spoken to Gerald and Eric just before the Inspector arrives

Analysis

- This quote reveals Arthur Birling's self-centredness and his narrow-minded view of society
- His vocabulary reveals his sense of individualism as he believes that everyone should be responsible for themselves and their family and is devoid of any sympathy for those less fortunate than himself
- “A man has to...” alludes to his **patriarchal** values, that men should have more power and privilege than women



“Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges” – Inspector Goole, Act II

Meaning and context

- This quote is delivered in Act II by the Inspector and is directed to Arthur Birling
- The Inspector argues that members of a society have duties and obligations toward each other's welfare and have a collective and **social responsibility** to take care of each other

Analysis

- As Arthur (and Sybil) hold prominent positions within society, the Inspector suggests they have an even greater duty of care toward others
- Birling's hypocritical views about personal responsibility are unfitting for a character who has held prominent public positions

- While the Inspector alludes to ideas of “responsibility”, Arthur also repeatedly uses this word though he interprets responsibility in a very different way



Inspector
Goole



“ We are members of one body.
We are responsible for each
other... if men will not learn
that lesson, then they will
be taught it in fire and blood
and anguish”



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“We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other... if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish” – Inspector Goole, Act III

Meaning and context

- This quote is from Inspector’s final speech in Act III to the Birlings before he exits the stage

Analysis

- This is the Inspector’s most significant and weighty statement in the play and Priestley warns of the dire consequences of evading **social responsibility**
- The language here is carefully composed and **moralistic** in tone
- The use of violent imagery and metaphor is powerful and suggests impending conflict
- Priestley warns the audience (and society) of the consequences of evading **social responsibility**

Capitalism versus Socialism

An Inspector Calls is a play that deals with ideas of fairness and inequality. Priestley used the play to argue that the economic system of **Capitalism** prevented equality and social justice and that another system, **Socialism**, which aims to share out wealth, would be fairer for all.



Arthur Birling



“Working together, for lower costs and higher prices”



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“Working together, for lower costs and higher prices” – Arthur Birling, Act I

Meaning and context

- This quote is from Act I and is directed toward Gerald Croft
- Arthur Birling is discussing his delight that one day Gerald’s family business will no longer be seen as rivals and that they may eventually join forces

Analysis

- Arthur’s priorities are those of business and he believes he needs to make as much profit as possible, regardless of the consequences
- He has no sense of responsibility or concern that his workers may need higher wages to live
- He believes his wages are fair and treats the pay strike at his factory with contempt for it threatens his profits



Sheila Birling



“but these girls aren’t cheap labour – they’re people”



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“but these girls aren’t cheap labour - they’re people” – Sheila Birling, Act I

Meaning and context



- This quote is from Act I and Sheila directs this quote to her father when he is discussing the workers in his factory
- Working-class women would have been one of the cheapest forms of labour available to factory owners

Analysis

- Although Sheila appears somewhat self-interested at the beginning of Act I, there are early indications (as evident in this quote) that she is a caring character
- This quote reveals her sensitive nature and her compassion and empathy for others less fortunate than herself
- The use of the word 'but' shows how she has interrupted and challenged her father's views here and as the play progresses, her dialogue increasingly demonstrates an assertiveness towards her parents

Generational divide

Priestley explores the idea of generational change in *An Inspector Calls*: younger characters are more open to social and economic change, and as a result are in conflict with their parent's generation, who are stuck in their ways.



Gerald
Croft



"Everything's all right now, Sheila"



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"Everything's all right now, Sheila" – Gerald Croft, Act III

Meaning and context

- This quote is from the end of Act III and Gerald directs this line to Sheila in the hope that she will take back his engagement ring

Analysis

- Offering the ring again to Sheila at the end of the play suggests Gerald has not learned anything from the Inspector



Your notes

- The use of the adverb 'now' shows that he believes that it is possible for everything to return to normal
- When Gerald realises there are no consequences for his behaviour, he no longer cares
- As Gerald falls between the younger and older generations, the audience will have hoped that he would have redeemed himself, but by the end of the play he reverts to his original stance



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Examiners love when students link ideas and themes in the given extract to the rest of the play. A fantastic way to do this is to include quotations from elsewhere in *An Inspector Calls* that show a connection, contrast, or character development.

However, it is equally valuable to include your own "paired quotations": two quotations that might not feature in the extract but show these connections, or changes. These paired quotations are marked below and are great when memorised together.

Guilt

For Priestley, guilt is the result of accepting the personal and social responsibility of one's actions. It is noteworthy that younger characters in *An Inspector Calls* express guilt, but not the older generation, suggesting that they are not willing to see their own flaws or those of the society they live in.

Paired Quotations:



Sheila Birling



“ I know I’m to blame – and I’m desperately sorry ”



Sheila Birling



“ I can’t stop thinking about it ”

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“I know I’m to blame - and I’m desperately sorry” – Sheila Birling, Act II

‘I can’t stop thinking about it’ – Sheila Birling, Act II

Meaning and context

- These quotes are from Act II, after Sheila’s confession in Act I

Analysis

- Sheila is portrayed as both sympathetic and courageous as she is the first character (apart from the Inspector) to empathise with Eva Smith’s **predicament**
- The personal pronoun ‘I’ is repeatedly used here to show that Sheila acknowledges her own personal guilt
- However, the Inspector insists that the guilt, as well as the responsibility, must be shared by all
- Sheila’s language becomes increasingly emotional and she continually displays genuine remorse for her actions



Sybil Birling



"I'm very sorry. But I think she had only herself to blame"



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"I'm very sorry. But I think she had only herself to blame" – Sybil Birling, Act II

Meaning and context

- This quote is from Act II and Sybil Birling directs it toward the Inspector

Analysis

- Sybil is portrayed as one of the least compassionate characters in the play
- She refuses to express any guilt for their treatment of Eva
- She continues to fail to see or acknowledge that she has done anything wrong
- The older generation is sharply contrasted with the younger generation, as they are able to demonstrate their capacity for change and accept their social responsibility

Class

Priestley uses the characters in An Inspector Calls to criticise the inequality and unfairness of the British class system and argues that the privilege of class blinds people to their immoral behaviour.



Sybil Birling



"Girls of that class"



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Meaning and context

- This quote is from Act II and Sybil Birling directs it toward the Inspector

Analysis

- Sybil makes incorrect assertions about the working classes and views them as morally and socially inferior
- She ignorantly links class with morality and cannot believe Eva, as a working-class girl, would refuse stolen money
- Sybil's **hypocritical** stance means she overlooks her own selfish and immoral actions and others belonging to her class

Gender

Priestley explores the inequality between male and female characters in An Inspector Calls to criticise his society's suppression of women's rights and the mistreatment of women in general.



Eric
Birling



"I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty"



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"I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty" - Eric Birling, Act III

Meaning and context

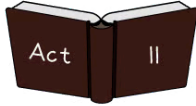
- This quote is from Act III and is said by Eric Birling during his confession

Analysis

- While an audience may view Eric as a sympathetic character, his treatment of Eva reveals how he has also abused her
- Eric hints at the potential for sexual violence and reveals Eva did not want him to enter her room until he became 'nasty' and issued a threat
- This quote exposes the vulnerability of women who can be easily exploited by wealthy men like Eric



Gerald
Croft



“ I did keep a girl last summer. I've admitted it. And I'm sorry Sheila”



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Your notes

“I did keep a girl last summer. I've admitted it. And I'm sorry Sheila.” – Gerald Croft, Act II

Meaning and context

- This quote is from Act II and is during Gerald's confession about his affair with Eva/Daisy

Analysis

- The three-part list in this quote suggests Gerald feels that it is all over and done with and he and Sheila can simply move on
- During his confession, Gerald he appears more concerned that his affair has been discovered, rather than having betrayed his fiancée
- Gerald's confession of having a mistress is overlooked by Arthur and Sybil



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Aim for quality, not quantity. There are no rules about the number of references you should make to the whole text, but making 2–3 thoughtful, detailed and considered references, closely focused on the question, will attain higher marks than, for example, 6–7 brief and undeveloped references.

An Inspector Calls: Character Quotations



Your notes

Exam questions usually focus on a theme, a character or a relationship between two or more characters. Examiners reward responses that track the development of characters or themes through the play.

When revising, try to consider quotes in terms of their dramatic effects — how the words are spoken, what attitudes or relationships are presented and why these ideas have been shown to the audience.

We've included the best An Inspector Calls quotes — with detailed analysis — to help you to revise and organised them by the following characters:

- Arthur Birling
- Sybil Birling
- Sheila Birling
- Eric Birling



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Examiners are looking for short quotations that support your points. You will be rewarded for finding patterns in a character's dialogue or for picking out particular words that the character repeats, so use short, key word quotes rather than long quotations.

We recommend that you examine techniques in the dialogue that are relevant to spoken language. Remember, this is a play!

This is why we've included a "key word or phrase" from every one of our longer quotations to help you to recall the most important parts of each quotation.

Arthur Birling



"But take my word for it, you youngsters — and I've learnt in the good hard school of experience — that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own" - Arthur Birling, Act 1



Your notes



Arthur Birling

Key word or phrase to

memorise: “you youngsters” and “hard school of experience”

What the quotation

means: Arthur tells Sheila and Eric that his experience outweighs education, and that they should heed his advice to look after one’s own family instead of everyone else’s

Theme:

Capitalism versus Socialism

- Arthur Birling is presented as patronising, and often wrong despite his certainty:
 - He belittles his adult children, calling them “you youngsters”
 - In this way, Priestley exposes Arthur as an arrogant parent
- Priestley portrays Arthur Birling’s strong disagreement with **socialist** philosophies:
 - His **capitalist** views are illustrated by his pride as a businessman
 - His description of a “good hard school of experience” challenges academics
 - He thinks “practical” businessmen “know” better than socialist writers like the “Bernard Shaws and H.G.Wellses”



“And this girl, Eva Smith, was one of them. She'd had a lot to say – far too much – so she had to go” - Arthur Birling, Act 1



Arthur Birling

Key word or phrase to

memorise: “a lot to say” and “had to go”

What the quotation means:

Arthur Birling explains to the Inspector that he had no choice but to dismiss Eva as she was part of the protestors and was too outspoken

Theme:

Guilt

- Contrasting characters highlight ideas about morality and guilt:
 - The Inspector and Eric support the right to protest for fair wages, however Arthur Birling feels no guilt
 - The **modal** “had to” implies that, as a good businessman, he had no choice
 - His words illustrate the lack of workers’ rights in Edwardian England
- Arthur Birling **ironically** says that he dismissed Eva for saying “far too much”:
 - This subtly mocks Mr Birling’s hypocrisy as he often talks at length

- Priestley presents Arthur Birling's argument as **farcical**



Your notes



“You must give me a list of those accounts. I've got to cover this up as soon as I can” - Arthur Birling, Act 3



Arthur Birling

Key word or phrase to memorise:
“cover this up”

What the quotation means: When Eric tells his father that he stole money from his office, Arthur Birling's first priority is ensure he is not exposed

Theme:
Responsibility

- Priestley presents Arthur Birling as unchanged despite the Inspector's visit:
 - He lacks personal responsibility and avoids accountability
- Arthur Birling insists on keeping things hidden:
 - Earlier in the play he expresses concern about the “press”
 - Rather than engage with his son's actions he chooses to cover it up
 - Priestley challenges **capitalism** by exposing their virtue as a **facade**

Sybil Birling



“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 had” - Sybil Birling, Act 1



Sybil Birling

Key word or phrase to memorise:
“important work” and “get used to that”

What the quotation means: Sybil Birling tells Sheila that she must not complain and suggests that Sheila should get used to Gerald focusing on business

Theme:
Gender

- Priestley illustrates the patriarchal system in 1912 through Sybil and Sheila Birling:



- Sheila’s mother perpetuates gender norms before **suffrage**
- She teaches Sheila that her husband is superior and to submit to him
- She implies that Gerald’s work is more important than his marriage
- In fact, Eric is the only one to protest:
 - He laughs and questions their interest in Sheila’s happiness



“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” - Sybil Birling, Act 2



Sybil Birling

Key word or phrase to memorise:
“gross impertinence” and “prejudiced”

What the quotation means:
Sybil Birling tells the Inspector that she judged Eva as intentionally disrespectful when she asked her charity for help with the pregnancy, and this is why she was refused

Theme:
Class


- Sybil Birling is presented as an arrogant and snobbish upper class woman:
 - Her proud determination makes her confidently admit her prejudice
 - She believes it disrespectful for Eva to have used the Birling name
- Priestley humiliates Sybil Birling for her hypocritical and indignant pride:
 - Her insistence that the father of the child should take responsibility is met with shock when she is told that the father is Eric



“I was the only one of you who didn't give in to him. And now I say we must discuss this business quietly and sensibly” - Sybil Birling, Act 3




Your notes

 <p>Sybil Birling</p>	Key word or phrase to memorise: “give in” and “quietly and sensibly”	What the quotation means: Sybil Birling expresses pride at not having changed as a result of the Inspector's visit, and wants to resume their ordered world	Theme: Responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Mrs Birling's pride at her inability to change illustrates her continued sense of superiority:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Her wish to return to calm implies that she prefers to ignore issues▪ The phrase, “give in” implies an admission of wrongdoing is an undignified submission▪ Priestley challenges conservatism via a depiction of the parents' refusal to change:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Sheila and Eric are emboldened by accepting new information▪ But the parents dismiss the Inspector in favour of traditional attitudes			

Sheila Birling



“It's just that 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” - Sheila Birling, Act 1

 <p>Sheila Birling</p>	Key word or phrase to memorise: “destroying herself so horribly” and “I've been so happy tonight”	What the quotation means: Sheila expresses horror at Eva's death, yet wishes the terrible news had not ruined her happy night	Theme: Responsibility
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- To begin, Priestley portrays Sheila as self-absorbed:
 - Her wish to be ignorant of tragic news portrays her as immature and selfish
- However, Sheila is presented as a naïve young girl who is not used to challenges:
 - Here, she expresses her shock
 - She conveys empathy through the emotive “destroyed” and “so horribly”
 - Priestley conveys how she has been protected from the evils of the world



“So that's what you think I'm really like. I'm glad I realised it in time, Gerald” - Sheila Birling, Act 2



Sheila Birling

Key word or phrase to memorise:
“realised it in time”

What the quotation means:
Gerald suggests that Sheila wants to hear the Inspector humiliate someone else, and she replies that she is glad she knows his real opinion, implying this may change their relationship


Theme:
Gender

- Priestley uses Sheila and Gerald’s relationship to illustrate gender imbalances:
 - The implication of Sheila’s words is that they do not know each other well
 - This alludes to their marriage as a business contract
 - Priestley highlights this earlier when Arthur describes how the marriage will bond the rival businesses
- Her reply **foreshadows** the end of their relationship (she refuses the ring at the end):
 - Priestley presents Sheila as less compliant than her mother
 - Nevertheless, her future, alone and without support, is uncertain



“The point is, you don't seem to have learnt anything.” - Sheila Birling, Act 3




 <p>Sheila Birling</p>	<p>Key word or phrase to memorise: “learnt anything”</p>	<p>What the quotation means: Sheila is disturbed that her parents have learned nothing from the Inspector’s visit</p>	<p>Theme: Generational divide</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Priestley presents a distinct difference between the Birling parents and children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eric is cynically aware of his parents’ weaknesses from the start ▪ Sheila undergoes a transformation and starts to challenge her parents ▪ Here, she is frustrated that her parents have chosen to deny all personal responsibility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sheila’s disappointment lies in their inability to learn, one of Priestley’s main critiques 			

Eric Birling



“What about war?” - Eric, Act 1

 <p>Eric Birling</p>	<p>Key word or phrase to memorise: “What about war?”</p>	<p>What the quotation means: Eric challenges his father on his lack of concern for the predictions of war</p>	<p>Theme: Generational divide</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eric is a contrasting character to Gerald: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Arthur Birling says that Gerald is “just the kind of son-in-law” he wanted ▪ Eric challenges his father and holds him to account, unlike Gerald ▪ Eric’s short question is a shy, early challenge to his father’s arrogance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ His question leads Arthur Birling to assert his superiority ▪ Dramatic irony presents Eric as wiser 			



“...do you remember what you said to Gerald and me after dinner, when you were feeling so pleased with yourself?” - Eric, Act 3



Eric Birling

Key word or phrase to memorise: “...do you remember what you said” and “pleased with yourself”

What the quotation means: Eric interrupts his father to remind him of what he said earlier, and enjoys announcing that his father was not so sure of himself when the Inspector quizzed him on his **capitalist** views

Theme:
Generational divide

- Priestley presents Eric as a cynical son:
 - He interrupts his father and laughs “bitterly” to hold him to account
- Eric’s description of his father being “so pleased” criticises his arrogance:
 - He reminds his father of his confident words prior to the Inspector’s visit



“and the child she'd have had too — my child — your own grandchild — you killed them both — damn you, damn you” - Eric, Act 3



Eric Birling

Key word or phrase to memorise: “your own grandchild”

What the quotation means: Eric is furious with his mother for refusing to help the pregnant Eva and accuses her of killing her own grandchild as well as Eva

Theme:
Responsibility

- Priestley portrays how Sybil Birling’s children turn against her when she is exposed:
 - Eric’s anger is conveyed in his unstable voice and curses
- The revelation that Eric is the father of Eva’s unborn baby is a dramatic turning point:
 - Eric’s explicit accusation highlights Sybil Birling’s callousness
 - She denies responsibility even when a distressed Eric tells her the truth

Sources

Priestley, J.B. (1992). *An Inspector Calls*. Heinemann.



Your notes