

An Inspector Calls Knowledge Organiser

The Birling family are celebrating Gerald and Sheila's engagement

Mr. Birling says that he sacked Eva Smith because she led a strike in his factory

Gerald looks shocked when the Inspector reveals that Eva changed her name to Daisy Renton

Gerald confesses to his affair with Daisy Renton before becoming upset and leaving

Sheila realises what the Inspector is doing and knows that Eric must also be involved

Eric enters and reveals his own relationship with Eva Smith. He becomes angry with his mother for not helping her

Gerald returns, having found that the Inspector may be a fake

Sheila and Eric are appalled by their parents' callous attitudes

Act One

The Inspector arrives and tells them that a young woman has killed herself

Sheila breaks down before confessing that he had Eva Smith sacked from her job at the department store, Milward's

Sheila is suspicious of Gerald's reaction. He admits that he knew Daisy Renton



Mrs. Birling is unapologetic when she says that she turned the pregnant Daisy away from her charity (because she referred to herself as Mrs. Birling)

Act Two



The Inspector tricks Mrs. Birling into saying that the unborn child's father should be dealt with severely



The Inspector tells that family that they all helped to kill Eva Smith, and then leaves

Act Three



Mr. and Mrs. Birling are relieved when they find that there is no Inspector Goole and there has been no suicide



Mr. Birling takes a call saying that there has been a suicide and there is an Inspector on the way

Mr.. Birling

A **'rather portentous'** (pompous) self-made man who has rose from the middle to upper classes. Arrogant, conceited, ruthless.

'For lower costs and higher prices' and 'I speak as a hard-headed business man' → A firm **capitalist**, he wants to use the Birling-Croft marriage to exploit people in order to make more money.

'You've a lot to learn yet' → He lectures Eric and Gerald on his conceited, but foolish, opinions on the world.

'community and all that nonsense' → No social responsibility.

'I've got to cover this up as soon as I can' → He cares more about his own reputation, and potential to make money.

'You're the one I blame for this' (to Eric) → And a terrible father!

'[Excitedly] A fake!' → He discovers that the Inspector is not real, and quickly forgets all the pain that the family has caused.

Mrs.. Birling

A **'rather cold woman'**. Old money: she was born into the upper classes. She shows the least remorse of all the family.

'I'm Mrs. Birling, y'know' → She is condescending towards the Inspector and attempts to use her status to intimidate him.

'this disgusting affair' → She presents herself as a moral person, but the audience soon learn otherwise.

'I've done nothing wrong' → She accepts no responsibility.

'they'll be as amused as we are' → And even thinks it's funny!

Sheila

Starts off as a carefree girl (**'very pleased with life and rather excited'**) before **progressing** into a more independent and responsible woman. She is the most **dynamic character**.

'Mummy sent me' → She acts like a subservient child in Act One.

'But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people' → Early signs of empathy and more progressive attitude towards the poor.

'I know I'm to blame' → She quickly shows remorse.

'You began to learn something. And now you've stopped' and 'It frightens me the way you talk' → She criticises her parents.

Eric

The **'half shy, half assertive'** and reckless young man. Like his older sister, he feels more responsibility than his parents.

'Why shouldn't they try for higher wages?' → Empathy for the lower classes

'But you didn't have to sack her'

'You killed her' → He blames his mother

'The money's not the important thing'

'I agree with Sheila...it frightens me'

Gerald Croft

An **'easy, well-bred man-about-town'** from an 'old money' family.

'You couldn't have done anything else' → He supports Mr. Birling

'I don't come into this suicide business' → Shows little empathy for Eva Smith, and is more worried about his reputation.

'Everything's alright now, Sheila [Holds up the ring]' → He easily forgets about the pain he's caused: he is **callous**.

Inspector Goole

The audience never learn whether he is a real policeman, or whether he is even a real person (*Goole = Ghoul?*). The fact is that it doesn't matter: Priestley constructs him as a **symbol of social responsibility** and a mechanism to expose the immorality of the upper classes. He is a **mouthpiece** and **advocate** for Priestley's own socialist viewpoint.

Priestley uses stage directions to make him intimidating: **'an impression of purposefulness, massiveness and solidity'** **'Plain, darkish suit'** → working class contrast to the Birlings. **'Cutting in. Massively'** → He takes control of the room. **'Stares hard'** → He is not intimidated by the class hierarchy.

He gives a clear message to the Birlings (and to the middle class audience):

'You helped to kill her. Remember that'

'If men will not learnt hat lesson then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish' → His final words appear to predict the bloodshed of two world wars. He appears

prescient, in contrast to Mr.. Birling's foolish predictions on war.

Eva Smith (or Daisy Renton)

Eve = start of life, innocence and promise

Common name = she represents many

A common, fragile but beautiful flower

The working class factory girl who may or may not be one person (the Inspector may not have showed the family the same photo). It's better to think of her as a **symbol of inequality**.

What the other characters say about her:

'Lonely, half starved, she was feeling desperate' The Inspector

'She'd had a lot to say – far too much – so she had to go' Mr. Birling

'I was sorry for her' and 'I didn't feel about her as she felt about me' Gerald

I didn't like her manner' Mrs. Birling's prejudice towards the working class

JB Priestley's context

He fought, and was wounded, in World War I. He was appalled by the poor decision making of upper class senior officers, and never forgave them for the deaths of his friends. He said **'I went into that war without any such prejudice, free of any class feeling'** but then could never rid himself of his bias against the upper classes. Eric and Gerald might be seen as representatives of the pompous and reckless 'officer class': they would have probably become officers in World War I, two years after the play is set.



He was an passionate socialist and member of the Labour party. He therefore believed that wealth should be evenly distributed in order to help the less fortunate. He uses Mr.. and Mrs.. Birling as **caricatures** (exaggerated versions) of the immoral rich in order to persuade the middle and upper class audience to become more socially responsible.

Priestley said that his work **'owes much to the influence of Chekhov'**. Chekhov was a communist writer in Russia, whose work contributed to a revolution (uprising) against the wealthy ruling classes.

Themes

Priestley highlighted many layers of **hierarchy** and **inequality**. As a young, working class woman, Eva Smith is constructed as a symbol of three different inequalities.

Gender



The mistreatment of women runs throughout play. Priestley exposes how upper class men use lower class women as **commodities** ('useful' things). Eva is first used as **'cheap labour'** by Birling, and then used for sex by Gerald and Eric (**'she was a good sport'**). Edna the parlourmaid is another example.

Even the Birling women are shown **contempt** by the men: Sheila has little say in her own engagement ring (**'Is it the one you wanted me to have?'**) and Mrs.. Birling seems content to be the traditional **subservient** wife (**'I think Sheila and I had better go into the drawing room'**).

Class and Status



Priestley admitted that he was **prejudiced** against the upper classes, following the behaviour of upper class officers during World War I. He used the play to depict the **classist arrogance** of some wealthy people.

Not only do the Birling's show disregard towards Eva Smith, but Mr.. and Mrs.. Birling show little respect towards the Inspector as he is working class. In turn, the Inspector undermines them when he **'cuts in'** and **'stares hard'**; he, like Priestley, has little time for upper class arrogance.

Age and Generations

Priestley portrays a clear difference between the old and the young Birlings. Mr.. and Mrs.. Birling grew up in Victorian times and possess many of the prejudices and **pretences** that Priestley despised. They feel they must put on act of morality and happiness through their lavish house and strict **protocol**. However, they are exposed as deeply immoral.

In contrast, the Birling children are more relaxed (they drink and swear) but are more **progressive** in their attitudes towards the working class. By Act Three, they are disgusted by their parents' immoral attitudes.

Priestley's use of stagecraft

Depiction of wealth and pretentiousness:

'Large suburban house'; the Birlings' dress (**'tails and white tie'**); luxury items (**'champagne', 'cigars', 'port'**)

The play is set in real time:

the audience watch the evening unfold in the same time that the characters would experience it. This allows the audience to feel the **urgency and shock**.



A **claustrophobic set**: the family are surrounded by three walls, with the audience peering into their private setting. This highlights their exposure and

Use of lighting: the lighting should be **'pink and intimate'** (safe, comfortable) and then **'brighter and harder'** once the Inspector enters, emphasising the intrusion into their safe environment. The brightness symbolises his exposure of the truth: the family are under the spotlight.

1912

Historical Context

1945

When the play is set

World War 1
1914-1918

Birling is presented as foolish when claims that 'nobody wants war', and that the Titanic is 'unsinkable'.... Priestley uses **dramatic irony** to bias the audience against Mr.. Birling.



World War 2
1939-1945

Post-war UK was economically poor and so the audience were more susceptible to Priestley's message on equality – and might have found Birling even more dislikeable. In fact, the UK voted in a socialist government (Labour Party) that year.



Play first performed