An Inspector Calls

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. B. PRIESTLEY

Priestley grew up in Manningham, England. His mother died when he was two years old and, at the age of sixteen, he left school to work as a junior clerk at a wool firm. He served and was injured in World War I and then went to study at Trinity College. Priestley hosted a popular radio show, "Postscripts," from the beginning of World War II until the show was cancelled in 1940 after members of the Conservative Party—including, it seems likely, Winston Churchill—complained about Priestley's broadcasting his left-wing politics. He continued nevertheless to have a political presence in the UK: he and a group of friends founded the 1941 Committee, which advocated for a national wages policy and for railways, mines, and docks to come under public control; in 1942, he co-founded the Common Wealth Party, which sought to advance the causes of "Common Ownership," "Vital Democracy" and "Morality in Politics." Priestley wrote novels, plays, and newspaper articles throughout his life, including *An Inspector Calls* in 1945. He was married three times.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play takes place right before the First World War, during a moment of rising international tensions and significant industrial expansion. The industrial expansion resulted in a gain in influence and wealth for industrialists of the period (like Mr. Birling). The early decades of the 20th century also marked the end of the Victorian era, and the consequent loosening of the formerly rigid class system; the Labour Party, founded in 1900, was beginning to gain leverage and to become increasingly committed to socialist ideas. Socialism and Communism were also on an upswing in many places around the world. The Russian Revolution, in which Communists overthrew the Czar of Russia, began in 1917.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Insofar as the text is a political allegory of class tensions, it is reminiscent of *Animal Farm*, which also explores political conflict and the rise of Communism in a small representative narrative (though Animal Farm was strongly anti-Communist, Orwell was himself a Socialist). In its suspense and the structuring of its narrative around a scaffolding of revelations and reveals of true identity, it resembles many of Alfred Hitchock's 20th century thriller films, including *Vertigo*, *To Catch a Thief*, and *North by Northwest*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *An Inspector Calls*
- **When Written:** 1945
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1945 (play premiered in Soviet Union)
- **Literary Period:** mid-20th century British drama, social realism
- **Genre:** Mystery drama
- **Setting:** 1912; a comfortable home in Brumley, England
- **Climax:** Gerald returns to the Birling home after Goole has left, to report that the Inspector wasn't actually a real inspector, and to hypothesize that the whole thing was a hoax—that there was no single girl that all of the Birlings had offended, and no suicide that they precipitated.

EXTRA CREDIT

Ghoulish Goole. Many interpretations of the text consider the Inspector's ghostly name to be symbolic of the mystery that surrounds his character.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins in a nice dining room, with the prosperous Birling family joyously celebrating the engagement of their daughter, Sheila, to Gerald Croft. Everybody is in good spirits. Mr. Birling gives a toast, and Gerald gives Sheila her engagement ring, which she puts on her finger very excitedly. Mr. Birling encourages Gerald and Sheila to ignore the pessimistic "silly talk" going around these days, and claims that fear of an inevitable war is "fiddlesticks."

A Police Inspector arrives, and reports that he is investigating the suicide of a young woman who recently swallowed disinfectant and died in the Infirmary. When he mentions that her name was **Eva Smith**, Mr. Birling identifies that she used to work at his factory, before he forced her to leave when she became the ring- leader of a strike for higher wages.

Sheila returns to the room, and is very upset to hear about the girl's tragic suicide. The Inspector goes on to tell the family that Eva Smith, after Birling put her out, was hired at a shop—Milward's—but was fired on the basis of a customer's complaint. When the Inspector shows Sheila a picture of the girl, she begins to sob and runs out of the room. Upon re-entering, Sheila explains that, out of jealousy and in a bad temper, she had told the manager of Milward's to fire the girl after seeing her smile at a salesgirl when Sheila tried on something unflattering.

The Inspector then recounts that, after Milward's, the girl changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald appears startled by this. When they are left alone for a moment, Sheila discovers that Gerald had been having an affair with Daisy Renton all of the previous summer. When the Inspector returns, Gerald confesses to his acquaintance with Daisy Renton— he met her at the Palace Music Hall, and ended up inviting her to live in a set of rooms that belonged to a friend of his who was temporarily away. Gerald excuses himself to take a walk, and Sheila returns his engagement ring.

The Inspector now shows Mrs. Birling the girl's photograph. The front door slams, and Mr. Birling discovers that his son, Eric, has stormed out of the house. Though she resists, Mrs. Birling finally admits that she had used her influence some weeks previous to deny the pictured girl aid from the Women's Charity Organization, as she was prejudiced against the girl's case. The Inspector contributes the additional fact that the girl was pregnant when she committed suicide, and that it was due to her pregnancy that she was asking the Charity Organization for help. Mrs. Birling confirms that the child's father had given the girl money but that the girl refused it because she found out it was stolen. Mrs. Birling claims that the only people responsible for the girl's downfall and suicide are the girl herself and the man that got her pregnant.

Eric re-enters the house, and admits to impregnating the girl and offering her stolen money. He divulges that he stole the money from his father's office.

The Inspector leaves the Birlings brooding and guilty. Gerald returns to the room and announces that as he was walking he met a policeman and discovered that the supposed Inspector wasn't really an inspector after all, and proposes his further hypotheses that there was no single girl that all of the Birlings offended, and no suicide that the Birlings precipitated. He and Mr. Birling prove these hypotheses to be correct after calls to the Police Department and to the Infirmary. The Birling parents celebrate these discoveries, as they feel they have escaped both scandal and guilt, but Sheila and Eric remain affected by the proceedings and cannot forget what's been revealed.

The telephone rings. After Mr. Birling hangs up, he reports that it was the police, informing him that a girl just died on her way to the infirmary after swallowing some disinfectant, and that a Police Inspector is on his way to ask some questions. The Birlings stare "guiltily and dumbfounded." As Sheila rises to stand, the curtain falls slowly.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Arthur Birling – Arthur Birling is introduced as a "fairly prosperous" manufacturer and a family man with a wife and two children, Sheila and Eric. He is large-bodied and middle aged, with easy manners and provincial speech. Birling is identified by the Inspector as the initiator of **Eva Smith**'s downfall: he refused her request for a raise in his factory and forced her to find work elsewhere. He is portrayed throughout the play as a fierce capitalist, who cares only for the prosperity of his own company—even at the sacrifice of his laborers' well-being—and for the prospect of ever greater success. He further seems to care more for success than for his own children, as people. When, at the end of the play, the Birlings discover that the Inspector was a fraud and no suicide has taken place, Mr. Birling is triumphant and relieved that the revelations will not precipitate a social scandal. He is resistant to any lesson that might be gleaned from the Inspector's interrogation, and remains unchanged by it.

Mrs. Birling — Mrs. Birling is described as being "cold" and Mr. Birling's "social superior." Throughout the questioning process, she resists the Inspector's inquiries and reminds him, to Sheila's frustration, of the Birlings' high social status. Despite her reluctance, Mrs. Birling finally admits to having used her influence in the Women's Charity Organization to deny aid for **Eva Smith** because she was prejudiced against her manner and offended by the girl's falsely assuming the name "Mrs. Birling." After the revelations at the end of the play that the whole inspection was a hoax, Mrs. Birling prides herself on having resisted the Inspector more than the rest of her family. And, like her husband, she feels completely relieved of any responsibility she had felt previously.

Sheila — The daughter of Mr. Birling and Mrs. Birling, **Sheila** is a young woman in her early twenties who is generally excited about life and is engaged to Gerald Croft. She is most upset by the news of the girl's suicide, and expresses the most remorse among the Birling's for her involvement in it. Throughout the play, she warns her mother against presumptuously putting up walls between themselves and the less fortunate girl, and, in the end, insists that it remains just as significant that the Birlings did what they confessed to doing despite the absence of a social scandal and legal consequence, or even any suicide.

Gerald Croft — Gerald is engaged to Sheila. During the inspection, Gerald admits to having had an affair with the girl in question—at the time, Daisy Renton—which prompts Sheila to return his engagement ring. Gerald comes out seeming the least guilty of all for the girl's suicide. In the end, it is he who realizes that the whole inspection, and all of its premises, was a hoax. Nonetheless, he also seems less affected by the Inspector's casting of blame than Sheila and Eric, and Sheila denies his offer to renew their engagement.

Eric — Eric is the son of the family. He disapproves of his father's decision to deny Eva Smith's request for higher wages, and becomes drunk and upset throughout the course of the evening, which prompts Sheila to expose him as a heavy-drinker, unbeknownst to his parents. In the middle of the play, Eric storms out of the house. When Eric returns, he admits to

being exactly the person—Eva Smith's impregnator—that his mother had most blamed for the girl's suicide, and to having stolen money from his father. His parents are ashamed of him and continue to remind him what he's done; but he is likewise ashamed of them for overlooking the true significance of the bad deeds that they all have been exposed as having committed. He joins Sheila in her judgment of their parents' ignorance and in her regard for the significance of the facts at hand.

Inspector Goole — Goole is allegedly a police officer who has come to investigate the potential involvement of the Birlings in the recent suicide of a girl by the name of **Eva Smith**. Throughout the play, he conducts himself in a manner unsuitable for a police inspector: he takes moral stances throughout his interrogation, usually in support of labor rights, and in the end he universalizes **Eva Smith**'s case to the cases of many such disadvantaged lower class citizens throughout the country. In the end of the play, it turns that he is not an Inspector after all, and is suspected instead to be a person from the town with socialist tendencies and a grudge against Mr. Birling. The final revelation—the call from the infirmary that there really was a suicide—renews suspicion about the Inspector's identity, as it makes it seem that Inspector Goole did somehow know what was going to happen, and was not merely seeking to make the Birlings cognizant of their moral wrongs.

Eva Smith — Eva Smith is an employee at Birling's factory who leads a group of workers in a strike for higher wages. When their request is denied, she is forced to leave the factory. The Inspector alleges that Eva Smith repeatedly changed her name, and is the same girl that Sheila requested be fired, that Mrs. Birling denied aid, and that Gerald and Eric had affairs with. As Gerald points out, however, there is no evidence that this is true. As such, Eva Smith becomes not just a character in the play, but also a symbol within the play.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Daisy Renton — Daisy Renton is the girl that Gerald Croft has an affair with and sets up in his friend's empty set of rooms.

Sir George Croft — Sir George Croft is Gerald's father, and the owner of Crofts Limited, a larger competitor with Birling's business though older and more successful.

Chief Constable — A friend of Mr. Birling's, who leads the police department. Birling seems to believe that his friendship with the Chief Inspector protects him from any damage regarding the Inspector's revelations about Eva Smith.

Joe Meggarty — An alderman whom the Birling parents deem respectable, before Sheila and Gerald inform them that he has a reputation as a womanizer. Gerald claims that he initially went over to Daisy Renton in order to save her from Meggarty's harassment.

Edna – The Birling family's maid, who cleans, pours drinks, and announces guests, but otherwise has little role in the play.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WEALTH, POWER, AND INFLUENCE

The Birlings are a family of wealth and power, who take pride in their high social position. Mr. Birling is a successful businessman, and the family inhabits a nice home with a maid (and likely other servants). The play begins with the family celebrating and feeling generally pleased with themselves and their fortunate circumstance. Throughout the Inspector's investigation, however, it comes out that several of the Birlings have used their power and influence immorally, in disempowering and worsening the position of a girl from a lower class: Mr. Birling used his high professional position to force Eva Smith out of his factory when she led a faction of workers in demanding a raise; Sheila, in a bad temper, used her social status and her family's reputation to have the girl fired from Milward's; Mrs. Birling used her influence in the Women's Charity Organization to deny the girl monetary aid. Both Sheila and Mrs. Birling acted upon petty motivations in injuring the girl; Mr. Birling acted upon selfish, capitalist motivations.

Throughout the play, as these acts are revealed, the Birlings' social status becomes a point of conflict amongst members of the family, as the children grow ashamed of their family's ability to use their influence immorally and the parents remain proud of their social and economic position and do not understand their children's concern.

The play demonstrates the corruption implicit within a capitalist economy in which wealth and influence are concentrated in a small portion of the population. The few wealthy people at the top maintain the social hierarchy in order to retain their high position, and have the power, on a petty whim, to push the powerless even further down the ladder. And, in the conflict at the end of the play between the younger and older members of the Birlings, it becomes clear that as the powerful settle into their power, they become blind to the possibility that they may be acting immorally, seeing themselves as naturally deserving of their positions and therefore of their actions as being natural and right (as opposed to selfish attempts to maintain the status quo that puts them at the top).

BLAME AND RESPONSIBILITY

The question asked throughout the play is: who is responsible for the suicide of **Eva Smith**? Who is to blame? The arc of the play follows the gradual spreading of responsibility, from Mr. Birling, to Mr. Birling and Sheila, to Mr. Birling and Sheila and Gerald, and so on and so forth. Each of the characters has different opinions about which of them is most responsible for the girl's suicide. Mrs. Birling, most extremely, ends up blaming her own son, by suggesting that the person most responsible is the man that impregnated the girl, before realizing that the person in question is Eric.

In the end, the Inspector universalizes the shared responsibility that the Birlings feel for the girl's death, into a plea for something like Socialism: "We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish." The lesson of the Inspector, and of the play at large, is that our actions have an influence beyond themselves and therefore that we are *already* responsible for each other so long as we are responsible for ourselves and our own actions. The play contends that Socialism simply recognizes and builds upon this truth, in de-privatizing wealth and power and thus building an economy and politics on the foundation of shared responsibility.

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE

The Inspector, and the play at large, challenges the "privacy" of the private sphere, by revealing that actions that the family may have conceived of as private and personal really have an effect beyond themselves and their family. For example, Sheila's revelation that Eric drinks more than his parents had thought—"he's been steadily drinking too much for the last two years"— seems like private information but turns out to have a greater effect, insofar as it helps to identify (in the Inspector's alleged story) Eric as the father of the girl's child.

In addition, what begins as an inspection of truths that had real consequence on someone outside of the immediate Birling family, ends up also uncovering truths and drama that pertain more privately to the family. For example, the Inspector's discovery of Gerald's relationship with Daisy Renton results in the severing of his engagement to Sheila. The inspector has to remind the family to keep their private drama out of his investigation: "There'll be plenty of time, when I've gone, for you all to adjust your family relationships."

This blurring of the line between the public and the private reflects the play's interest in class politics, in the conflict between those who want to maintain the privatization of wealth and production, and those who desire the communalization of the same. The Socialist perspective—as represented by the Inspector (and by J.B. Priestley)—challenges and seeks to erase the line between public and private, by de-privatizing the economy, but also by making those who are privileged to see that what they consider "private", by nature of their privilege, has an outside influence on the world from which they are insulated. In other words, the Inspector argues not just for a de-privatized economy but a de-privatized sensibility, a recognition that what seems private to the privileged are in fact strands of a public web of relationships and the moral obligations such relationships create.

CLASS POLITICS

Mr. Birling describes the politics of the day as revolving around "Capital versus Labor agitations." Mr. Birling is a representative Capitalist, who cares only about his company's profit. He speaks of himself as "a hard-headed, practical man of business," and looks forward to the prospect of being knighted. The girls who lead a worker's strike in his factor, meanwhile, represent the Labor side of the conflict in trying to improve the rights and wages of laborers and the lower classes.

Birling loosely articulates his understanding of the agitations in his speech to Eric and Gerald: "a man has to make his own way—has to look after himself...and so long as he does that he won't come to much harm... But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive—a man has to mind his own business and look after himself." The Inspector speaks the voice of Socialism, of the Labor side of the conflict; he seeks to make the Birlings realize the implicit corruption of Capitalism by emphasizing how easy it was for them to cause pain for the lower class without even realizing at the time the significance of their own actions.

MORALITY AND LEGALITY

The play interrogates the way that people construct, construe, and apply their moral values, especially in relation to legality and illegality. Do actions have moral consequence in themselves, or in relation to their effects on other people; or can we only measure morality in relation to legal rulings? When the legal consequences of the truths revealed by the Inspector's questioning have been removed (through the revelation that the Inspector is not, in fact, an inspector), there remains a question about what significance and moral weight the uncovered truths hold. The status of their significance changes at each level of revelation: that the Inspector wasn't an inspector, that the girl wasn't all the same girl, that the girl didn't commit suicide.

After the discovery that the Inspector wasn't an inspector, Eric declares, "the fact remains that I did what I did. And Mother did

what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her. It's still the same rotten story whether it's been told to a police inspector or to somebody else." After the discovery that there was no suicide, Mr. Birling declares, "But the whole thing's different now... And the artful devil knew all the time nobody had died and the whole story was bunkum"; at the same time, Sheila insists, "Everything we said had happened really had happened. If it didn't end tragically, then that's lucky for us. But it might have done." The final turn—the police's phone call reporting a suicide—confirms Sheila's view that, given the facts revealed by the Inspector, it was only a matter of luck that something tragic didn't ensue that time—as something tragic did, in fact, ensue shortly after.

While Mr. and Mrs. Birling feel wholly relieved of their guilt by the final revelation, Sheila and Eric insist at each level that the truths uncovered by the Inspector about the family's actions still remain significant and entail moral consequences. The play's conclusion suggests the playwright's sympathy with Sheila and Eric's view.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

EVA SMITH

The symbol of **Eva Smith** is the character that the Inspector constructs by explaining that she has changed her name multiple times, was injured by each of the Birlings in turn, and consequently commits suicide. In fact, the Inspector seems to have created her as an amalgam of several women, each of them separately harmed by the different Birlings. As a combination of many working class women affected by the Birlings, Eva Smith represents the working class, the Labor side of the Labor vs. Capital agitations, who get squashed by the powerful upper class, such as the Birlings.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dramatists Play Service, Inc. edition of *An Inspector Calls* published in 1998.

Act 1 Quotes

❝ There's a good deal of silly talk about these days—but—and I speak as a hard-headed business man, who has to take risks and know what he's about—I say, you can ignore all this silly pessimistic talk. When you marry, you'll be marrying at a very good time.

Related Characters: Arthur Birling (speaker), Sheila, Gerald Croft

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arthur Birling, the patriarch of the Birling family, gives a toast in which he welcomes Gerald Croft into the family. (The speech is important because it provides all the expository information we need for the moment--Sheila and Gerald are getting engaged.) Birling is described as a successful businessman, and his tone is casual yet emotional as he congratulates his daughter and future son-in-law.

There are a couple things to notice here. First, Arthur defines himself as a "hard-headed business man," even in the middle of his engagement toast. Indeed, Arthur is so focused on business and the capitalistic mindset that he thinks of his daughter's marriage in business terms--he later describes it as a "merger" between the Birling and the Croft family businesses. Furthermore, Birling claims that now is the "best of times" for marriage. He ignores the harsh realities of the time: as we know, World War I is about to begin. Birling's ignorance of the real world makes him seem small-minded and petty; by the same token, it allows the audience, with the benefit of hindsight, to feel a little superior to Birling and Birling's family--the Birlings don't know what's about to happen to their country, but we do.

❝ I tell you, by that time you'll be living in a world that'll have forgotten all these Capital versus Labor agitations and all these silly little war scares. There'll be peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere.

Related Characters: Arthur Birling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

As Arthur Birling proceeds with his toast, it becomes clearer and clearer that he's a businessman first and a father second. Birling's advice to his daughter Sheila and his new son-in-law, Gerald, could be interpreted as fatherly and kind--he's telling them not to listen to cynics and doubters and focus on their own happiness. And yet Birling's speech isn't really about marriage at all: the "happy future" he

mentions is a future in which capitalism has triumphed over its opponents, and businessmen like Birling have achieved massive success.

Birling's lofty vision of the future makes it clear that he defines himself in terms of his wealth and success as a businessman. And yet for all his emphasis on the future, Birling is clearly *wrong*--as we know very well, World War I is about to begin (not exactly a "silly little war scare"...), and class revolutions continue to take place around the world. So Birling tries to give the impression of being wise and fatherly, but when viewed from an outsider's perspective, he's greedy, selfish, and short-sighted.

> 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. But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive.

Related Characters: Arthur Birling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

During the period when the play is set, there was a lively debate in England over the future of the English economy. Should a small group of wealthy capitalists be allowed to continue owning their own factories and facilities, leaving their workers to toil for tiny wages? Or should the wealth be redistributed, so that society as whole could benefit from industrialization? Mr. Birling clearly takes the former point of view: as a successful businessmen and capitalist, he looks out for his own interests, not those of his workers.

Birling's speech is important because although he frames it in strictly economic terms, we'll come to see that it has serious moral implications. Birling thinks that he can go through life never caring about other people; his philosophy is that everybody should "take care of themselves," contrary to what socialist "cranks" believe. The play will show the moral limitations of such a philosophy--Birling will cause enormous misery to other people, then turn his back on them.

> It's the way I like to go to work. One person and one line of inquiry at a time. Otherwise, there's a muddle.

Related Characters: Inspector Goole (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Inspector Goole has now come to the Birling home and begun his inquiry. Goole begins by speaking to Mr. Birling about his relationship with Eva Smith, a former employee of his. Birling examines a photograph that Goole gives him, but when Birling's relatives want to look at the photograph as well, Goole prevents them from doing so. He explains that he wants to work with Birling, then proceed to the other family members.

Goole's explanation isn't entirely convincing, but it's designed to justify the slow, theatrical structure of the play itself. One by one, Goole will move from Mr. Birling to Sheila to Gerald, etc.--with each new character, we will learn more about the moral limitations of the Birling family. Of course, Goole's decision to show the photograph to only one person at a time is also practical--as we'll see, Goole is fooling the Birling family into thinking that they've wronged the same person; if Goole were to show the same photograph to two people, his illusion would be dispelled.

> If we are all responsible for everything that happened to everybody we'd had anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn't it?

Related Characters: Arthur Birling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The Inspector continues to talk about Eva Smith with Arthur Birling. Birling admits that he knew Eva Smith when she worked for him, but angrily denies that he had anything to do with her death. Birling doesn't deny that he had a major influence on the course of her life; his point is that people can't be held accountable for every single person they influence.

The key word in this passage is "awkward." Birling isn't denying that he influenced Smith, or even that he ruined her life--his point is simply that acknowledging his own guilt would be publicly and privately embarrassing to him. Birling is shown to be obsessed with his social status; thus, he

conceals (even to himself) the true nature of his crimes. Birling's statement could be considered the "capitalist's alibi"--unchecked capitalism, we can see, is an ideology that ruins lives and drives people to immoral actions. And yet the powerful businessmen who cause suffering to other people claim deniability; they're not "truly" responsible for their fired employees.

> Birling: It's a free country, I told them.
> Eric: It isn't if you can't go and work somewhere else.

Related Characters: Arthur Birling, Eric (speaker), Eva Smith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Arthur Birling proceeds to tell the Inspector more about his relationship with Eva Smith. Smith, we learn, was something of a union organizer; she wanted to mobilize the people who worked for Birling to ensure that they'd get better wages and fairer hours. When Smith demanded that Birling pay his employees more, Birling responded in classic capitalist fashion: he told Birling that she was "free" to work somewhere else if she didn't like her wages.

Birling's response to Eva Smith illustrates the flaws in the free market. It's all very well for someone like Birling to preach sanctimoniously about freedom to run one's own business--but at the end of the day, his "philosophy" is just an excuse for his own greediness. As Eric points out, a country isn't truly free if people like Eva can't find a good place to work. Birling's smug definition of freedom, then, is sorely lacking in substance.

> I can't help thinking about this girl—destroying herself so horribly—and I've been so happy tonight.

Related Characters: Sheila (speaker), Eva Smith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, made by Sheila, in Act I. Sheila is far more sympathetic about Eva Smith's fate than her father is. Unlike Arthur, Sheila believes that workers should be treated well and paid fairly. Moreover, Sheila feels guilty about being so happy with her own life, at a time when millions of people like Eva Smith are suffering.

However, while Sheila's sympathy for Eva seems sincere, she's not necessarily a better person than her father is. In fact, the quote subtly suggests that Sheila's sympathy for Eva at this point is a kind of "bad faith" -- the state of mind in which one says one thing and yet believes another, perhaps even lying to oneself in the process. First, Sheila displays a level of condescension toward Eva by referring to her as "this girl." Second, while Sheila pities Eva, she also describes Eva's situation as "destroying herself so horribly," which implies that despite her pity Sheila considers Eva's fate to be at least to some extent her own fault. Even Sheila's seeming shame at feeling so happy herself while Eva was suffering comes across as somewhat callous, as Sheila focuses on her own shame rather than Eva's more dreadful suffering. So while Sheila makes a show of supporting Eva -- and may even believe that she *does* support Eva -- she never actually does anything about it. She's all talk. And, ultimately, Sheila's show of sympathy for Eva seems more a way for Sheila to make *herself* feel better rather than anything meant to actually help Eva.

> Inspector: There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence, Miss Birling, in every city and big town in this country.
> Sheila: But these girls aren't cheap labor. They're *people*.

Related Characters: Sheila, Inspector Goole (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Sheila continues to voice her support for Eva Smith and Eva's fellow workers. Unlike her father, who considers all his workers mere "objects," to be manipulated and changed as he sees fit, Sheila thinks that workers are human beings, too.

The passage is significant because Inspector Goole hints at the scale of the tragedy involved in Eva's suicide. Eva is just one woman, but she's indicative of a much broader trend in European society. In a country where there's lots of money concentrated in a few people's pockets, millions like Eva are forced to live hard lives, sometimes even ending with suicide. Although the play focuses on only one such worker, Goole makes it clear that "Eva Smith" could refer to any number of different people--a point that will come back to haunt the Birling family in Act III of the play.

Gerald: We're respectable citizens and not dangerous criminals.
Inspector: Sometimes there isn't as much difference as you think.

Related Characters: Gerald Croft, Inspector Goole (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gerald Croft angrily tells Inspector Goole that Goole shouldn't be harrassing the Birling family. He claims that the Birlings are a respectable group--they're not criminals. Goole coolly replies that criminality and respectability aren't so different, deep down. Goole's statement could serve as a kind of thesis statement for the play itself: although the Birlings, and plenty of other families like them, are seen as normal and respectable in their capitalistic society, their money and good manners conceal a secret deviousness and vindictiveness that causes misery to other people, usually without punishment. It seems to be Goole's goal to bring some punishment, or at least self-awareness, to the Birlings.

The passage further suggests the link between capitalism and misery. Birling professes to be a good man and a good businessmen, and yet he only ascends to become wealthy by treating his workers horribly. Perhaps it's impossible to be a great businessman and a moral human being at the same time: businessmen are rewarded for ignoring their workers' feelings and needs.

Act 2 Quotes

Miss Birling has just been made to understand what she did to this girl. She feels responsible. And if she leaves us now, and doesn't hear any more, then she'll feel she's entirely to blame, she'll be alone with her responsibility.

Related Characters: Inspector Goole (speaker), Sheila, Eva Smith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gerald tries to get Sheila, hisfiancé, to leave the room. Gerald pretends that he's doing so in order to "spare" Sheila from tragic information. But it's perfectly obvious that he's trying to get Sheila out of earshot so that she doesn't hear anything more about his marital infidelities. Inspector Goole calmly replies that the "right" thing to do would be to keep Sheila in the room--if she were to leave now, she'd get the wrong idea and assume that she was solely responsible for a woman's death.

This is one of the key passages in the play, because it says a lot about the Inspector's motives. In one sense, Inspector Goole seems to be trying to cause the Birling family as much pain as possible--although he frames his response to Gerald in moral terms, his real motive is punishment, not kindness. And yet Goole *does* make a fair point: the Birlings are all equally guilty of Eva Smith's death (it's not just Sheila's fault). By now, it's pretty clear that Goole already knows that the other Birlings played a part in Eva's suicide--the only remaining mystery is how. By staying in the room, Sheila mitigates her sense of guilt, but also comes to see how immoral her supposedly respectable family really is.

If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt.

Related Characters: Inspector Goole (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Inspector Goole isn't like any police officer the Birlings have ever seen before (an early sign that he's not, in fact, a police

officer at all!). He's fond of theorizing and moralizing at the most inappropriate times. Here, he suggests that as the Birling family becomes increasingly aware of its role in Eva Smith's suicide, they'll have to share their guilt. In a way, sharing guilt is what families are meant to do: instead of punishing just one person with the blame, the family dilutes blame by spreading it around and supporting each other.

Goole's statement raises another important question--who is truly responsible for Eva Smith's suicide? By now, it's pretty clear that no single person pushed Eva to suicide; instead, everybody was a little bit responsible, a fact that allows for convincing deniability. (For example, Arthur Birling claims that many other factors must have caused Eva's suicide.) It's as if the Birling family itself (and unrestricted capitalism, which it represents) is one single, evil character--a character that clearly caused Eva's death.

> You know, of course, that my husband was Lord Mayor only two years ago and that he's still a magistrate?

Related Characters: Mrs. Birling (speaker), Arthur Birling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mrs. Birling's hypocrisy is clear. She insists that Inspector Goole should leave as soon as possible, sparing the family any further consternation. Her reasons for insisting so are fascinating: she claims that good, respectable people like her family members have nothing of substance to learn from the life of a poor girl like Eva Smith. Even worse, Mrs. Birling cites the fact that her husband used to be a Lord Mayor, and still works as a magistrate. Such information, we're left to assume, is supposed to mean that Mr. Birling is above all moral suspicion. High-ranking people can't possibly be bad!

The statement could also be interpreted as an implied threat: it's as if Mrs. Birling is reminding Inspector Goole that he's playing with fire by inquiring into the lives of powerful people. If Goole isn't careful, Arthur Birling could ruin Goole's entire career. Mrs. Birling is one of the most openly hypocritical characters in the play; simultaneously threatening her guest to close the investigation *and* claiming that her husband is above all suspicion.

> I don't dislike you as I did half an hour ago, Gerald. In fact, in some odd way, I rather respect you more than I've ever done before.

Related Characters: Sheila (speaker), Gerald Croft

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sheila tells Gerald that they're not going to get married; she returns his engagement ring. Sheila's explanation for not wanting to marry Gerald is simple enough: Gerald has had an affair with another woman, and lied about it. The fact that Gerald didn't tell Sheila about his affair is bad enough--but he also tried to keep her from finding out about it when Inspector Goole called.

The passage is interesting because Sheila doesn't seem particularly angry with Gerald anymore. In a way, she claims, she respects him more than she ever has before: they've finally been forced to be honest with each other. The passage raises an interesting point--perhaps Goole's visit to the Birlings isn't as destructive as it seemed. Goole is dismantling the Birling's pretensions of goodness, but he's *also* allowing them to live more honest lives. Sheila, perhaps the most moral of the Birlings, seems to genuinely want to be an honest, good person, and so allows these public revelations to influence her private life and morality.

> We've no excuse now for putting on airs.

Related Characters: Sheila (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Inspector Goole now turns to Mrs. Birling. Mrs. Birling continues her claims that she shouldn't have to sit through Inspector Goole's tiresome investigation: she's from a good family, and therefore can't be guilty of any crimes. And yet Sheila interjects, telling her mother that it's time to stop pretending to be good and "putting on airs." The Birlings are a wealthy family, it's true, but just because they're wealthy doesn't mean they're inherently good; if anything, their wealth has allowed them to commit more crimes and get away with them scot-free.

Sheila isn't an entirely "good" character, but she seems to differ from her family in wanting to make genuine moral progress. Similarly, she's tired of her parents for pretending to be good at all times, simply because of their wealth. It seems perfectly obvious to Sheila that wealthy people shouldn't be held immune from all guilt or punishment--just the opposite is true.

> You've had children. You must have known what she was feeling. And you slammed the door in her face.

Related Characters: Inspector Goole (speaker), Mrs. Birling, Eva Smith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the Inspector's questions to Mrs. Birling become considerably more pointed and accusatory. It has come out that Mrs. Birling used her influenced position in a charity to deny care and comfort to Eva Smith (now possibly named Daisy Renton) when she came for help. Smith was pregnant, it's revealed: she wanted charity from Mrs. Birling, but Mrs. Birling gave her none.

Inspector Goole's accusations suggest that Mrs. Birling has committed a grave sin: she refused help, not only to a grown woman but also to a child. Mrs. Birling claims that the woman should have known better, but such an explanation simply isn't satisfactory. While Mrs. Birling objects to Eva Smith for having gotten pregnant without being married, her refusal to help Eva Smith punishes an innocent child for its parents' supposed mistakes. Goole phrases his indictment of Mrs. Birling in highly gendered language: it's particularly bad for Mrs. Birling to deny Eva help, he claims, because Mrs. Birling herself has been a mother. Mrs. Birling refused to listen to one of the most basic instincts in her body--a mother's instinct to help other mothers--because of her narrow morality and her petty emphasis on appearances and class.

Act 3 Quotes

> There'll be plenty of time, when I've gone, for you all to adjust your family relationships.

Related Characters: Inspector Goole (speaker), Arthur Birling, Mrs. Birling, Sheila, Gerald Croft, Eric

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Birling family has descended into arguing. A once-happy betrothed couple has split up, and everyone else is shouting at one another. The Birlings have learned that they're all greedy, drunk, disloyal, and even complicit in a woman's death. Goole listens to the Birlings arguing, and tells them that they'll have to work out their new "relationships" later--for now, they need to focus on Eva Smith.

Goole's statement can be taken in any number of senses. First, it's a sign that the Birlings, in spite of the new information they've received, are still making a big mistake: they're focusing too exclusively on each other's privatefaults, instead of showing real compassion for the deceased, or accepting the larger social ramifications of their actions (the fact that because they are so wealthy and powerful, they have undue influence over others). Second, Goole's statement reminds us that his investigation has permanently changed the Birling family. It's possible that the family will be permanently disgraced, or fall apart from within. Yet it's also possible that the Birlings--particularly Sheila--will learn from the experience and try to become better people.

> This girl killed herself—and died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her. Remember that. Never forget it. But then I don't think you ever will.

Related Characters: Inspector Goole (speaker), Eva Smith, Arthur Birling, Mrs. Birling, Sheila, Gerald Croft, Eric

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

The Inspector comes to the conclusion he's been anticipating this entire time. He's shown the Birling family that they caused the death of Eva Smith: in various ways, each Birling (and Gerald) has ruined Smith's life and pushed

her to kill herself. Goole predicts that the Birlings will never be able to forget their sins.

Why, exactly, did Goole come to visit the Birlings? His visit seems far different from that of a typical police officer: he seems more philosophical, and more concerned with morality than with solving a crime. It's as if Goole just wants to teach the Birlings a lesson about the importance of personal responsibility. While Arthur Birling wants to believe that it's "every man for himself," Goole has endeavored to prove the opposite point of view.

> There are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, with what we think and do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.

Related Characters: Inspector Goole (speaker), Eva Smith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

As the Inspector proceeds with his indictment of the Birling family, he gives a kind of "moral" for the investigation. The Birlings have tried to pretend that they're all alone in the world, responsible for each other, but nobody else. The truth, Goole insists, is that all people are responsible for other people. The only way to lead a moral life, then, is to care about strangers, and to treat all people with respect. This relatively personal lesson is then a clear analogy to the class politics Priestley has been alluding to throughout--in pure capitalism, the wealthy only look out for themselves at the expense of all others, while in socialism (the ideology Priestley espoused) everyone supports everyone else.

The passage is also critical because it shows that Goole's motives for visiting the Birling family weren't just moral or criminal punishment. Instead of ruining the Birlings' reputations, he wanted to teach them to be better people. While certain members of the Birling family seem not to have understood Goole's point (Arthur Birling, for example), others, such as Sheila, seem to have gotten the message--perhaps Sheila will try to be a better person from now on.

> If all that's come out tonight is true, then it doesn't much matter who it was who made us confess.

Related Characters: Sheila (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

After Inspector Goole leaves, Gerald reenters with a shocking revelation--Inspector Goole wasn't a policeman at all. The Birling parents are delighted by this news, but Sheila maintains that it doesn't matter whether or not the Inspector was real. Unlike Arthur Birling, who insists that, if the Inspector was a fake, all their problems have been solved, Sheila takes the point of view that they're guilty either way. Arthur Birling is most concerned with the social repercussions of his crimes, while Sheila cares more about her own sense of guilt. Inspector Goole might not put her family in prison, but he's still exposed the family's complicity in a horrible crime and an unjust society, which is far worse.

> Whoever that chap was, the fact remains that I did what I did. And Mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her. It's still the same rotten story whether it's been told to a police inspector or to somebody else.

Related Characters: Eric (speaker), Inspector Goole, Mrs. Birling

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Sheila isn't the only one who's learned a valuable lesson from Inspector Goole. Eric, Sheila's sister, agrees that it doesn't matter whether or not Inspector Goole was a "real" police officer or not. Goole's credentials don't change the fact that Eric did what Goole said he did: he impregnated an unmarried woman and then abandoned her.

The passage reinforces the possibility that some of the characters will choose to learn from their mistakes. Eric probably won't face any actual punishment from society for his actions, and yet it seems that he'll try to be more morally upright in the future, never again hypocritically claiming to be a "good" man when he's not.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The scene is set in the dining- room of a house that belongs to a fairly wealthy manufacturer. The house is described as nice, solid, with good furniture, and an ornate floor lamp. It is "comfortable" but not "cozy."

The appearance and quality of the Birlings' dining- room suggests that they are a family of wealth and class.

The curtain lifts to reveal a family—the Birlings—and one non-family member, Gerald, sitting at the dining-room table. Edna, the maid, is cleaning the bare table of stray champagne glasses and dessert plates. The family begins to drink port, and everyone is wearing appropriate "evening dress." Arthur Birling, the father, is characterized as a large man with provincial speech; his wife is cold and her husband's "social superior." Sheila, the daughter, is in her early twenties and appears to be excited about life. Gerald Croft is an attractive thirty-year old man-about-town. Eric is in his mid-twenties and appears a little uneasy. The family is celebrating a special occasion.

The presence of a maid and of good quality port reinforces the image of the Birlings as a well-off family. They are all dressed for a special occasion. Mr. and Mrs. Birling are described in terms of their status markers—their speech, their social positions—which indicates, from the start, the play's concern with class and status. Also note the different ages of the characters: the established older parents comfortable and proud of their position; the successful thirty-year old; the two twenty-somethings who seem less set in their places, making one more excited by life and the other uncomfortable.

Mr. Birling opens the play by thanking Edna for the port she has brought out of the sideboard, and offering it to Gerald, with a promise that it is the same port that Gerald's father customarily purchases. When Gerald qualifies that he doesn't know much about port himself, Sheila expresses relief that her fiancé is not one of those "purple-faced old men" who are knowledgeable in such matters.

The fact that Mr. Birling knows the port to be the same port that Mr. Croft purchases suggests that the Birlings and the Crofts belong to a similar social and economic circle, but also that Mr. Birling may aspire to be like Mr. Croft.

Birling encourages his wife to drink, reminding her that it is a special occasion. Edna takes her leave and Birling remarks how nice the evening is. Mrs. Birling reproaches her husband for having made such a comment, but he responds that he was only treating Gerald like a family member.

In chastising her husband for a rather harmless remark, Mrs. Birling betrays her concern for the family's conduct and social manners; she clearly wants to make a good impression on Gerald Croft.

Sheila mentions, as an instance in which Gerald had seemingly opted out of membership in the family, that he had largely ignored her the summer before. He defensively cites how busy he was at the works and Mrs. Birling chimes in that once Sheila is married she'll realize that men with important work sometimes have to spend all their time and energy on business. Sheila says that she will be unable to get used to that, and warns Gerald to be careful.

Sheila is resistant to the gender roles typical of the period—the man busy with work, and the woman left alone in the house— and is uncomfortable with her mother's suggestion that marriage will create this role division. Sheila's resistance suggests that she is more socially progressive than her mother, not surprising given her younger age.

Eric begins to laugh uncontrollably and rises from his chair. Sheila inquires what he is laughing about, and he replies that he just felt the need to laugh; Sheila calls him "squiffy." Eric provokes Sheila, and she calls him an ass, at which point Mrs. Birling tells the two of them to stop it. To change the subject, she asks Arthur to give his "famous toast."

Eric is acting strangely, for reasons that we do not yet know but will become clearer as the play progresses. The dynamic of the nuclear family is fairly standard: Eric and Sheila tease each other in typical sibling manner, and their mother attempts to put an end to their bickering.

Birling rises to deliver the promised toast. He prefaces the speech by regretting that Gerald's parents could not join in on the celebrations because they're abroad, but then expressing his gladness that they are having such an intimate gathering. He names the night one of the happiest of his life, and tells Gerald that his engagement to Sheila means a "tremendous lot" to him. He mentions that he and Gerald's father are business rivals—though Gerald's father's business, Crofts Limited, is older and bigger—and relishes in the possibility of a future partnership between the Crofts and Birlings. Gerald seconds his desire for this prospect.

It becomes clear that Mr. Birling is excited about his daughter's marriage not only for her own happiness but also for his own more self-interested business and social prospects. He is always looking to move further up in the world, and an "alliance" with the even more well-off Crofts will help him do that.

Mrs. Birling and Sheila object to Arthur's discussing business on such a night, so Arthur raises his glass. They all raise their glasses, and Sheila drinks to Gerald. Gerald rises and drinks to Sheila, and then brings out a ring. Sheila asks if it's the one he wanted her to have, he affirms, and she exclaims that it's wonderful, shows it to her mother, and slips it onto her finger.

Again, Mrs. Birling monitors her husband's contributions to the conversation, in an attempt to keep him in line with the tone of the evening. Sheila's pleasure with the engagement ring because it's the one Gerald wants her to have suggests she's not as progressive as she thinks. She likes it because he likes it.

Birling mentions that there's been a lot of "silly talk" around lately, but he encourages Gerald and Sheila to ignore all the pessimism and to rest assured that the notion that war is inevitable is "fiddlesticks." He promises Eric, Gerald, and Sheila that in twenty or thirty years everyone will have forgotten about the "Capital versus Labor agitations" that currently seem so prominent.

Mr. Birling briefly indicates the political atmosphere of the time—the frightening prospect of war, and heightened political conflict between those who care most for the prosperity of their own business and those who care more for the rights and fair wages of the businesses' laborers. Birling believes in the current status quo, which places him on top, and dismisses any change to that order as ridiculous.

Mrs. Birling leaves with Sheila and Eric, who is whistling "Rule Britannia," and Birling sits down with Gerald. Birling tells Gerald, in a confidential manner, that he recognizes that Mrs. Croft may have wanted her daughter to marry someone in a better social position; he lets Gerald know, as a concession for this, that he might be granted a knighthood in the near future. Gerald congratulates him.

Mr. Birling demonstrates his preoccupation with his social status and class position, and assumes that others—such as the Crofts—are likewise preoccupied. He considers his prospective knighthood to be very important for his advancement, both in his eyes and in the eyes of the Crofts.

Eric re-enters the room, sits down and pours himself a glass of port. He reports, dismissively, that he has left his mother and sister talking about clothes. Birling informs him that clothes mean more to women, because they function as a sign of self-respect.

Birling reinforces a traditional gender stereotype that women care more about their appearance and clothing than men.

Birling begins in again on his lecture. He tells Eric and Gerald that a man has to "make his own way," and not listen to those people who preach about everybody needing to look after everybody else. He concludes his speech with another glass of port.

Birling speaks out for the "Capital" side of the conflict that he laid out earlier, by arguing for the priority of business and self-interest over communal interest.

Edna enters and announces that a police inspector by the name of Goole has called on an important matter. Birling instructs her to let him in, and jokes with Gerald that Eric has probably gotten himself into trouble. Eric appears uneasy at the suggestion. The Inspector enters and makes an "impression of massiveness, solidity, and purposefulness." Birling identifies that he must be a new inspector, as he does not recognize him, despite having been an alderman for years and knowing most of the police officers well.

Eric's uneasiness at Gerald and Arthur's suggestion that he has gotten into trouble foretells guilt that will be confirmed later on in the play. Birling demonstrates his familiarity with the local police officers as a sign of power. This is the sort of "soft" power—of connection and influence—that the rich display almost without knowing it. Birling's unfamiliarity with Inspector Goole will also prove significant as the play progresses.

When Birling presses the Inspector on the reason for his appearance, he explains that he is investigating the suicide of a young woman who recently swallowed disinfectant and died in the Infirmary. The Inspector says that he has been to the dead girl's room, where he found a letter and diary. She used more than one name, he says, but her real name was Eva Smith. Birling appears to recognize the name, and the Inspector informs him that she had been employed in his works. When Birling claims to know no more, the Inspector pulls out a picture to show him.

The Inspector's introduction of the girl's suicide establishes the main premise of the play and sends a sudden shock through the comfortable world of the Birling's. Birling's claim not to know the girl despite the fact that she worked for him is an attempt to insulate himself from her suicide, to assert to no connection to her or her death, almost to deny that he knew her as a human being. She was just a name on his payroll, he seems to be saying.

Gerald and Eric attempt to look at the photograph as well, but the Inspector does not allow them, preferring to work on only one line of inquiry at a time.

The Inspector's strict procedural protocol of only showing the picture to one person at a time will become very significant later in the play.

At the Inspector's prying, Birling admits that he does remember Eva Smith, and that he had discharged her from his factory. Eric wonders aloud whether it was because of Birling's discharging her that she killed herself. Gerald asks if Birling would prefer that he left, and Birling say that he doesn't mind, and then lets the Inspector know that Gerald is the son of Sir George Croft. With this piece of information, the Inspector explicitly asks Gerald to stay.

Birling is forced to admit that he does know and remember the girl, and that he took an active role in her firing.In asking whether his father should be deemed responsible for the girl's suicide, Eric takes a stance against his father's position that no person owes any responsibility to anyone else. This is the first of many such attributions of guilt that will be made throughout the play. Birling seeks to overawe the Inspector by revealing Gerald's importance. The Inspector's response that Gerald should stay suggests he too is somehow involved.

Birling contests that he had nothing to do with the girl's suicide, because her time at his business long preceded her death, but the Inspector disagrees, explaining that what happened to her at the business might have determined what happened afterwards, leading up to the suicide. Birling concedes his point, but still denies responsibility, saying that it would be very "awkward" if we were all responsible for everything that happened to anyone we'd had anything to do with.

The Inspector theorizes about the nature of responsibility: in some sense, he proposes, we are responsible even for events very distant from the immediate consequences of our actions, because our actions precipitate others, which precipitate others, and so on and so forth. Birling sees sense in the Inspector's point, but still denies it as a usable way of living one's life as it would create "awkwardness." The implication of the play is that "awkwardness" is not suitable grounds to dismiss one's own responsibility.

Eric chimes in with a reference to his father's previous pep talk, and Birling explains to the Inspector that he had recently been giving Gerald and Eric some good advice. Then Birling describes Eva Smith as a lively, attractive girl, who was up for promotion, but who became the ring- leader of a group of girls who went on a strike for a raise—25-shillings per week instead of 23. He refused the girls' request in order to keep labor costs down, and instructed them that if they didn't like their current rates, they could go and work somewhere else, given it was "a free country." Eric retorts that the country isn't so free if you *can't* find work somewhere else. Birling quiets him, but Eric continues to contest his father's decision, and Gerald defends Birling's side.

Eric puts the Inspector's notion of responsibility into contrast with Birling's previous lecture about the sole necessity of looking after oneself and not concerning oneself with the well- being of others. Eric sees that the "free" world that Birling sees is not so free, in actuality, for the poor. That in some sense Birling's position is based on an illusory and self-serving view of the world. It's noteworthy that the older more successful Gerald takes Birling's side.

After the Inspector expresses allegiance with Eric's disapproval, Birling inquires how well the Inspector knows Chief Constable. The Inspector replies that he doesn't see him often, and Birling warns him that he is a good friend of the Chief.

As Birling begins to feel more vulnerable, he increases the social pressure he brings against the Inspector. He seeks to use his connections to control or limit this investigation.

Eric continues to ask his father why the girls shouldn't have demanded higher wages, and adds that in the same position, he would have let them stay. Birling chastises Eric, then asks the Inspector what happened to the girl after he let her go. Sheila enters the room; when her father tells her to run along, the Inspector holds her back for questioning. He tells her what's happened, and Sheila is very upset by the news of the suicide.

Eric again displays his growing allegiance with the laborers' side of the conflict, in defending their right to higher wages. The investigation is beginning to introduce conflict into the family. Birling seeks to shield her daughter from the investigation, for the simple reason that she's a woman.

When Birling and Gerald chime in that there's nothing more to be revealed, the Inspector asks if they're sure they don't know what happened to the girl afterward, suggesting that one of the remaining Birlings does. The Inspector reveals that he hasn't come to the house to see Mr. Birling alone.

Up until this point, it has seemed as though the Inspector came for the sole purpose of interrogating Mr. Birling, but it comes out now that he has come to question others of the Birling family as well—that he sees multiple people in the family as possibly connected to this suicide.

The Inspector reminds the family that Eva Smith used more than one name, and then tells them that, for the months following her dismissal from Birling's, the girl was unemployed and downtrodden. He reminds the family that many young women are similarly suffering in their underpaid labor positions. Sheila objects that the working girls are people rather than cheap labor, and the Inspector agrees. He then continues to recount the tale of Eva Smith: she was hired at a shop, Milward's, but was fired after a couple of months because of a customer's complaint. When the Inspector says this last bit, he looks at Sheila, who now appears agitated.

As at other moments throughout the investigation, the Inspector universalizes Eva Smith's situation, by comparing her to the countless other girls in her position as an underpaid, downtrodden laborer. Sheila seems, like her brother (and unlike the older members of the family), to be growing sympathetic with the laboring class., seeing them as people and not just resources.

Sheila asks what the girl looked like, and then sobs and leaves the room when the Inspector shows her the girl's photograph. Birling scolds the Inspector for upsetting his daughter and their celebratory evening.

Sheila acts suspiciously and as though guilty when she sees the girl's picture.

Gerald asks the Inspector if he can look at the photograph, but the Inspector reiterates his preference for maintaining one line of inquiry at a time. Eric exasperatedly interjects that he's had enough and makes to leave, but the Inspector insists that he stay. He adds that sometimes there isn't as much difference as it seems between respectable citizens and dangerous criminals.

The Inspector reminds the family of his peculiar procedural preferences, and contributes yet another pointed theoretical statement inspired by the case, regarding the thin line between criminality and innocence, which seems to suggest that even those acting within the law can be responsible for great harm.

Sheila re-enters and asks the Inspector if he knew all the time that she was guilty. The Inspector says that he had an idea she might have been, on the basis of the girl's diaries. Sheila asks the Inspector if she's really responsible, and he says not entirely, but partly.

Sheila admits to her participation in the girl's firing from Milward's; her recognition of her own guilt makes her feel even worse about Eva Smith's fate.

Sheila explains that she had told the manager of Milward's to fire the girl, threatening that if they didn't fire her, Mrs. Birling would close the family's account there. Sheila admits that she was acting out of a bad temper, which was provoked by seeing the girl smile at a salesgirl while Sheila was looking at the mirror trying on something that didn't suit her and had looked better on the girl. When Sheila effusively expresses her remorse, the Inspector harshly responds that it's too late.

Sheila's reasons for demanding that Eva Smith be fired from Milward's were petty and thoughtless. Because of her family's prominence and high economic position, Sheila was able to have a significant influence on the life of another person—to satisfy her own vanity by having another woman fired. The hurt Sheila caused was much greater than what she endured.

The Inspector continues on with his narrative of the dead girl's difficult travails, now adding that after she was fired at Milward's, she changed her name to Daisy Renton. At the mention of the name, Gerald looks startled and pours himself a drink. The Inspector and Eric depart, leaving Gerald and Sheila alone; Sheila questions Gerald about his startling at Daisy's name, and he admits that he knew her. She asks if it was Miss Renton that he was seeing during the spring and summer that he was so busy, and he grants that it was and apologizes.

The inspection begins to incite various personal conflicts within the family; here, it provokes Gerald to expose his unfaithfulness to Sheila, thus weakening their formerly strong engagement.

Gerald pleads with Sheila to not mention that he knew Daisy Renton, and Sheila laughs and insists that the Inspector surely already knows. "You'll see. You'll see," she says triumphantly.

Sheila has caught on to the logic and rigor of the Inspector's investigation, and is confident that it will be exhaustive.

ACT 2

The scene and situation remains the same as at the end of Act 1, except that the main table is slightly more upstage. The Inspector remains at the door, and then enters the room and looks expectantly to Gerald. Gerald suggests that Sheila should be excused from the proceedings, but she insists on staying for the rest of the interrogation. The Inspector asks Gerald if he thinks women shouldn't have to deal with unpleasant things, and then reminds him of one woman who wasn't spared.

The Inspector points out the hypocrisy in Gerald's wanting to protect Sheila from unpleasant things, in light of his previous activities with Daisy Renton. It is clear that Gerald only wants Sheila to leave so that she won't hear more about his infidelity.

When Sheila again insists on staying, Gerald suggests that she only wants to see someone else go through the questioning. His suggestion offends her and she accuses him of judging her to be selfish and vindictive. The Inspector offers his interpretation that Sheila simply doesn't want to be alone with her responsibility and that, if nothing else, we have to "share our guilt." Sheila agrees with him, but then begins to question his strange manner for a police officer.

Previously so content and apparently in love, Gerald and Sheila have become increasingly antagonistic with one another since the revelation of Gerald's affair. The Inspector makes another general remark about the necessity of sharing guilt, which renews suspicion about his unusual investigative methods and effusive theorizing.

Before he can respond, Mrs. Birling strides in. She has been informed of the proceedings, and insists to the Inspector that the family will not be able to assist him any more. Sheila begs her mother not to act so stridently and risk saying or doing something that she'll later regret. She and Gerald and Mr. Birling, she explains, had all begun confident until the Inspector began questioning them.

Sheila has clearly been influenced by the proceedings thus far, and disapproves of her mother's continued stridency. She tries to convince Mrs. Birling of the importance of humility at this point in the investigation.

Mrs. Birling suggests that Sheila go to bed, because she won't be able to understand the motives of a girl "of that class." Sheila again refuses to leave, and again warns her mother against building a wall between herself and the girl that the Inspector is bound to tear town. Mrs. Birling continues on in this vein, taking offense at the Inspector's inquiry and reminding him of her husband's high position as a magistrate and former Lord Mayor.

Again Sheila appears to have already learned and internalized lessons from the interrogation— in addition to humility, she has developed an increased respect for the lower classes and greater hesitance to draw sharp lines between classes of people. Mrs. Birling, meanwhile, stubbornly invokes the family's social status, thus betraying her own ignorance of the lessons to be learned from the proceedings, and refusing to believe that people of her class could even understand those of the lower class.

Mrs. Birling reports that her husband is in the other room calming Eric down from his excitable mood. When she explains that her son isn't used to drinking so much, Sheila corrects her by revealing that Eric has been consistently over-drinking for the past two years. Mrs. Birling doesn't believe it, but Gerald testifies that Eric is indeed a heavy drinker. Sheila reminds her mother that she had warned her not to presumptively build walls between herself and others that she deemed less respectable.

The inspection has resulted in numerous personal revelations, including this revelation of Eric's drinking habits. Sheila uses this information, and her mother's surprised reaction to it, to support her insistence that Mrs. Birling needs to be more humble and not so presumptuous, that wealth and the trappings of "respectability" do not automatically equal moral rightness.

Birling enters and reports that Eric has refused to go to bed as his father asked him, because the Inspector has requested that he stay. He asks the Inspector if this is true, and then encourages him to question the boy now, if he is going to at all. The Inspector insists that Eric wait his turn. Sheila provokes her mother, "You see?" but Mrs. Birling doesn't understand.

The Inspector is letting on that Eric, too, played a part in Eva Smith's downfall, but Mrs. Birling in the arrogant blindness of her privileged position is blind to this implication.

Birling takes offense at the Inspector's tone and handling of the inquiry. The Inspector coolly proceeds to ask Gerald when he first got to know Daisy Renton. His presumption of an acquaintance between Gerald and the girl surprises the Birling parents. Gerald half-heartedly attempts to seem surprised by the Inspector's presumption, but then he gives in and confesses that he met the girl in the bar at the Palace Music Hall, a favorite destination for "women of the town."

Again, suspicion is raised at the Inspector's manner. As at their discovery of Eric's drinking habits, the Birlings are surprised by the revelation of Gerald's affair. The Birling parents are continually taken aback by the actual behavior of their children and relations, and yet remain seemingly incapable of drawing lessons from it.


Gerald explains that he was going to leave the bar when he noticed a girl who appeared different from the rest. In the middle of describing this girl, he exclaims "My God!," having just internalized the girl's death. He continues his description of her as charmingly dressed, and notes that at the moment he noticed her she was being harassed by Old Joe Meggarty. Mrs. Birling bristles at the idea that Gerald is speaking of Alderman Meggarty, whom she had always thought respectable, but Gerald and Sheila confirm that Meggarty is a renowned womanizer.

Though the investigation is a formal procedure, Gerald's sudden exclamation reminds us as well of its emotionally fraught and tragic content. Again, Mr. and Mrs. Birling are proven to have been ignorant of the actual behavior of others in their "respectable" class, as they learn with great surprise about the universally known immoral behavior of an alderman they presumed to be respectable.

Gerald goes on to describe his first meeting with Daisy Renton—he took her out of the bar to the County Hotel, where he asked her questions about herself. She vaguely mentioned her jobs at Birling's and at Milward's. Gerald realized a few nights later, when they met again, that she was completely impoverished, and offered her to live in a set of rooms that belonged to a friend of his who was away on a trip. He assures the Birlings that he did not put her there in order to sleep with her, and that the affair only came after.

Gerald portrays his own role in Daisy Renton's narrative to be rather innocent and well intentioned—he helped her in a time of impoverishment and need, and the affair, according to him, only came secondarily. And this may even be true, but it also suggests he did not understand the level of influence he would have over her once he put her up.



Gerald apologizes to the Inspector, but Sheila insists that she rather more deserves the apology. The Inspector asks firsts whether the girl became his mistress and then whether he was in love with her. Gerald responds affirmatively to the first question and hesitatingly to the second.

The investigation veers into the personal when the Inspector inquires about the terms of Gerald's affair and his level of affection. Gerald was willing to have an affair with a poorer woman he did not love—he was in it for enjoyment. Also note how Gerald doesn't think to apologize to the woman to whom he is engaged.

Gerald reports that he broke off the affair in the first week of September, right before he was to go away for several weeks; she took it very well, and Gerald gave her a small parting gift of money to help her support herself for a while. She didn't mention to Gerald what she planned on doing afterward, but the Inspector fills him in that she went away to a seaside place to be alone.

Gerald comes off relatively cleanly. Yet while, from his point of view, the affair ended smoothly, and with Daisy Renton's compliance, that Daisy Renton went off to be by herself suggests that she may have needed to emotionally recover; that she was more in love with this man who had helped her than he ever understood.

Upset by the proceedings, Gerald excuses himself to walk outside and be alone for a bit. Sheila returns her engagement ring to him before he leaves. She respects him for his honesty, she says, but believes that they just aren't the same people who sat down to dinner, and that they would have to re-build their relationship anew. Birling tries to convince Sheila to be more reasonable, but Sheila replies that Gerald knows better than her father does what she means; Gerald concurs.

The inspection has taken a serious toll on the family, now severing ties between the previously engaged Sheila and Gerald. Sheila's comment is interesting, as they are exactly the same people who sat down to dinner; now they just know more about each other. Birling seeks to keep things comfortable and "reasonable" more than he does about his daughter's emotional well-being or pride.

Mrs. Birling announces that it seems they've almost reached the end of it, but Gerald interrupts that he doesn't think so, before he walks out the door. Sheila points out that the Inspector never showed Gerald the picture of the girl, and the Inspector responds that he didn't think it necessary.

Gerald, like Sheila before, is confident that the Inspector still has unforeseeable tricks up his sleeve. He seems, in addition, to suspect the consistency of the Inspector's procedures, given that he was never shown a picture as the other Birlings were.

The Inspector shows the photograph to Mrs. Birling, who denies recognizing it. The Inspector accuses her of lying. Birling demands that the Inspector apologize for his accusation, but the Inspector instead retorts that public men "have their responsibilities as well as their privileges." Birling responds that the Inspector was never *asked* to talk to Mr. Birling about his responsibilities. Sheila contributes her feeling that the Birlings no longer have a right to put on airs. She then confronts her mother, insisting that she could tell by her expression that Mrs. Birling indeed recognized the photograph.

Mrs. Birling, like Mr. Birling earlier, refuses to admit she knows or recognizes the girl, even though Sheila can see that she does. The Inspector bluntly does not believe this, and his response to Mr. Birling suggests that Birling and his family have been enjoying the privileges of their public success while not recognizing their responsibilities. Sheila again tries to make her parents realize the lessons before their eyes: that they shouldn't presume their own superiority or doubt the integrity of the investigation.

The front door slams, and there is some question about whether Gerald has returned or Eric has left. The Inspector continues his interrogation of Mrs. Birling by identifying her as a prominent member of the Brumley Women's Charity Organization. He asks about a meeting of the interviewing committee a couple of weeks previous.

The Inspector now focuses on Mrs. Birling, clearly indicating that he knows that she does know the girl and about her participation in the girl's fate.

Mr. Birling asks why his wife should answer the Inspector's questions, and the Inspector informs him that the girl had appealed to the Women's Charity Organization two weeks prior. According to the Inspector, the girl initially called herself Mrs. Birling, which Mrs. Birling notes having found very impertinent. At the Inspector's provocation, Mrs. Birling admits that she was prejudiced against the girl's case and used her influence to assure that the girl be refused aid from the committee.

Mrs. Birling joins her husband, daughter, and daughter's fiancé in admitting that she, too, played a part in Eva Smith's downfall. Based on her personal annoyance at the girl, Mrs. Birling denied her aid—an action similar, though more serious, to Sheila getting the girl fired.

The Inspector asks Mrs. Birling why the girl wanted help, and Mrs. Birling initially refuses to answer, determined not to cave under his pressure as the other three did, and convinced that she is not ashamed of anything she's done. She explains simply that she wasn't satisfied with the girl's claim and so used her influence to deny her aid, and then reiterates that she's done nothing wrong.

Mrs. Birling refuses to play into the Inspector's motive to awaken the Birlings to their responsibility for the girl's death. She sees her role on the charity organization not as to help people but to wield influence in deciding who does and doesn't deserve aid.

The Inspector states that he thinks she *has* done something very wrong that she will regret for the rest of her life. He wishes that she'd been with him at the Infirmary to see the dead girl, and then he reveals the more devastating fact that the girl had also been pregnant when she killed herself. Sheila is horrified and asks how the pregnant girl could have wanted to commit suicide; the Inspector answers that she had been "turned out and turned down too many times."

The girl's pregnancy adds yet another layer of tragedy to her suicide, and augments Sheila's feelings of devastation and guilt. The fact that the Inspector has withheld this piece of information until this point, however, makes it seem as though he has conducted the investigation specifically with the goal of creating suspense and increasing astonishment.

The Inspector adds that it was because she was pregnant that she appealed to the Women's Charity Organization. Mrs. Birling repeats what she reports having said to the girl—that she ought to go appeal to the child's father, as providing for the child was his responsibility. Sheila tells her mother that she thinks what she did was "cruel and vile."

Sheila's disapproval of her mother for refusing the girl aid mirrors Eric's disapproval of his father for refusing her a raise. Both Eric and Sheila continue to express growing sympathies with the lower class, while the Birling parents remain defensive of their use of power and influence and willingness to stand in judgment of the lower classes (despite the fact that their own class has been revealed by the Inspector to be not as respectable as it first appeared).

It comes out that the child's father had offered the girl money, but that she didn't want to take it because it was stolen. The Inspector asks Mrs. Birling if it wasn't a good thing that the girl refused to take the money. She says possibly, but stands firm in refusing to accept any blame. At the Inspector's lead, Mrs. Birling claims that, if the father *was* indeed guilty of thievery, then he is entirely responsible for the girl's suicide and deserves to be punished.

Mrs. Birling stubbornly refuses to accept any culpability for the girl's suicide, and instead places guilt on the girl herself. She thereby demonstrates allegiance with her husband's philosophy about the priority of self-responsibility over mutual responsibility.

Sheila cries out "Stop" to her mother, and asks her if she doesn't see what's going on, right after the Inspector voices his eagerness for Eric's return. When the door slams, signifying Eric's return, Mrs. Birling finally understands and asks the Inspector if her son is all mixed up in this. The Inspector responds that, if he is, it'll be clear what to do with him, based on what Mrs. Birling has just said. The Inspector holds his hand up as the front door sounds; everyone waits and looks towards the door; Eric enters pale and distressed. The curtain falls slowly.

Mrs. Birling realizes too late that she has foolishly placed blame on her own son. Mrs. Birling seems to have believed that the father of the baby must also have been lower class. Her blindness makes it impossible for her to see that her own class—her own son—might be "mixed up in this."

ACT 3

The scene is the same as at the end of Act 2. Eric is standing near the entrance of the room and asks if they know. The Inspector confirms that they do, and Sheila reveals that their mother placed blame on whichever young man got the girl into trouble. Eric bitterly accuses his mother of making it difficult for him, and Mrs. Birling defends that she couldn't have known the man in question was him, as he's not the kind of person to get drunk. Sheila corrects her as she did before, which prompts Eric to blame Sheila for betraying his drinking habits. The Birling parents begin accusing Sheila of family disloyalty, when the Inspector cuts them off and encourages them to address their family relationships after he's finished.

Intra-family antagonisms ensue when Eric learns that both his mother and sister have betrayed him. The Inspector has to ask the Birling family to sort through their private problems after he has cleared up the more public problems that he is addressing in the investigation.

Eric pours himself a drink and begins to explain his story: he met the girl the previous November in the Palace bar, while he was "a bit squiffy," and started talking to her. He clarifies that she wasn't there to "solicit." He went back to her place that night. At her father's insistence, Sheila removes her mother from the room. Eric continues: he saw the girl a number of times after, and one of the times, she told him she was pregnant. The girl didn't want to marry him because he didn't love her. He gave her fifty pounds to support her.

Eric's relationship with Eva Smith was very similar to Gerald's, but was different enough to render his actions punishable: like Gerald, he met her at a bar and then continued to see and sleep with her; unlike Gerald, however, he incidentally got her pregnant. Also like Gerald, he tried to be responsible in providing the girl with money; unlike Gerald, however, (as will soon be seen), the money he provided was obtained illegally.

When Mr. Birling asks where the fifty pounds came from, Eric confesses that he took it from his father's office. Mrs. Birling enters again, curious, and her husband informs her of both of the son's wrongdoings—impregnating the girl and stealing Birling's money. Eric explains that he got the money by collecting small accounts, giving the firm's receipt, and then keeping the money for himself. When his father asks him why he didn't just ask him for help, Eric replies that he's not the "kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble."

Eric is the first of the Birlings to be accused of committing a legal crime. The other Birlings did things that were immoral, but none that necessarily defied a law. Because of the definable illegality of Eric's wrongdoing, the Birling parents will be more upset with him than they were with Sheila or with each other.

The Inspector leadingly asks Eric if the girl found out that his money had been stolen, and Eric says that she had and that she refused to see him afterward, but then he asks how the Inspector had known that. Sheila reveals that Mrs. Birling sat on the committee that assessed the girl's need for aid. Eric turns to his mother to blame her for the girl's suicide and begins to threaten her.

Eric avenges the blame that his mother placed on him by returning the gesture and blaming her in turn. At the same time, the girl who Mrs. Birling refused aid turned down on account of her low morals now is revealed as quite moral—refusing money in a time of need. The girl's use of the name Mrs. Birling in front of the charity organization also takes on a new light, as she may have been referencing the fact that she was carrying Eric Birling's child.

The Inspector states that he does not need to know any more, and reminds the family that each member is responsible for the death of **Eva Smith**. He tells them to never forget it. Mr. Birling offers the Inspector a bribe of thousands of pounds, but the Inspector refuses it.

The Inspector's departing reminder makes it seem as though the main project of his inspection all along was to convince the Birling family of the immorality of their separate actions toward Eva Smith, of their responsibilities as people with wealth and power and as people in general. Birling, with his bribe, continues to try to use power and influence to evade responsibility.

The Inspector deduces a moral from the investigation—though **Eva Smith** has gone, there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths still alive, who have hopes and suffering and aspirations, and who are all implicated in what we think, say, and do. He insists that everyone is responsible for each other, and then walks out.

The Inspector speaks in the vein of the people that Mr. Birling positioned himself against in the beginning of the play, strongly asserting the fundamental humanity of all people and therefore the responsibility of everyone for everyone.

Sheila is left crying, Mrs. Birling is collapsed in a chair, Eric is brooding, and Birling pours himself a drink and then tells Eric that he considers him to be most blameful. He fears for the public scandal that will surely result from the investigation and that might harm his chances at a knighthood. Eric asks what difference it makes if he gets a knighthood now; Birling warns Eric that he'll be required to repay everything he's stolen and work for nothing until he has.

The Birlings recover from this bombardment of information. Mr. Birling places most blame on Eric, presumably because his contribution to the affair –given its illegality—will result in the greatest social scandal and will do most harm to the family's name.

Sheila is upset that her parents are acting as though nothing has happened. She then wonders aloud whether the Inspector wasn't actually a police inspector at all. Birling judges that it would make a big difference if the Inspector had been a fake, while Sheila judges that it wouldn't, because what is really important are the truths revealed by the questioning. Birling recalls that the Inspector did talk like a Socialist.

Sheila and Mr. Birling split in their respective opinions of the moral consequence of the Birlings' actions; Sheila thinks that they have ethical significance regardless of their legal assessment; Birling, on the other hand, cares only about the legal and social consequences.

Edna announces Gerald's entrance. Gerald inquires how the Inspector behaved with them since his departure, and then he reveals that the Inspector wasn't a real police officer. Gerald met a police sergeant on his walk and asked him about Inspector Goole; the Sergeant swore that there was no inspector by the same name or description.

Gerald confirms Sheila's earlier hypothesis that the Inspector was bluffing about his affiliation with the police department. Suddenly the legal ramifications of what the Inspector revealed disappear.

The Birling parents are very excited by this news, and Birling calls Chief Constable to verify that there is no Inspector whose name is Goole or who matches his description. Birling exclaims that this makes all the difference, and again Sheila and Eric insist that it doesn't. Birling reasons that the inspection was probably set up by someone in the town who doesn't like him.

The removal of the legal (and therefore social) consequences of what has happened widens the split between the family members. The Birling parents care about their position, and therefore when the legal issues are gone consider themselves home free. Eric and Sheila, who care about Eva Smith herself and the basic morality of the Birlings' actions, don't agree.

Mrs. Birling reminds her family that she was the only one who didn't give in to him, and suggests that they now discuss the affair amongst them and determine if there is anything to do about it. Birling agrees with his wife, and adds that that the Inspector may not be the end of it.

Mrs. Birling sees the interaction with the Inspector as one based on power: only she didn't give in to him. Now she wants to keep the entire affair private and handle it themselves (and also prepare to deal with any other consequences beyond the Inspector).

Birling demands that Eric, who is looking sulky, begin to take some interest in the matter. Eric responds that his problem is rather that he's taken too much interest, and Sheila joins him in this sentiment. Mr. Birling and Mrs. Birling voice their desire to "behave sensibly" in the circumstance, but their children rebut that they can't pretend that nothing's happened, when the girl is still dead and the family members still did the things they confessed to doing. Both sides continue to protest and defend their own positions.

The rift widens between the older Birlings who wish to put their deeds and the inspection behind them, and those (the children) who cannot forget what they've done and what happened to the girl with whom they were connected.

Gerald proposes that the one fact that Eric and Sheila are assigning great significance—that **Eva Smith** is dead—may not even be a fact after all. He asks the Birlings how they know that they've all committed offenses to the same girl, suggesting that the photographs the Inspector showed the family members might actually have been distinct photographs, and not of the same girl. Birling catches on, and reasons that they only had the Inspector's word for it, but now that they know that he lied about his identity, he might well have been lying about it all.

Gerald's hypotheses turns the philosophical and moral screw of the play even further: if Eva was not a single individual and there was no suicide, then there were no dire consequences. The play has already created a contrast between legality and morality. Now it asks the question of whether immoral behavior is less immoral if there are no serious consequences. Gerald and Birling seem to think not.

Gerald asks what happened after he'd left. Mrs. Birling recounts that the Inspector accused her of seeing **Eva Smith** only two weeks previous, and that she had assented even though the girl hadn't called herself Eva Smith before the Committee. She admits that she had felt compelled to provide what the Inspector expected from her.

Mrs. Birling revisits her performance in the questioning, and retrospectively sees that she had been manipulated into answering as the Inspector wanted her to; she thus tries to use the Inspector's newfound guilt to bolster her own innocence.

Eric still doesn't believe Gerald's claim, and insists that the girl that he got pregnant was the same that asked his mother for aid. Gerald proposes that even that could have been nonsense. Eric fights back, arguing that it's not nonsense because the girl's still dead, but Gerald asks "what girl?" Eric still holds to the idea that the girl he knew is dead, even though he has no evidence for it apart from the Inspector's testimony.

Even though Eric should logically be the most relieved, he is also the least willing to dismiss the girl's suicide as an invented hoax, likely because he feels guiltiest for the offenses that he committed. It's almost like Eric needs the consequence in order to feel the guilt he knows he should feel.

Birling triumphantly continues to hypothesize that the Inspector simply shocked them into submission with his initial description of the girl's suicide, in order to more easily bluff them throughout his inquiry. Gerald suggests that they call the Infirmary to confirm whether or not there was any suicide at all, and though Birling objects that it will look "queer," he proceeds, and discovers from the hospital that they haven't had a suicide for months.

Again, the case is further unraveled, and its ethical significance further confused, when it turns out that no suicide took place. Yet, oddly, as Eva Smith ceases to be a real person, she becomes even more of a symbol of all poor women and people affected by the blind and uncaring power of the rich.

Gerald, Mr. Birling, and Mrs. Birling relax at this news and pour themselves a drink. Sheila refuses to celebrate, and continues to claim that what has happened remains important, and that it was only lucky that it didn't end tragically this time. Eric joins her in refusing to pretend that everything is as it was before. Sheila articulates that she can't forget what the Inspector said and how he made her feel, and that it frightens her that her parents can so easily forget it. She refuses Gerald's offer to renew their engagement.

In contrast to their parents and Gerald, Sheila and Eric firmly believe that the investigation and the truths it revealed remain significant. They take the position that t that uncaring acts toward others that could *result in harm to others, even if no such harm occurs, are immoral and must be responded to as such. Sheila's refusal to renew her engagement to Gerald is a refusal to go back to the unthinking, comfortable state she occupied before.*

Just as Birling begins to make fun of his overly serious children, the telephone rings. After Birling hangs up, he reports that it was the police, alerting him that a girl has just died on her way to the infirmary, after swallowing some disinfectant, and that a Police Inspector is on his way to ask some questions. The Birlings stare "guiltily and dumbfounded." As Sheila rises to stand, the curtain falls slowly.

The play concludes on an ambiguous note: did the Inspector know that a girl had or was going to commit suicide by disinfectant, or is the play just a constructed political allegory that ultimately proves Sheila's point:"If it didn't end tragically, then that's lucky for us. But it might have done"? Taken symbolically, it's possible to see this sudden death as a response to the question about morality when there are no consequences: that even if some immoral acts based on denying the humanity of others don't produce consequences, they will eventually *result in consequences, not just for those harmed but for those like the Birlings who do the harming. Sheila standing as the curtain falls seems to indicate not just her willingness but her desire that the Birlings be forced to face what they have done.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Batkin, Liza. "*An Inspector Calls*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Apr 2014. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Batkin, Liza. "*An Inspector Calls*." LitCharts LLC, April 3, 2014. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/an-inspector-calls.

To cite any of the quotes from *An Inspector Calls* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Priestley, J. B.. An Inspector Calls. Dramatists Play Service, Inc.. 1998.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Priestley, J. B.. An Inspector Calls. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc.. 1998.