Reading the text

Plot, characters and themes

One evening in the spring of 1912, the Birlings are celebrating their daughter Sheila’s engagement to Gerald Croft, who is also present. Husband and wife Arthur and Sybil Birling, along with their son Eric, are pleased with themselves. Birling toasts the happy couple, and Gerald presents Sheila with a ring which absolutely delights her.

Birling makes a lengthy speech, not only congratulating Gerald and Sheila, but also commenting on the state of the nation. He predicts prosperity, particularly referring to the example of the ‘unsinkable’ Titanic, which set sail the week earlier. Birling styles himself as a ‘hard-headed man of business.’

The women leave the room, and Eric follows them. Birling and Gerald discuss the fact that Gerald might have ‘done better for [himself] socially’: Sheila is Gerald’s social inferior. Birling confides to Gerald that he is in the running for a knighthood in the next Honours List. When Eric returns, Birling continues giving advice, and he is passionately announcing his ‘every man for himself’ worldview when the doorbell rings.

Themes to think about as you read the play:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>The class divide</th>
<th>The seven deadly sins</th>
<th>Socialism vs Capitalism</th>
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</thead>
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An Inspector Calls by J.B. Priestley

Activities for Act 1

Act 1

As you read Act 1 answer the following questions.

a. Look at the way Priestley has described the Birlings’ dining room. He spent a great deal of time listing very precise details about the house and its owners. Why do you think this is?

b. Why might it be important that the Birlings are shown to be so comfortable and happy?

c. Mr Birling is what they would have called a ‘blatherskite’. He talks about things he doesn’t truly understand, and doesn’t know when to stop talking! He also makes erroneous judgements about things to come that show how comfortable the rich were with their lives. Find and list things from his speech that Mr Birling has predicted incorrectly, and explain why you chose them.

d. Mrs Birling and Sheila were expected to act as though they are the weaker sex. Find examples of things that the female characters say and do in line with this behaviour.

e. Structure was very important in this play. Look at the moment the doorbell rings. Why was this the perfect moment for the Inspector to call, and how would the audience have reacted?

f. Stereotypical characters, power and hierarchy form a large part of the dynamics of this play. Using the order of the character pictures earlier in this booklet as a guide, think about who is in power when the play begins, and why. Does the power shift between characters as the play progresses? How and why?

g. What do you think of the ending of this Act? Based on his behaviour and the way the other characters react to his presence, how is the Inspector presented in this section of the play?

Look back through this Act. Find a quotation that sums up each character’s personality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>What it tells us about them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr Birling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs Birling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Character** | **Quotation** | **What it tells us about them**
--- | --- | ---
Gerald |  |  
Eric |  |  
Inspector Goole |  |  

### Contextual info

Priestley was originally from Bradford. Here is something he once wrote about the place:

‘I have tried to make myself - and other people - aware of the harsh economic realities of our time. Again and again I have taken my typewriter to the factories, the mines, the steel mills. I denounced or jeered at those colleagues who would not look. I wrote some of the first detailed accounts of the depressed areas. Having been brought up on the edge of it, I knew what life was like ‘back o’ the mill’. I did not discover the proletariat at Oxford or Cambridge, for the West Riding working-class was in my blood and bones. I grew up among socialists. I watched the smoke thicken and the millionaires who made it ride away. I saw broken old women creep back to the mills, and young men wither because there was no work for them to do and nobody wanted them. I saw the saddest waste of all, the waste of human life’.

*The Delight That Never Was, 1949*

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Look up the definitions of the words in bold.

Summarise Priestley’s beliefs in 50 words or fewer.

How do the writer’s beliefs come across in the play so far?