

Edexcel IGCSE English Literature

An Inspector Calls: Themes

Generations: Young vs Old

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Generations: Young vs. Old

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

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

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

Context

Generational divide

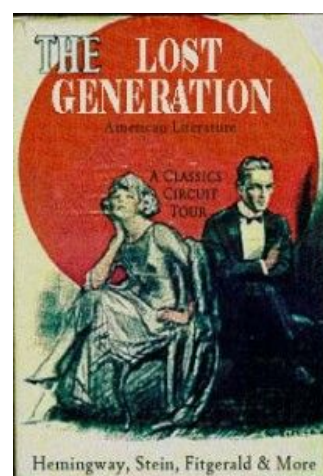
The generational divide in Britain in 1945 was possibly the most **severe** it had ever been.

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

The Lost Generation

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

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



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How Priestley portrays the generations

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

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

Development of the Theme

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

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

Exam Tip

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

Beginning of the play

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

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

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



Character development

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

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



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

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

Ending

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

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

Mr Birling

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



Mr Birling as a teacher

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

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

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

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



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

Arrogance of the older generations

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

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

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

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

Struggles to accept change

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

Older generation and capitalism

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

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

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

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



Mrs Birling

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



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Obsession with appearance

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

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

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

Stubborn

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

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

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



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

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

Reaction to Eva

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

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

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

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

Eric & Sheila

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

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



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

Eric

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

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

Wanting to impress his father

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

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

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

Challenging his father

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

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



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

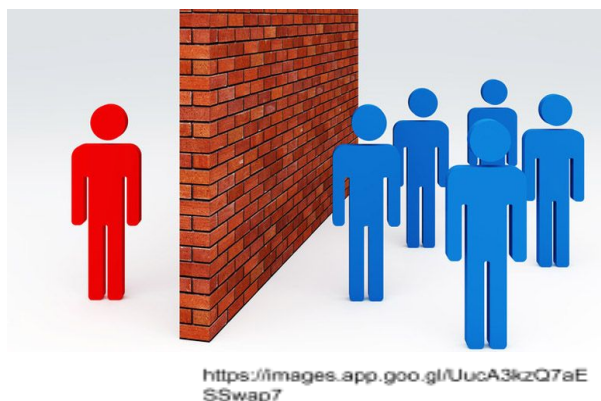
Sheila

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

Sheila and her parents

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

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



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

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

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



Sheila and Gerald

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

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

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

Fights and Clashes Between Generations

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

Why is there tension?

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

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

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

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

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



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

Mr and Mrs Birling silencing their children

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr and Mrs Birling dismissing Sheila

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

The Final Scenes

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

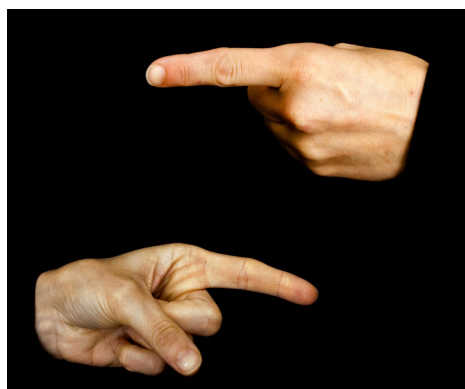


By showing this rift, Priestley suggests that the beliefs of the parents - selfishness and denial of responsibility - **belong in the past**, in 1912, while the children's attitudes - their willingness to accept blame and to change - **belong to the future**.

Reaction to the Inspector leaving

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

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



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

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

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

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

Who was the Inspector?

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

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



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

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

Mr Birling is frustrated by his children’s views.

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

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

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

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

Pretending nothing had happened

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

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



<https://images.app.goo.gl/sdSTEDo8Z4y7S3Mr6>



The accusation repeats throughout the scene:

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

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

Was a lesson learnt?

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

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



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



Importance of understanding

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

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

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

