

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Themes *Exploitation*

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Exploitation

Exploitation is when someone treats something in an **unfair** and **underhand** (dishonest) way in order to **benefit** from it. This could be a **person**, **system**, or **position**. It often involves **taking advantage of weakness or trust**.

The theme of exploitation runs through the play, as Eva Smith is exploited by **individuals** and **the system of Capitalism** as a whole. Exploitation links to the themes of social class, Capitalism vs. Socialism, and gender.

Eva is **vulnerable** because she is a **working class woman**. Even though as an individual she is strong and assertive, her position in society means she has **no power** and faces **discrimination** from others.

- Priestley presents the ways in which employers - and the Capitalist economy as a whole - **prey on the vulnerability of working class women to make huge profits**. They are able to **exploit** their **desperation** by making them work for a low wage.
- He suggests **the entire function of the British economy in the twentieth century relied on the exploitation of those at the bottom of the hierarchy**.

Priestley implies **the systems of class and power in British society are exploited by the upper classes**. The Birlings take advantage of their trusted positions in the community to get their own way and escape punishment. At the time the play is set the upper classes **controlled everything in society**, including money and employment. The poor lived on the landowners' estates and had to pay rent, or were employed by factory workers and had to follow their rules. This means the lower classes were **dependent** on the upper classes for everything, and Priestley argues that the upper classes exploited this dependency to **control** others.



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Development of the Theme

Each of the Birlings used some **form of exploitation** in their mistreatment of Eva:

- Mr Birling exploited her for **cheap labour**.
- Sheila exploited her **status** as the daughter of a well-known man to get Eva fired without a sufficient cause.
- Gerald and Eric exploited her for **sex**.
- Mrs Birling exploited her **influence** at the charity to get her case denied.

Through Eva's story, Priestley outlines the different forms of exploitation that support and benefit the upper classes of society. **He shows how the class system and Capitalism rely on the exploitation of the weak, vulnerable, or powerless**.



Birling & Co

Mr Birling's business practices are used by Priestley as an **allegory** for **Capitalism's exploitation of the working class**. He details the ways in which **profit is prioritised over personal wellbeing**, and how the poor are **dehumanised** and **reduced to cheap labour**.

Exploitation of his workers

Mr Birling uses his position as an employer to boss others around, **threatening** them with unemployment if they don't adhere to his strict ways. **He takes advantage of poverty and high unemployment rates to find workers who will work for a low wage**. He **targets** the weak and vulnerable, but isn't prepared to help when his actions backfire.

Minimum Wage

There was no national minimum wage in 1912 (when the play is set), or in 1945 (when it was written). Priestley shows the audience how employers exploited this in order to **push wages as low as possible** to maximise profits.

Mr Birling's business **motto** is unveiled when he announces his hopes to work **"together"** with Crofts Limited **"for lower costs and higher prices"** (*Act 1, pg 4*). His goal is unconcerned with improving **working conditions** or workers' **rights**. Instead, he wants to make even more profit, even though it is clear his business is already successful. His workers are **reduced** to a simple **"cost"**, a figure he wants to lower. His workers never receive the benefit of these **"higher prices"** as Mr Birling keeps the profit for himself. This simple clause summarises all of the issues Priestley sees in Capitalist business: **the exploitation and dehumanisation of workers**.

Dehumanisation of workers

Mr Birling's **perception** of his workers is in keeping with his business methods. He outlines how he has **"several hundred young women"** at his factory who **"keep changing"** which shows how he doesn't see his workers as individuals. The vague term **"several hundred"** illustrates the women's **loss of individual identity**, as they are viewed as a **collective**. Furthermore, they **"keep changing"**, meaning **it is not the individual who matters, only that the factory always has a large number of workers on a low wage**. The phrase **"keep changing"** alludes to the vast number of unemployed people available, as Priestley suggests the company **consistently hires new staff while firing old staff to keep their costs low**. As they are all **"women"**, Priestley again indicates that working class women were the most targeted by Capitalist endeavours, because companies could give them a **lower wage than if they were men**.



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Poverty and capitalism

The Inspector explains how **beneficial extreme poverty and despair are for Capitalist companies**. He tells Sheila: **“There are a lot of young girls living that sort of existence in every city and big town in this country, Miss Birling. If there weren’t, the factories and warehouses wouldn’t know where to look for cheap labour” (Act 1, pg 19)**. This suggests that companies don’t just turn a blind eye to the suffering of the working class. Rather, they **actively seek it out**, to exploit them and keep their **profit margins** high.

- The phrase **“every city and big town in this country”** expresses how **universal** the problem is, evoking the idea that poverty is an **epidemic**. The Inspector implies the wealth and success signified by a **“city” obscures its destitute** (extremely poor) **underbelly**.
- As they are prepared to harm **“young girls”**, the audience understands how these companies must be **inhuman** and **pitiless**.

Priestley demonstrates how the **comfort** and luxury of **one person’s life**, or the **success of one business**, is directly **dependent** on the distress and hardship of others. This means the prosperity enjoyed by the upper classes in 1912 was only possible because others were struggling, proving the wealth and progress associated with the early twentieth century was just an **illusion**. Moreover, Priestley accuses **“the factories and warehouses”** of **perpetuating** (continuing) the **cycle of poverty** to ensure they always had a cheap workforce available. **He suggests the issue of poverty could be solved, but isn’t, because others benefit from it.**

Gerald & Eric

As the young men in the family, Gerald and Eric represent the ways in which exploitation and mistreatment of women is **normalised** and **encouraged** in society. Their behaviour is a **symptom** of a wider **culture of aggressive masculinity and pride**. Priestley uses these characters to demonstrate how men **exploit** the **dominance** they are given in a **patriarchal society** and the power their wealth brings them to **take advantage of working class women**.

Gerald

Much like how Mr Birling’s company hires young women to exploit their need for money, Priestley suggests rich men like Gerald use young women’s fear to get them to go to bed with them. Gerald doesn’t just pity Eva and wants to help her: he sees an **opportunity**.



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His exploitation of Eva

The **morality** of Gerald's actions is the most questionable of all the family. He rescues Eva, gives her money and a place to stay and brings her love and happiness. This would suggest that he is a **Good Samaritan** who **selflessly** helps her. However, because he makes her his **mistress** and **abandons** her when he sees fit, his actions appear to have an **ulterior motive**. He takes advantage of her vulnerability for his own entertainment.

It is clear from Gerald's descriptions of when he first met Eva that her worth was based purely on how attractive she was. He said: **"looked quite different"**, **"was very pretty"**, and **"looked young and fresh and charming and altogether out of place down there"** (Act 2, pg 34-35). These **sensual, romanticised** descriptions imply his **sexual attraction** to her was always a factor in his decision to befriend her. The focus on her appearance, with the **repetition** of how she **"looked"**, shows that he formed these opinions of her before even talking to her.

He continues by saying how she gave him **"a glance that was nothing less than a cry for help"** leading him to get rid of Joe Meggarty and tell her **"if she didn't want any more of that sort of thing, she'd better let [him] take her out of there"** (Act 2, pg 35). This is an **ultimatum**, tying her escape to his company. He implies that if she rejects him, she will be in trouble again, forcing her to be **reliant** on him. He takes advantage of her distress, her need for **"help"**, and how she was **"out of place"**.

Dependency

Priestley conveys the **imbalance** of Gerald and Eva's relationship to illustrate the working classes' **dependence** on the upper classes.

- Gerald recalls how Eva was **"intensely grateful"** to him, and he **"became at once the most important person in her life"** (Act 2, pg 37). This could imply that Eva felt she **owed** Gerald for rescuing her, rather than his aid being an act of selfless goodwill. Gerald did not offer Eva much, but she had been so **lonely** and **desperate** that his status as an upper class man made him automatically **"important"**.
- The **adverb** **"intensely"** and the **superlative** **"most"** emphasise how reliant Eva was on Gerald, implying he controlled her. Gerald's friendship was **priceless** to her even if he didn't treat her well. Her life **depended** on him because he was providing her with housing and money, meaning his treatment of her became a form of **sexual exploitation**.



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It is clear the love and dependency within their relationship wasn't equal: he confesses he **"didn't feel about her as she felt about [him]"**, and he enjoyed being the **"wonderful Fairy Prince"** (Act 2, pg 38), suggesting he exploited Eva's need for him in order to sleep with her.

- The sense of power being her **"Fairy Prince"** gave him enabled him to do as he wished. When he did eventually break it off, she told him she **"hadn't expected it to"**



last”, and *“she didn’t blame [him] at all”* (Act 2, pg 39), showing how he **took advantage of her kindness and forgiveness**.

- As she *“hadn’t expected it to last”* this suggests she was aware that Gerald was much **less invested** in their relationship than she was, and that his **desire** for her would wear off.

Power imbalance

Priestley emphasises the **power imbalance** between the two characters: Eva’s whole life **revolved** around their relationship, whereas Gerald viewed her as a temporary source of pleasure. The power imbalance is further proof of his exploitation of Eva and her position.

Priestley uses their relationship to show how the lower classes were **fully committed** to the upper classes’ desires and whims, and the upper classes could enjoy the **benefits** of this without ever needing to be invested themselves. They could break ties whenever they wanted and not face consequences.

Eric

Like Gerald, Eric also has a relationship with Eva. This appears to be very one sided with Eric admitting: *“I wasn’t in love with her or anything - but I liked her - she was pretty and a good sport”* (Act 3, pg 52) which shows how he used her to **satisfy his own sexual desires**.

- By describing her as *“pretty and a good sport”*, Eric **objectifies** her. She is presented as prey or something to be conquered rather than a willing participant. Here, *“Good sport”* implies she only tolerated him.
- By *“insist[ing]”* and *“threaten[ing]”* her, (Act 3, pg 51-52) it is clear that Eric has forced her into a position she didn’t want to be in.

The consequences of their relationship are much more serious and permanent for Eva than they are for Eric which shows how **the exploitation of working class women caused long-lasting trauma and damage for them**.

Exploitation of Eva

The Inspector summarises how Eric exploited Eva to satisfy his own urges, saying he *“just used her for the end of a stupid drunken evening, as if she was an animal, a thing, not a person,”* (Act 3, pg 56). This shows how he used Eva as **a means to an end**, and didn’t consider her own feelings.

As it was out of the question for people of different classes to marry, Priestley shows how Eric was able to use her as a *“thing”* without committing to marrying her or ever seeing her again. It is implied he **dehumanised** her because she was of a lower class.

Furthermore, as she was a working class girl, no one would take her seriously if she tried to accuse him - as demonstrated by Mrs Birling’s own actions. Priestley likens the upper classes’ exploitation of the working classes to the treatment of *“animals”*, showing how they were **treated inhumanely** and barbarically.

