

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Themes

Wealth and Materialism



Wealth and Materialism

Wealth is one of the Birlings' main interests and influences all of their interactions with others.

- Mr Birling won't raise his workers' wages so that he can make a bigger **profit**.
- Sheila is a **wealthy customer** and enjoys spending money in **upmarket** shops.
- Gerald uses money to support Eva while she is his **mistress**.
- Eric **steals** money
- Mrs Birling **refuses** to give Eva money to help her.

Wealth brings each family member **power** over others and this power seems to make them forget that **the poor are human** too. Priestley uses the Inspector to try and change how the characters and audience feel and act towards the lower classes.

Class system

Priestley suggests that wealth **corrupts** people and **society as a whole**. He shows how **social hierarchies determined by wealth**, alongside **Capitalism**, lead to **materialism** (believing money, material possessions, and physical comfort are the most important things in life) and **greed**.

In a Capitalist class system, wealth leads to **increasingly** more **power** and **success**. Priestley argues that this means people seek out material possessions and money as **symbols of their own worth in society**. Consequently, they **lack emotional and moral intelligence**, and cannot **connect** with others. Priestley also presents how those at the bottom of the hierarchy are **dehumanised** and **objectified** as a result.



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When Priestley wrote the play in 1945, the country had just witnessed **two World Wars and the Great Depression**. The economy was struggling, and many people had lost money as well as their homes. This means his audience would already **understand how dangerous it is to rely so much on money**. He encourages them to look out for each other, and to **appreciate love and friendship rather than wealth**.

Development of the theme

Wealth and materialism appear as themes in the play **right from the start**. The **setting** of the play and the **appearances** of the characters means the audience would **recognise the**



Birlings as a wealthy family. They **surround** themselves with **signs of their money**, showing how **important** it is to them.

Even as the play continues and they learn of the **destructive consequences** of wealth, the setting **remains the same**. The luxury of their surroundings becomes more **intimidating** and **grotesque**, but the characters **can't escape** and nor can the audience. Priestley uses this to show how wealth is such a **fixture** in society the **reality** of its role in Eva's death must be **confronted**.

The **continuity** of the setting also reflects how the elder Birlings refuse to learn or change their ways. When the Inspector leaves they can **return to the comforts of their money without losing anything**. The Birlings are held accountable for their actions by the Inspector but when he leaves they still have money, which is all they care about.

The Inspector's role is to slowly **take apart** the Birlings' greed and materialism. By telling Eva's story and focusing on the **motives** behind the Birlings' actions, he shows how **their greed caused her death**. With every revelation about each character's involvement in her death, their **extravagant** surroundings become even more **morbid** and **horrifying**. **They are able to live in luxury and comfort while Eva Smith is dead in the Infirmary**.

The Opening Scenes

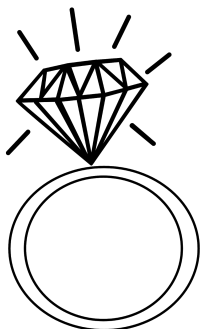
The Setting

Priestley sets the play in the Birlings' home which is a **physical manifestation** of **upper class materialism**.

- It is a **"fairly large suburban house, belonging to a prosperous manufacturer"** with **"good solid furniture"** (Act 1, pg 1).
- The **"Champagne glasses"**, **"port"**, and a **"cigar box"** (Act 1, pg 1) are all indications of their **excessive wealth**.
- The **"fairly large"** size of the house and the **"good"** quality of the furniture show the Birlings live in comfort, **wanting nothing**. The **adverb "fairly"** and **adjective "prosperous"** suggest they are climbing the **social ladder**.

While the **"substantial and heavily comfortable"** home connotes **luxury** and **decadence**, Priestley specifies it is **"not cosy and homelike"** (Act 1, pg 1). The setting is **unwelcoming**, and may even **intimidate** an audience which represents the **untouchable position of the rich**. Moreover, as it is not **"homelike"**, Priestley implies the family are missing **emotional connection**. They can fulfil all their **material** desires but their money cannot bring them **emotional contentment**. Priestley suggests **materialism prevents people from finding love and intimacy**.





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Sheila's engagement ring

Equally, Sheila's excitement over her engagement ring - ***"Isn't it a beauty? Oh - darling -"*** (Act 1, pg 5) - suggests the **physical token** of her engagement brings her more joy than the engagement does. Her declaration, ***"Now I really feel engaged,"*** (Act 1, pg 5), implies a material possession is needed for the engagement to be **real**. The gift of a ring is the thing that connects her to Gerald, rather than love. Priestley presents **the issues of a society that places too much importance on physical possessions**.

Mr Birling's focus on money

Priestley shows how a focus on wealth means **people cannot recognise other sources of pleasure or happiness**. Money is the **only thing of worth** to the Birlings.

Mr Birling refused to pay his workers a **slightly higher wage** because of his **greed**: it was too **"heavy"** a **"price"** for his business. The Inspector reminds him, ***"She wanted twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and sixpence. You made her pay a heavy price for that,"*** (Act 3, pg 56). Realistically, raising their wages was **within his power**, and **would not have destroyed his business**. In contrast, the **"price"** Eva was forced to pay was **losing her life**.

- The **metaphor "price"** alludes to economy and trade, implicating **Capitalist greed as the direct cause of her death**.
- Priestley **contrasts** Mr Birling's interpretation of a **"heavy price"** with the **"heavy price"** Eva experienced to show how **greed blinds people to others' needs and humanity**.
- Priestley suggests that what is in reality of **small consequence** to the upper classes, who own **fortunes**, is of **huge consequence** to the lower classes.



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Eva Smith's poverty

Priestley suggests the rich think the lower classes' only weakness or hardship is their shortage of money. When confronted with Eva's poverty and hardship **all three upper class men offer her money**. It is evident from this that they believe **money can solve everything**.

- Gerald **"allowed"** her money over the summer and **"insisted on a parting gift"** of **"money"** (Act 2, pg 39).
- Eric **"insisted on giving her enough money to keep her going,"** (Act 3, pg 53)
- Mr Birling swears ***"I'd give thousands - yes, thousands -"*** (Act 3, pg 56).



By offering her money but still **abandoning** her they **reduce** her to an **object they can throw money at**. She is **dispossessed** of her **humanity** purely because she lacks **material possessions**.

Through the men's interactions with Eva, Priestley implies **capitalism** turns people and forgiveness into **things that can be bought**. It is evident that the men don't understand what else they can offer Eva, such as **love, support, or kindness**. They don't understand that their acts of cruelty or their prejudices also have an impact and are ignorant of **social isolation and oppression**. Priestley's audience would learn to value **emotional connection and fellowship** over wealth.

