

OCR English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Character Profile

Mrs Birling

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First Impressions

Character in context

Mrs Birling (or Sybil Birling) is married to Mr Birling and is mother to Eric and Sheila. She has some **public influence** as she sits on the council for charity organisations and is married to Mr Birling, who was Lord Mayor, and is a business owner.



Priestley uses her as a **symbol** for the **hypocrisy** of the upper-classes and as a demonstration of the need for a **welfare state**. Priestley dictates in the stage directions that Mrs Birling is **“about fifty, a rather cold woman”** and thus reveals her **unsympathetic** and **individualistic** nature. She is her husband's **“social superior”** and therefore belongs to an upper class family.

- Mrs Birling represents the selfish nature of the upper classes, their privileges, and their prejudices.
- She perceives the working classes as inferior.

Complicit in her own domination

Priestley portrays an accurate depiction of domestic life in the early 20th Century, as the inequality between men and women and is demonstrated through her reluctance to challenge her husband.

- At the time it was the **convention** (tradition of the time) for to go to the drawing room after dinner, allowing men to remain in the dining room to discuss politics and news. These were not considered suitable topics for women, so they were excluded from such affairs and confined to domestic chores.
- However, Mr Birling does not command her to leave; she knows her place. It is Mrs Birling, who is the one to initiate their exit as she announces it is time for Sheila and herself to **“leave you men”**.
 - Mrs Birling's commitment to maintaining the **patriarchal status quo** (existing state of affairs) leads her to become **complicit in her own oppression** and she inflicts this upon her own daughter.

Marriage is a construct

Mrs Birling recognises that marriage is a means to secure financial security and social status.

- Loyalty and trust, the foundations of a loving relationship, are not seen by Mrs Birling as important.
 - This is demonstrated through Mrs Birling's indifference to Gerald's affair with **“Daisy Renton”** (Eva Smith's **pseudonym**) and potentially Mr Birling's affair. Instead, it is viewed as something to be expected of men.
- Priestley describes Mrs Birling as a **“cold woman”** in the stage directions, which would have been perceived as a bit of an **oxymoron** at the time.
 - **Contemporary women** were meant to conform to the expectations of their **gender** of being loving, **maternal** and sensitive. However, Mrs Birling is **“cold”**, implying that she shows little emotion, and is self-interested.



- Perhaps, this is Priestley conveying the message that Mrs Birling's **detached** attitude towards suffering is irrational and unnatural.
- Mrs Birling's cold nature is further demonstrated when she is **unsympathetic** to her child's distress after Sheila discovers how her actions helped contribute to Eva's suicide.
- The idea of marriage is clearly not centred around love for Mrs Birling; it is a **transaction**.
- Gerald covers up his affair by telling Sheila he's "**busy at the works**", which she doesn't question initially, submitting to her expected societal role, based on her gender.



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/>

Upholding the patriarchy

Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as upholding the current patriarchal system of 1912. Her perception of men's sexual desires is a clear **patriarchal interpretation** as she believes they should be accepted and satisfied, without question, by **submissive** women.

Mrs Birling perceives Eva's suicide as Eva's own fault as those who are responsible were "**first, the girl herself**" and "**secondly the young man**". Mrs Birling takes the ignorant view that working class women **voluntarily choose prostitution** rather than being **forced** into it.

The Inspector's message of **collective responsibility** is rejected by Mrs Birling, and she denies her role in the chain of events leading to Eva's suicide: "**I won't believe it**". Rather than accept the need for **greater social responsibility**, Mrs Birling maintains the view that Eva chose to lead the life she led, and therefore the consequences are her own fault. Therefore, there is no need for society to change, as she believes that **class inequalities** did not cause Eva's death, and Mrs Birling's privileged upper class lifestyle can continue.

Hysteria

Mrs Birling perceives displays of emotion to be a sign of weakness. This is evident when she attempts to silence and dismiss Sheila, telling her that "**you're behaving like a hysterical child**". Priestley includes references to the **hysteria** disorder, which has historically been used to control women and prevent them from acquiring positions of power.

- Sheila's **newfound socialist views** are opposed by Mrs Birling and therefore using **hysteria** to dismiss her as **delusional** is easier than attempting to argue against the views she holds.
- This is an example of an **ad hominem** attack, focusing on Sheila's personal traits, demonstrating that Mrs Birling does not have a satisfactory counter-argument.
- Gerald sides with Mrs Birling in attacking Sheila for becoming "**hysterical**".

Resisting suffrage

Mrs Birling is used by Priestley as a **symbol** of the upper classes, many of whom resisted the suffrage movement in the early 20th Century.



- Mrs Birling perceives the suffrage movement as undermining **traditional gender roles** and the foundation of the family, which will ultimately (in her view) lead to **domestic chaos**.
- Priestley demonstrates Mrs Birling's **conservative** view that women should have moral and domestic roles and exclude themselves from the **political realm of men**.
- She is able to take this stance because she has no interest in **changing society** because she is privileged. **Suffrage** threatens her comfortable lifestyle, as Mrs Birling's privileges are at risk.

Relationships with other characters

Marriage of convenience

Priestley presents Mrs Birling as, to an extent, ashamed of her husband's lower-class origins and the way he carries himself. Mrs Birling is, as Priestley describes her in the **stage directions**, her husband's "**social superior**". Therefore, the **upper class social etiquette** and mannerisms of Mrs Birling are unnatural to Mr Birling. This is demonstrated by Priestley's use of the **adverb** "**reproachfully**" in the **stage directions** when she criticises Mr Birling: "**Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things**".

Their marriage was most likely arranged in a similar fashion to a **transaction**; Mr Birling's **financial support** in exchange for Mrs Birling's **reputable family and status**. Here, Priestley demonstrates the **individualism of capitalists**, as they don't marry for love, but in the interests of **social mobility** or financial gain.

Mrs Birling hints at Mr Birling having an affair, and accepting it, responding to Sheila's discomfort in the knowledge of Gerald's affair, as something she will "**have to get used to, just as I did**". This further evidences the expected lack of happiness and love in marriage. Priestley dictates in the **stage directions** that the Birling household doesn't feel "**cosy or homelike**" as the family is not one built on love but built for appearance and in a "**portentous**" (done to impress) fashion.

Sheila resists her mother's manipulation

Priestley portrays Sheila as, at first, a victim of her mother's influence. However, after the Inspector's arrival, there is a **distinct shift** in their relationship; Sheila rejects her **mother's manipulation**.

Initially, Sheila is obviously influenced by her mother's **formal vocabulary**, evidenced by Sheila's use of the **adjective** "**impertinent**" when she describes Eva, **linguistically echoed** by her mother later. However, Sheila, towards the end of the play, rejects the use of this **adjective**, calling it "**such a silly word**". It is clear that from this point onwards, Mrs Birling has lost all influence and power over her daughter.



Mrs Birling juxtaposes Sheila

Priestley uses two female characters that directly contrast each other, creating a clear distinction between the **older and younger generations** which highlights the differences in their beliefs and attitudes.

Sheila is the **exemplar response** (how Priestley wants the audience to respond) to the Inspector's message, whereas Mrs Birling is her direct **antithesis** (opposite character). This is evident as Sheila aligns herself with the views of the Inspector, while Mrs Birling rejects the Inspector's message.

- Mrs Birling denies all responsibility and inadvertently deflects the blame onto her son, Eric, as **"I'll tell you what I told her [Eva]. Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility."**
- Sheila accepts her role in Eva's suicide immediately, and is **remorseful**: **"I know I'm to blame – and I'm desperately sorry"**.

Here, Priestley presents Mrs Birling as **symbolic** of **conservatism** and **resistant to change**. Sheila **symbolises the progressive** younger generation, who will replace the outdated views of their parents. Mrs Birling represents the bygone era of the Victorian age, with strict etiquette and formal language, neither of which have a place in contemporary society.

Opposition to the Inspector

Mrs Birling is in complete opposition to the Inspector and the message that he represents - the need for increased **social responsibility**. Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as significantly opposed to the Inspector.

- Priestley demonstrates Mrs Birling's **abhorrence** to the Inspector's accusing and forthright tone through the **rhetorical question** **"what business is it of yours?"** and the **exclamation** **"I beg your pardon"**.
 - The Inspector violates the established class system of 1912 Britain, in his treatment and accusation of Mrs Birling, who is of a much higher social class.
- Mrs Birling's outrage at being dictated to by an Inspector of a lower-class background is demonstrated by the **passive-aggressive response**, **"I realise that you have to conduct some sort of inquiry, but I must say that so far you seem to be conducting it in a rather peculiar and offensive manner."**

Exam tip -
Ensure that you explicitly link Priestley's methods (oxymoron, rhetorical question) with the question's theme (e.g. responsibility).

Contempt for Eva

Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as maintaining a **repugnance** (hatred) for Eva Smith and her working class background. Priestley presents Mrs Birling as having strong-held beliefs against people of **inferior social status**.

- Mrs Birling immediately signals her indifference to Eva's suffering as she tells Sheila she **"ought to go to bed - and forget about this absurd business"**. The **adjective** **"absurd"** reveals her dismissiveness; due to the death of Eva not directly affecting Mrs Birling, she sees no point in caring.



- The real reason behind Mrs Birling's dislike of Eva is revealed as she doesn't "**suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class**".
 - The divide between the upper and lower classes is evidenced by Mrs Birling's use of the **determiner "that"**, which enables her to distance herself from the working class, which she views as 'other' (different from herself).
 - This is further evidenced by Mrs Birling's contempt for Eva, who clearly didn't appreciate Eva's **social etiquette** "**I didn't like her manner**".
- Mrs Birling describes Eva's plea for aid to the charity council which she sits on as "**simply a piece of gross impertinence**". Therefore, it is clear that Mrs Birling's **prejudice** against the lower classes **negatively affects** those people in her charity work.

Indifference to Eric

Priestley shows Mrs Birling to be 'cold' and **uncaring**, even for her own children. She is more concerned with the way in which Eric and Sheila **behave** as upper class citizens, than with their own personal wellbeing.

Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as **indifferent** to Eric's **welfare**. To shift some of the responsibility away from her, Mrs Birling inadvertently blames her own son, dictating the punishments he should receive, "**He should be made an example of. If the girl's death is due to anybody, then it's due to him**". Then, upon realising that Eric is indeed the father of Eva's soon-to-be child, she refuses to accept this as the truth: "**Eric, I can't believe it. There must be some mistake.**"

- Mrs Birling refuses this fact as it **jeopardises** the **reputation** of the Birling family.
- Eric's outrage towards his mother, who is **unsympathetic** and fails to even apologise, is demonstrated by Priestley in his broken speech, "**Then - you killed her... and the child she'd have had too - my child - your own Grandchild - you killed them both - damn you, damn you.**" and "**You don't understand anything. You never did. You never even tried.**"

Mrs Birling expresses her disappointment in her son as "**Eric, I'm absolutely ashamed of you**". Here, it is clear that Mrs Birling still hasn't accepted any **responsibility**. It is important to note that Mrs Birling only expresses this after the Inspector leaves as perhaps, she knew that he would object to her saying this.

- Eric responds to this with "**well, I don't blame you. But don't forget I'm ashamed of you as well - yes both of you**". This shows that Eric has accepted responsibility as he doesn't blame his mother for being "**ashamed**", but he doesn't allow his parents to escape the responsibility either, reminding them of their implication.
 - Mrs Birling remains **unsympathetic** towards Eric despite denying aid to her **granddaughter-to-be's mother**, which was one of the last things that contributed to Eva's suicide.



Final Impressions

Superficiality

Mrs Birling and her husband are **static characters**, as their beliefs remain unchanged at the end of the play. Priestley presents Mrs Birling as seeming to care very deeply about others' perception of her.

- She believes that "***I did my duty***" in denying Eva aid, due to a lack of evidence in her story. Priestley presents Mrs Birling's perception of "***duty***" as limited to a **capitalist social duty** of keeping the rich people rich and the poor people poor. In doing so, she **neglects her moral duty** to provide assistance to those who need it the most.



Image conscious

Mrs Birling's public image is of utmost importance, and she is concerned about how the family is perceived by others.

- Eva's use of the "***Birling***" surname was a cause of **embarrassment** to Mrs Birling, as she felt disgusted by being associated with the lower class.
- Priestley presents Mrs Birling in contrast to her husband:
 - She is his "***social superior***" and fully aware of how a family should appear.
 - Mrs Birling admonishes her husband, telling him that he isn't "***supposed to say such things***" after complimenting their chef, in part because he is a member of their own staff, and also due to Mrs Birling wanting to maintain an image of ignoring the existence of working class people.
- Mrs Birling is accustomed to getting what she desires, whilst maintaining **power** and **control** over others.
 - This power is something she enjoys, as demonstrated by her denial of aid to Eva, whilst sitting on a charity's council.
 - The Inspector's overwhelming sense of **moral authority** is therefore met with great opposition from Mrs Birling.

Class system only leads to hate

Despite Mrs Birling benefitting from the class system, she is still **discontented** and constantly **paranoid** about her reputation being tarnished.

- Priestley does this to expose the class system for being **toxic** and spreading **discontent** amongst all people.

Exam tip -

For visual learners, see Figure 1 at the bottom of the document for a diagram of the social hierarchy



The wealth of the Birlings doesn't bring them happiness, but **paranoia** and **insecurity**. This is evident in the **stage directions** as their home is "**heavily comfortable**", yet lacks the qualities of being "**cosy or homelike**".

- Mrs Birling's husband is never content with his **current status and wealth** because he believes he must constantly prove his wealth and success due to his "**provincial**" origins.
- Mrs Birling's **avarice** (greed for wealth) is demonstrated by her **financially motivated** marriage to Mr Birling.
- Similarly Mr Birling's **cupidity** (greed for money and possessions) is evident as he proclaims Sheila's marriage to Gerald "**one of the happiest nights of my life**".

Priestley shows the unhappiness of the upper class and the suffering of the working class to demonstrate that it is **imperative** to **rid society of this system**.

Acceptance of responsibility

Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as rejecting any sense of **responsibility**. Mrs Birling is **static** in her character development; she remains **ideologically the same**. This demonstrates her confidence in her own **superiority** yet this also reveals her **stubbornness** and **reluctance** to change.

However, it is possible that Mrs Birling may **consciously** know that her actions were **immoral**, but convinces herself that she has no reason to be responsible for Eva's subsequent actions to end her own life.

Priestley uses Mrs Birling as **symbolic** of the upper classes' **resistance** to change.

The comfortable lifestyle of the Birling family is challenged by **socialist change** and **greater social responsibility**.

Therefore, **accepting responsibility** would mean sacrificing their lives of **privilege** - a sacrifice they are not willing to take.

Cold temperament

Mrs Birling is used by Priestley to symbolise extreme individualism. Priestley deliberately characterises Mrs Birling as a person who is **selfish** and **egocentric** (thinks only of herself).

Mrs Birling gives priority to herself over her own family. This becomes evident when she justifies denying Eva Smith financial aid: "**In spite of what's happened to the girl since, I consider I did my duty**".

- This duty was not a **moral duty**; it was merely to defend her own **social image** and seek revenge against the perceived "**impertinence**" of Eva.
- Priestley similarly portrays Mr Birling as valuing a duty to business over a duty to the needy in society; "**It's my duty to keep labour costs down**".
- This is contrasted by the Inspector who tells them "**it's my duty to ask questions**", investigating the **morality** of the characters in the play and making them consider what their "**duty**" should really be.



She evidently lacks the **capacity to empathise** with the suffering of the lower classes.

- This is demonstrated through her blaming of Eva for her own suicide as “***I don’t suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide***”.
- Furthermore, Mrs Birling provides no comfort to her daughter, Sheila, when she feels **insecure** about her marriage, telling her to “***get used to that***” feeling.

Abuse of power

Priestley shows Mrs Birling as deliberately misusing her upper class power and privilege, presenting her as immoral. Priestley implies that the source of poverty is the greed and immorality of the upper classes.

- This is evident as Eva wouldn’t accept Eric’s **stolen money**, forcing her to be reliant on charity, yet Mrs Birling ironically stereotyped her as **greedy**.
- Mrs Birling refused to help Eva and thus Eva’s **moral predicament** becomes apparent - when the legitimate sources of aid are prejudiced against them, the poor cannot afford to choose where their money comes from.

This irony in Mrs Birling stereotyping the lower classes as inherently greedy is evident:

- The **avarice** (greedy) desire of the upper classes is much stronger than the lower classes, who merely try to survive.
- Mr Birling’s greed cost Eva her job as he refused to grant her and the other workers a relatively small pay rise.
- This initial **capitalist** greed sparked a **chain reaction** that ultimately ended in her suicide.

The **exploitation** of the lower classes is the reason why the poor are reliant on aid and charity. They can’t help themselves as they have no **power or influence**.

Contrast with Eva

In contrast to Mrs Birling, Eva is a symbol of morality within the play:

- She refused to take the stolen money and “***didn’t blame*** [Gerald] ***at all***”.
- She wouldn’t marry Eric because she “***said*** [Eric] ***didn’t love her***” and knew of the consequences Eric would face; he could possibly be disowned by his family.
- Mrs Birling is portrayed, throughout, as “***cold***”. She has no “***fine feelings***” and is oblivious to her wrongdoings and flaws.

Upholding divisions

Mrs Birling is **symbolic** of maintaining the **traditional class system**. Priestley presents Mrs Birling as failing to see those belonging to the lower classes as people deserving of respect.

- Mrs Birling is strongly in favour of the **class division**.
 - She is critical of Gerald’s affair as a “***wretched business***”, mainly because it was an **inter-class affair**, rather than the fact that it was a betrayal of Sheila.
- Mrs Birling emphasises that Eric “***didn’t belong to*** [Eva’s] ***class***”, demonstrating her firm belief in the fixed nature of the class system.
 - Priestley’s use of the **verb “belong”** demonstrates Mrs Birling’s belief that once born into a class, there should be no **social mobility**; where you are born is God’s will and this is where you should stay.



- This is slightly **hypocritical** of Mrs Birling as she married Mr Birling, whose “**provincial**” **lower-class** background is evidence of **upward social mobility**.
- She is dismissive of the **abusive nature** of Eric’s relationship with her, objecting most to the fact that Eva was of a lower class.

Hypocrisy

Priestley provides strong evidence of Mrs Birling’s **prejudice** towards the poor through Mrs Birling’s role as a “**prominent member of the Brumley Women’s Charity Organisation**”.

Priestley Portrays Mrs Birling as **morally hypocritical**.

- She claims “**with dignity**” that “**we’ve done a great deal of useful work for deserving cases**”.
 - This emphasis on the **adjective “deserving”** reveals Mrs Birling’s joy in playing God in these young women’s lives - whether they receive aid and benefit or are refused and suffer.
 - Equally, Mrs Birling’s distinction that aid is only for “**deserving cases**” highlights how the aid is given out at the **discretion** of the upper classes.
- Mrs Birling acknowledges her own **prejudice** against Eva’s “**impertinence**” in claiming to be “**Mrs Birling**” as “**one of the things that prejudiced me against her**”.
 - Thus those living in poverty have no way to escape it as they cannot challenge their exploitation; Eva’s attempt to strike saw her fired; the institutes meant to help them are **prejudiced** against them.

Ignorance

Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as **oblivious** to the lives, struggles, and **suffering** of others.

- She is uninterested in the reality of the **suffering** of the poor, instead accepting **convenient truths**, which benefit her perception of how society should function.
- Mrs Birling only accepts that which reinforces her pre-existing beliefs:
 - This is evident as, with regards to Eva’s plea to the charity council: “**it didn’t take long for me to get the truth – or some of the truth – out of her**”.
 - Mrs Birling only considers this the “**truth**” as it confirms her bias against the working class.
 - Eva’s honest recount of events, which didn’t fit with what Mrs Birling believes about **inter-class relationships**, was dismissed as “**silly nonsense**”.

Symbolism

Pride

Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as a manifestation of the **cardinal sin** of pride. Mrs Birling’s sense of **self-importance and superiority** drives her to abuse her privilege because she perceives the poor as inferior. She feels entitled to the respect of those **socially inferior** to her, which is demonstrated by her use of the **demeaning adjective “impertinent”** to describe Eva.

- She attempts to convey this demand of respect through her **formal language**:



Mrs Birling's **complex and elaborate use of language** masks the unsubstantiated nature of her arguments.

- Similarly Mr Birling compensates for the weakness of his arguments with **quantity** of speech, while Mrs Birling focuses on the **quality** of hers.
- Conversely, the Inspector is **terse** (concise) in speech and refrains from using complex language as his message is well substantiated by the death of Eva.

Possible 'Topic Sentences'

- Through the character of Mrs Birling, Priestley explores the resistance of the upper class to the change that threatens their social position.
- Priestley explores how the suffering of the working class is perpetuated by the class system through Mrs Birling's denial of financial aid to Eva Smith as a result of class-based prejudices towards her.
- Priestly demonstrates the hypocrisy of the upper classes through the character of Mrs Birling.

Exam tip -

A 'Topic Sentence' is the first sentence of your argument. This should convey the overall point you are making. It should reference Priestley explicitly and his ideas.

Exam tip -

Topic sentences should always link back to the question at hand. Also, try to link these sentences together (e.g. discuss the initial, transitional and final portrayals of a character).



Mrs Birling quote bank by theme

Theme	Quote	Analysis
Responsibility	<i>“A piece of gross impertinence”</i>	Mrs Birling’s reference to Eva’s honest tale of woe with the adjective “impertinence” reveals how she believes she is absolved of all responsibility as Eva’s claim to be “Mrs Birling” was disrespectful.
	<i>“She had only herself to blame”</i>	Mrs Birling takes the view that “suicide” is a conscious choice and therefore Eva can only blame herself for taking her own life.
	<i>“I did nothing I’m ashamed of”</i>	Priestley demonstrates the true extent of Mrs Birling’s “cold” nature as despite Eva’s death, Mrs Birling does not regret her denial of aid to Eva.
	<i>“I did my duty”</i>	Priestley’s use of the noun “duty” is used to expose Mrs Birling’s perception of duty as limited to a capitalist social duty of keeping the rich people rich and the poor people poor. In doing so, she neglects her moral duty to provide assistance to those most in need.
	<i>“First I blame the girl herself. Secondly, I blame the young man”</i>	Priestley portrays Mrs Birling as unable to accept any responsibility as she deflects blame onto Eric inadvertently. Yet, her hypocrisy is further revealed when she realises, and states “I didn’t know” , implying that she would not have placed the blame on her son for the same action.
	<i>“He’d be entirely responsible. [...] Compelled to confess in public his responsibility”</i>	Mrs Birling’s double standards are laid bare by Priestley when she discovers who the father is; the public confession of Eric would tarnish the reputation of the Birling family name. Mrs Birling is not consistent with her morals when it is her reputation at stake.



Pride	<i>“Don’t contradict me like that”</i>	Priestley presents Mrs Birling as symbolic of conservatism and resistant to change. By contrast, Sheila is representative of the younger generation who embrace radical change and the need for socialism .
	<i>“A trifle impertinent”</i>	Mrs Birling attempts to convey a demand of respect through her formal and complex vocabulary , evidenced by her accusing the Inspector as being “a trifle impertinent”
	<i>“Prominent member of the Brumley Women’s Charity Organisation”</i>	Priestley implies that Mrs Birling’s role is not held out of care or compassion for the poor, but as a way to gain influence and status due to her self-professed “prominent” status.
	<i>“[With dignity] We’ve done a great deal of useful work helping deserving cases”</i>	This emphasis on the adjective “deserving” reveals Mrs Birling’s joy in playing God in these young women’s lives, deciding whether they receive aid and benefit or are refused and suffer, a reflection of the power of the upper classes.
	<i>“One of the things that prejudiced me against her case”</i>	Mrs Birling sees her treatment of Eva as valid, unashamedly declaring that Eva’s “impertinence” in claiming to be “Mrs Birling” as “one of the things that prejudiced me against her” . This demonstrates that those living in poverty have no way to escape it as they cannot challenge their exploitation; Eva’s attempt to strike saw her fired; the institutes meant to help them are prejudiced against them.
	<i>“The rude way he spoke ... it was quite extraordinary!”</i>	Priestley’s use of the adjective “rude” reveals Mrs Birling’s perception of the Inspector as disrespectful. In doing so, she attempts to undermine his authority, devalidating his argument, meaning that they don’t have to take responsibility for their actions.
	<i>“What business is it of yours?”</i>	Priestley’s use of this rhetorical question evidences the arrogance of Mrs Birling and her sense of superiority . This is clear as the Inspector’s job is to “ask questions” and therefore anything related to the death of Eva



		Smith is the Inspector's " business ".
Class	"Her husband's social superior"	Mrs Birling is, as Priestley describes her in the stage directions , her husband's " social superior ". Therefore, her upper class social etiquette and mannerisms are not natural to Mr Birling and we see that this causes embarrassment to Mrs Birling; image, the way they are perceived by others, is everything.
	"Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things"	Mrs Birling admonishes Mr Birling when he compliments his own chef, accidentally betraying that he is not from the same class as his wife, who tells him that he isn't " supposed to say such things ". Mrs Birling desires to maintain an image of not associating with, and almost ignoring the existence of, lower-class people.
	"Disgusting affair"	She is critical of Gerald's " disgusting affair " as a result of its inter-class nature , rather than because of his disloyalty to Sheila.
	"girls of that class"	This makes it clear that her rejection of Eva's case was purely based on prejudice , shown by Mrs Birling's generalisation " girls of that class ". The determiner 'that' demonstrates contempt of the working class and is further evidence of how deep-rooted the class divide was in 20th century Britain.
Empathy	"A rather cold woman"	Priestley's use of the stage directions to describe Mrs Birling as a " cold woman " would have been perceived as an oxymoron at the time. Contemporary societal norms dictated that women were meant to be loving, maternal and emotional. Therefore, describing Mrs Birling as emotionally " cold " is perhaps an attempt by Priestly to convey that such a detached attitude towards suffering is unnatural.
	"You'll have to get used to that, just as I had"	Mrs Birling provides no comfort to her daughter, Sheila, when she feels insecure



		about Gerald's absence (and potential affair), instead upholding patriarchal norms by telling her to " get used to that " feeling. This is a demonstration of a societal double standard; contemporary women shunned if they did not abstain from sex outside marriage, while men were not condemned for doing so.
	<i>"Claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples"</i>	Mrs Birling perceives the working class as being less human , with less complex emotions, and feels that it is inappropriate for Eva to behave in a way that doesn't conform to her expectations of her class.

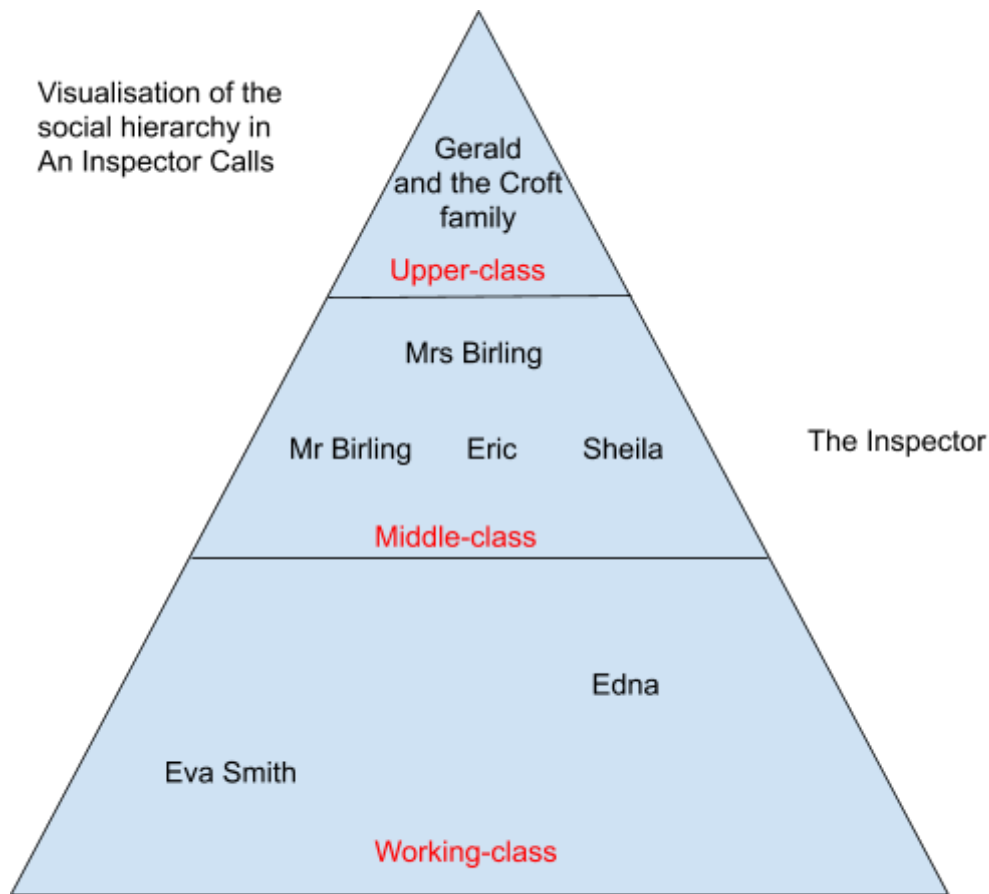


Figure 1

