

**AN INSPECTOR CALLS by J B PRIESTLEY**  
**MRS BIRLING**

notes taken from various sources

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**THE PURPOSE OF THE PLAY**

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“It is a lesson in civics invested with tension and cleverly manipulated into the form, not merely of a well-made play, but a play so well made that each of its theatrical surprises extends and deepens the lesson. Alternatively, or additionally, it may be seen as an updated morality play, with Birling perhaps representing avarice, Mrs Birling pride, Sheila envy and anger, Croft lust, and Eric lust, gluttony and sloth...”

*Benedict Nightingale (1982)*

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**HER NAME**

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Sybil, like Gerald and Sheila, is a name brought to Britain by the Normans,

- It also symbolises power and oppression
  - There is also a heavy irony involved in this name
    - Once again, much of Priestley’s audience would have been educated at grammar schools and public schools
      - They would all know Greek mythology, and most would have learned some Greek alongside their Latin
        - In Greek and Roman legend, there were ten sibyls, who were female prophets at different holy sites
          - They were revered, looked up to as having divine knowledge
            - This is so ironic to Priestley, because he deliberately portrays her as having very little knowledge:
              - she does not know that Alderman Meggarty is a predator
              - she does not know that Eric is potentially alcoholic, (when Sheila and Gerald know about both)
              - and of course she does not see, as Sheila does, that Eric must be the father of Eva’s child
              - finally, she does not see that denying charity to Eva was immoral

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**HER AGE**

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“His wife is about fifty”

- Priestley insists that Birling should be slightly older, “in his middle fifties”.
  - This pattern will be deliberately echoed in the relative ages of their daughter Sheila and her older fiancé Gerald

- This implies that the Birlings were once just like Sheila and Gerald
  - This will be important when we ask ourselves at the end of the play if they have truly learned The Inspector's lesson
    - If they share the same age gap as Arthur and Sybil, perhaps they are more likely to marry, and perhaps Sheila is therefore less likely to live out the lesson The Inspector teaches her

## MR. BIRLING'S SOCIAL SUPERIOR

‘a rather cold woman and her husband's social superior.’

- This juxtaposition suggests that Priestley believes being socially “superior” also makes a person “cold” and unfeeling towards others
  - He wants to change this in his audience.
    - Another reason for this is to emphasise the division between husband and wife, so that there is an element of conflict which matches the seating arrangement
      - Another ambiguity is also deliberately placed in front of us. Did she marry Arthur because she loved him, therefore ignoring his lower social status?
        - This is a parallel with Gerald choosing to marry Sheila, who has a lower social status and is “not good enough” for Gerald in the eyes of his parents
          - After the end of the play, we ask if this parallel will continue, and if Sheila will therefore marry Gerald.

Another view about Mr and Mrs. Birling's marriage is that Mr. Birling has married above himself and he has, no doubt, encouraged his daughter to do the same.

- It was possible for people of inferior classes to marry above them if they were able to offer enough money
  - This seems to be how Mr. Birling married Mrs. Birling
    - Perhaps he simply had enough money to be able to marry above himself

## OBSESSED WITH SOCIAL APPEARANCES

‘Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things —’

- It is for the guest to compliment the food, not the host.
  - Mrs Birling has to put her husband right on the social niceties.
    - Her obsession with social appearances supersedes any sense of morality and ethics she has
      - She tells Sheila she'll ‘have to get used to’ the fact that ‘men with important business sometimes have to spend nearly all their energy on their business’
        - The subtext here is that it is more important for her to submit to Gerald and put up with his cheating ways because marrying him would raise Sheila and the whole family's social status and so she puts social status above esteem, dignity and moral excellence
          - The fact that she instructs however doubles the effect of her pride and leaves the audience in no doubt about her obsession with social appearances because she is not only lowering her own moral standards but is instructing her daughter to do the same

- Her obsession with social appearances is epitomised in the revelation of her rejection of Eva Smith's plea for assistance, simply because Sheila assumed the Birling name
  - She is the last person to have contact with Eva and therefore is the final person she interacts with before she commits suicide, killing not only herself, but the unborn baby as well, thus reflecting the 'cold' description in the stage directions at the beginning
    - Priestley appears to be pointing out pride is not only repulsive, but if it exists in those with power, it can lead to the death of innocent people.

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### SOCIAL INFLUENCE vs SOCIAL IGNORANCE

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Sybil Birling is an unsympathetic woman with some public influence, sitting on charity organisations and having been married two years ago to the Lord Mayor, Arthur Birling.

- She has a lack of understanding of how other people live and thinks that all classes behave in a certain way,
  - In particular, she had a stereotypical view of the lower classes
    - this is shown in her snobbish comment "[a girl of that sort](#)" and in her unwillingness to believe that a lower class girl would refuse to take stolen money or marry a foolish young man responsible for her pregnancy.

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### IGNORORANCE

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Mrs Birling is a very naive character.

- She doesn't think there is any problem in her family at all and all problems exist outside, only seeing what she wants to see.
  - She is quite prepared to put the blame onto the father of the child because she doesn't know the father is her own son.
    - It is only when Mrs Birling realises that her son, Eric, was the father of Eva Smith's child and her actions have resulted in the death of her own grandchild that she begins to show any signs of remorse.
      - The speed at which she recovers after the inspector leaves reflects her coldness and lack of conscience.

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### PRIESTLEY, TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY

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'[Now Arthur if you've no more to say](#)' –

- Mrs Birling is conscious that her husband is likely to embarrass himself in front of Gerald and wishes to draw his speech to a swift conclusion.
  - It was normal in aristocratic circles for the ladies to retire after a meal, allowing the gentlemen to smoke.

Sybil regards interest in Eva's problems as a symptom of morbidity.

- She denies concern and responsibility,
  - even when Goole tells her that, as chairwoman of a charitable organization, she herself had denied one of Eva's final appeals for aid

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## THE PLAY'S CIRCULAR STRUCTURE

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It should be noted that *An Inspector Calls* has a circular structure independent of its three continuous acts.

- In a sort of prologue, the Birlings and Gerald Croft are first seen on their own, celebrating the marriage alliance between their families, who 'are no longer competing, but are working together – for lower costs and higher prices'.
  - After this introductory section, the Inspector arrives and interviews all the main characters in turn, concluding with Eric.
    - Finally, in a form of epilogue, the Birlings and Gerald are again left alone to 'settle' things.
      - This section of the play is the most important, since it deals with the unspoken question of whether the characters on stage have learned anything from the Inspector's intervention in their lives.
        - The answer to this question is that Sheila and Eric have learned something; Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald have not.

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## MRS BIRLING'S FUNCTION IN THE CIRCULAR STRUCTURE

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'I must say, we are learning something tonight.'

- This quote is ironic because Mrs Birling shows us that she learns nothing from the inspector's lesson

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## HOW THE CIRCULAR STRUCTURE REFLECTS THE BIRLINGS

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the Inspector leaves the Birling house only, as he himself states, when he is satisfied that the whole family will remember the individual and collective lessons he has taught them:

- 'No, I don't think any of you will forget' (56) he says.
  - He also leaves them with the not-so-veiled threat of communist revolution ('fire and blood and anguish', *ibid.*) if they do forget.

The avoidance of this 'fire and blood and anguish' is obviously contingent upon a change in hearts and minds:

- specifically, in the abandonment of what might be called the 'Birling doctrine' of each person looking out for his own best interests regardless of the whole.
  - The circularity of the play's structure, therefore, mirrors the circularity of the character arcs of Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald – those who do not 'learn their lesson'.
    - These three begin the play with an assumed set of bourgeois prejudices (essentially derived from laissez-faire capitalism)
      - that are challenged by the Inspector's covert narration of Eva Smith's life and death.
        - But by the ending, all three have reverted to their previous way of thinking.

- They have come full circle, as Sheila opines: ‘you’re beginning all over again to pretend that nothing much has happened –’
  - The result of this reversion back to the laissez-faire mindset they displayed at the beginning results in the phone ringing again, as it did in Act 1 and the news that ‘a girl has just died... and a police inspector is on his way’
    - If we take the deaths to represent the two world wars, we can see how Priestley is suggesting that capitalist pride, represented by Mrs Birling, and the failure to recognise and learn from the mistakes of pride, was one of the driving factors towards WWII.

## PRIESTLEY’S PURPOSE

To be caught in a time-loop – if that is indeed what has happened to the Birling family – is to be without hope of change:

- it is potentially as powerful an image of damnation as that found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis Clos*, with its ‘closed doors’ and its ‘L’enfer, c’est les autres.’
  - Neither Sartre, nor Priestley, however, are introducing metaphysical ideas into their plays for theological reasons.
    - Priestley’s point is that the Birlings – and bourgeois society in general – are trapped in a vicious circle of self-serving prejudice from which they do not have the imagination and generosity of heart to remove themselves, despite the stern rebukes of the Inspector.
      - The timeloop occurs, in this reading of the play, as a consequence of their pretending ‘nothing much has happened’, and the ‘judgement’ on them implied by the second inspector’s imminent arrival may be seen as a faint foreshadowing of the future ‘fire and blood and anguish’ with which the first inspector threatened them.

## IMPORTANT QUOTES

‘And if you'd take some steps to find this young man and then make sure that he's compelled to confess in public his responsibility – instead of staying here asking quite unnecessary questions – then you really would be doing your duty.’

I don't think we want any further details of this disgusting affair - (ACT 2)  
 “It’s disgusting to me”

## Act 1

**Pg 2:** *'Arthur you're not supposed to say such things'*

**Pg 3:** *'Sheila! What an expression! Really, the things you girls pick up these days!'*

**Pg 3:** *'Now Sheila don't tease him. When you're married you'll realise that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business.'*

**Pg 4:** *'Now Arthur, I don't think you ought to talk business on an occasion like this.'*

**Pg Unknown:** **Thinks her family are perfect** *'(staggered) It isn't true. You know him, Gerald - and you're a man - you must know it isn't true.'*

## Act 2

**Pg 30: Classist Snob. Thinks she is socially and morally superior** *'I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class -'*

**Pg 30:** *'That - I consider - is a trifle impertinent, Inspector'*

**Pg 30:** *'Please don't contradict me like that'*

**Pg 30: Accuses Sheila of staying for:** *'Nothing but morbid curiosity'*

**Pg 31:** *'I'm talking to the inspector now if you don't mind'*

**Pg 31: Intimidation** *'You know of course that my husband was lord Mayor only two years ago and that he's still a magistrate.'*

**Pg 32: Lying to cover her back** *'Though naturally I don't know anything about this girl'*

**Pg 33:** *'Over excited... And she refuses to go.'*

**Pg 34: Ignorant** *'It would be much better if Sheila didn't listen to this story at all'*

**Pg 35: Thinks upper class are perfect** *'(staggered) Well, really! Aldermant Meggarty! I must say, we are learning something tonight'*

**Pg 38:** *'It's disgusting to me.'*

**Facade to make her look good** *'(with dignity) Yes. We've done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases.'*

**Page 41:** *'I don't understand you Inspector'* **Page 42:** *'And if I was, what business is it of yours?'*

**Pg 43: Classist Snob because Eva used her name.** *'Yes I think it was simply a piece of gross impertinence.'*

**Pg 43:** *'Yes, I think it was simply a piece of gross impertinence – quite deliberate – and naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case.'*

**Pg 43:** *'But I think she had only herself to blame'*

**Pg 44: Snobbish Attitude** *'If you think you can bring any pressure to bear upon me, Inspector, you're quite mistaken. Unlike the other three, I did nothing I'm ashamed of or that won't bear investigation.'*

**Pg 44:** *'You have no power to make me change my mind.'*

**Pg 44:** I didn't like her manner. She'd impertinently made use of our name, though she pretended afterwards it just happened to be the first she thought of. She had to admit, after I began questioning her, that she had no claim to the name, that she wasn't married, and that the story she told me first – about a husband who'd deserted her – was quite false. It didn't take me long to get the truth – or some of the truth – out of her.

**Pg 44:** *'Simply a gross piece of impertinence'*

**Pg 45: Gets rid of blame on her.** *'I'll tell you what I told her. Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility.'*

**Pg 46: Blames her own husband** *'(agitated now) Oh, stop it, both of you. And please remember before you start accusing me of anything again that it wasn't I who had her turned out of her employment – which probably began it all.'*

**Pg 46:** *'All a lot of nonsense- I didn't believe a word of it. '*

**Pg 47: Classist Snob** *'As if a girl of that sort would refuse money.'*

**Pg 47:** *'I'm sorry she should have come to such a horrible end. But I accept no blame for it at all.'*

**Pg 47:** *'I blame the young man who was the father of the child she was going to have. If, as she said, he didn't belong to her class, and was some drunken young idler, then that's all the more reason why he shouldn't escape. He should be made an example of. If the girl's death is due to anybody, then it's due to him.'*

**Pg 48:** *'(severely) You're behaving like an hysterical child tonight.'*

**Pg 49: Naive, Ignorant** *'I don't believe it. I won't believe it'*

**Pg 49:** *'(understanding now) But surely...I mean...it's ridiculous...'*

## Act 3

**Pg 52:** *'(with a cry) Oh – Eric – how could you?'*

**Pg 55:** *'(very distressed now) No – Eric – please – I didn't know – I didn't understand-'*

**Pg 62: Snob** *'(Triumphantly) Didn't I tell you? Didn't I say I couldn't imagine a real police'*

*inspector talking like that to us?'*

**Page 63:** *'I felt it all the time. He never talking like one. He never even looked like one'*

**Pg 63:** *'I wish I'd been here when that man first arrived. I'd have asked him a few questions before I allowed him to ask us any.'*

**Pg 63:** *'I was the only one who didn't give in to him'*

**Pg 70:** *'Gerald you've argued this very cleverly and I'm most grateful'*