



Act 1

Sheila Birling has become engaged to Gerald Croft and as a result the Birling family have enjoyed a family dinner together. Mr Birling makes grand speeches giving his views on technology and industrial relations, emphasising his opinion that a man should only care about himself and his family and no-one else.

Their evening is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a police inspector by the name of Goole who is making enquiries into the suicide of a young woman called Eva Smith. The inspector has a photograph of the woman and from it Mr Birling admits that he once employed her in his factory but had sacked her over an industrial dispute over wages. Gerald Croft backs Mr Birling's belief that he acted within reason.

Sheila and her brother Eric react differently, feeling that their father was harsh in sacking her. However, upon seeing the photograph herself, Sheila realises that she also sacked the same woman from her job as a shop assistant. During the course of Act I it becomes clear that the inspector has an uncanny knowledge about the family's dealing with the girl. He then announces that the girl has in fact changed her name from Eva Smith to Daisy Renton.

The reaction that this causes in Gerald makes it obvious that he knows the girl also. By the time we reach the end of the act the inspector is already suggesting that many people share the responsibility for the miserable existence of the young girl which prompted her to take her own life.

Act 2

There is by now an evident tension between Sheila and Gerald which becomes heightened when he admits that he had had an affair with Daisy Renton in the spring of the previous year. Whilst feeling angry with Gerald for his involvement with the girl she does have a certain respect for his openness and honesty with his admission.

Mrs Birling makes attempts to intimidate the inspector and control the situation. Despite this, Sheila feels that it is foolish to try and hinder the inspector's enquiries and this appears to be well founded. At the point when Eric is out of the room Mrs Birling is forced to admit that she also has an involvement with the girl. Two weeks earlier she had refused the girl who had come to her seeking help. It is then revealed that the girl was pregnant and the suspicion now points at Eric as being the father of the unborn child.

Act 3

Eric confesses that he was he who had got the girl pregnant. He also admits to having stolen money from his father's firm in an attempt to support her. When he hears that his mother refused to help the girl he is horrified and blames her for both the death of the girl and of the unborn child. At this point it becomes clear that nay family unity has now dissolved.

The inspector has therefore done his job by showing each of them that they had a part to play in ruining the girl's life. He then goes on to make a speech about the consequence of social irresponsibility which is in direct contrast to the speeches made by Mr Birling at the start of the play. The inspector then leaves.

Gerald and Mr Birling begin to have doubts about the inspector's identity and are gradually able to prove that the man was not a real police inspector. This then raises further doubts between them all about whether they have been talking about the same girl or indeed whether any girl had actually killed herself at all. Gerald telephones the infirmary who confirm that they have no record of any girl dying there that afternoon.

Naturally there is a general feeling of relief upon hearing this. Sheila and Eric still feel guilty about their action although they seem to have been changed by the recent events. The others, however, feel a greater sense of relief and their confidence in the rightness of their own actions is restored. At that point the telephone rings and Mr Birling answers it. It is the police calling to say that a young woman has just died on her way to the infirmary and that an inspector is on his way to make enquiries about her death.

Commentary

CAST

Arthur Birling (Father)

Sybil Birling (Mother)

Sheila Birling (Daughter)

Eric Birling (Son)

Gerald Croft (Engaged to Sheila)

Inspector Goole

Eva Smith / Daisy Renton (Girlfriend of Gerald and Eric)

AIC Act 1

1 **What kind of mood is present in the house at the start of the play?**

The mood is one of celebration and good natured enjoyment. We can see from the surroundings/clothes/speech that this is place of luxury and wealth.

What event is taking place?

The engagement party of Sheila and Gerald

2 **What do we understand by the idea that Mrs Birling is 'Her husband's social superior'?**

Her family have been well established and wealthy for a long time. They are 'old money'. Arthur has become rich by building up his factory and is considered not as posh as his wife.

3 **When we say that Birling is rather 'provincial' in his speech, what do we mean?**

Sometimes, when he gets excited or angry he loses his posh accent he has developed and slips back into his old, uneducated, local accent. This tells us he is putting on his accent to seem posher than he really is. Things like this are

important to Birling. Status is everything and certainly more important to him than being a good father or boss.

4 What does Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft mean to Arthur Birling in terms of what people think of him?

He isn't too bothered about the happiness of his daughter. He is delighted because he thinks he will become associated with the Croft name. Croft's are a bigger, older and more established firm. He is not a caring, loving father. He is self-centred, ambitious and greedy for success and recognition.

5 What do we understand when Sheila says about Gerald (p3) '*Except for last summer- when you never came near me, and I wondered what had happened to you*'?

We are instantly suspicious that Gerald had been up to something. We realise Sheila is naive and innocent to some degree now. We are intrigued. What has he been doing? But Gerald is evasive and guides the chat away from any issues.

6 Look at Birling's 'History' speech. What is his attitude to the future? How does he think things are going to be in the world? What do we learn about the character of Birling from this speech?

Birling's speech proves that he doesn't understand much of what is going on in the outside world. All of his predictions about employment strikes, the Titanic and the possibility of war will eventually be proved totally wrong. He is only concerned about his own success and his own name becoming better known. He doesn't care about others.

7 How does his attitude change once the men are alone?

He becomes quite macho and speaks in a more 'laddish' way once the women are gone. He is sexist in that he sees men as being able to understand more and discuss different things to women. He talks about how women are only interested in clothes and looking nice etc.

8 What does Birling mean when he says he learnt in the 'Good hard school of experience'?

He hasn't been to university like Gerald or his own kids. He is resentful of this, so hides it by saying his education was developed on the streets growing up in tougher times. This connotes a feeling of insecurity about his background compared to the more traditionally Upper Class backgrounds of both his wife and Gerald Croft.

9 **Why does Eric react 'sharply' to the joking of Arthur Birling and Gerald Croft?**

Think about the relationship of father, son and Gerald.

It becomes quite clear that Arthur's relationship with Gerald is more father-son like than that of Arthur-Eric. Arthur clearly enjoys Gerald's company much more. Eric resents that. Arthur, as usual, is unaware of how unpleasant he is being towards his own son.

10 **How would you describe the mood in the room before the Inspector arrives?**

Happy, celebratory, mostly upbeat. A general atmosphere of being happy with one's life. As though nothing could ever possibly sabotage or change it.

What impressions do the stage directions give us of the Inspector?

We are aware that he is a man of importance and not to be messed with. Immediately he is seen as a presence.

How did the girl die?

She apparently swallowed bleach

14 **What can we say about the stage direction '*Cutting through massively*'? What does it tell us about the manner in which the Inspector is speaking?**

He is not a man to put up with Birling's waffling and self-importance. He is not impressed by Birling and all his blustering speeches. He is the one in charge now and he gets that point over really quickly. Birling's status cannot be used with this man.

15 **Why does the Inspector not allow each of them to see the photograph do you think?**

He is hiding the truth from each of them. We now begin to think that perhaps they have all been guilty of treating different girls badly and this is the Inspector's way of showing them their faults individually.

16 **How does Birling react to the news that he once employed the girl?**

Not that concerned. He will never see that he really has anything to do with any of this. He is not emotional about it at all. He is a selfish man. He can't even comprehend that he may have done anything wrong at all.

17 **Why did Birling sack the girl? (Look on p14 also)**

She led the strike action. He identified her as the trouble-maker. She was actually just sticking up for her rights and asking for a little more money which was perfectly reasonable. Birling was just picking on her to get rid of trouble-makers. This is typical of his bullying, unconcerned ways.

18 **Why does Birling not want Eric to remind the Inspector about his speech that said that it was ridiculous for people to be expected to look after each other and care for each other?**

This is Birling's point of view. He believes that it is silly for people to look after each other. . *HOWEVER THIS IS THE ESSENCE OF THE BOOK. PRIESTLEY WANTS TO US TO BELIEVE EXACTLY THAT. **FOR SOCIETY TO GET ON, WE MUST ALL LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER AND THINK ABOUT EACH OTHER*** . Birling goes totally against this.

19 **How does it become clear that Mr Birling had victimised the girl? I.e. treated her differently to other workers? What does this tell us about Birling's character?**

He is mean and a bully. He picked on her because she spoke out against him.

20 **What is Birling trying to do when he tells the Inspector that the Police Chief is an old friend of his?**

Mistakenly he is trying to force the Inspector into being impressed with his friends in high places/connections. The Inspector of course does not care in the slightest about who Birling knows. He is totally unimpressed.

- 21 **What does the phrase “Why shouldn’t they try for higher wages?” tell us about Eric and how he is very different to his father?**

Eric is more sympathetic and nicer than his father. He understands that it is perfectly reasonable for workers to ask for more money and try and speak to owners. He is appalled the way his father has acted but it doesn’t surprise him. He has had the same treatment himself and this allows him to understand how badly the workers must feel. Both he and they are victims of Birling’s disinterest.

- 22 **What does Sheila’s reaction to the incident tell us about her character? (p17)**

She too has normal, human feelings. She is upset and realises she has done wrong. This is important to remember as Sheila is the one (along with Gerald) who at the end of the book actually shows pity and an acceptance she had been guilty of something.

- 23 **How did the girl get on after she had left the Birling Factory? What kind of state was she in?**

She had no money, nowhere to live; she suddenly really began to struggle. Losing her job was really bad for her.

- 24 **What does the Inspector say to insult Birling? (Bottom p19)**

He accuses Birling of paying awful money, ‘cheap labour’. He is not a good boss. He treats his staff as badly as he can get away with, within the limits of the law.

- 25 **How did the girl’s life briefly improve? What happened to her?**

She got a decent job at Millward’s clothes shop, where she began to do really well. She was happy for a brief period of time.

- 26 **At the bottom of p20 why does Sheila begin to get worried?**

She clearly begins to remember how badly she has behaved in the past and probably remembers her atrocious behaviour towards the shop girl. At her worst, Sheila can be a spoilt brat, a silly little rich girl who just wants her own way. She treats the shop girl appallingly.

29 **And, once again, why does the Inspector probably insist that Eric stays? What can we predict about how the story might develop?**

We are beginning to realise by now that, actually, **everybody** is involved in some way in taking responsibility for the tragic situation.

30 **What did Sheila do to make Eva/Daisy lose her job at Millwards?**

She took offence because she thought the girl was laughing at her, even though she knew full well she wasn't.

31 **Why was Sheila able to force Millwards to do what they did?**

Her family were well known and important and she probably spent a lot of money in there. The power of her status as a Birling would have made it pretty easy for the Millward's bosses to agree to her demands.

32 **What is the second name the girl is known by?**

Daisy Renton / Eva Smith

33 **What do we now know is Gerald's connection to the situation?**

Gerald met her in the Palace Bar and began an affair with her.

34 **What are Sheila's wise words at the end of the chapter? What is she suggesting?**

"I hate to think how much he knows. You'll see. "She is beginning to show how she has judged the situation much more clearly and more quickly than her parents. This is the start of Sheila's development.

AIC Act 2

Explain the atmosphere between Gerald and Sheila at the start of Act 2

The atmosphere is tense, frosty and awkward. Sheila now realises that Gerald cheated on her. Due to the social situation of the time we do not see Sheila rant and rave at Gerald. But she can certainly let him know what she feels.

Why is Sheila determined to stay?

She doesn't want to be the typical female and pushed out of the door and not be part of the discussions. This totally concerns her. She is growing as a woman and as an important part of the family.

Why/ how is Sheila's reaction to the tragic news of the girl very different to that of both her father and her mother? (P29)

Sheila is genuinely sorry for her role. She accepts she has done wrong. Her mother simply will not accept this. Mrs Birling remains convinced that she has no responsibility for the events.

How does Mrs Birling begin her conversation with the Inspector? What point does she try and establish straight from the start?

She tries to distance herself from any responsibility. She is clear that the girl's problems were none of her concern. She is the least concerned of all the family members.

What wise advice does Sheila again come up with at the bottom of p29?

Sheila advises everybody to stop trying to hide the truth from the Inspector. She realises very early on that there is no hiding the truth from him. She is showing a wisdom her parents do not possess.

What does the Inspector mean when he speaks Line 6/7 on p30? (Clue it's almost a compliment to Sheila)

He suggests that the younger generation (Sheila/Eric) are more likely to see the way they have made mistakes and try and make amends.

What does Mrs Birling's statement 'Girls of that class....' imply about her as a person?

She is a snob. She thinks poorer people are not as good or decent as folks like her who have money. She equates money with being 'better'.

Halfway down p31, how does Mrs Birling again try and impress the Inspector?

She tries to impress him by saying that her husband knew the Lord Mayor. Of course, as we now know, the Inspector is totally unimpressed or threatened by this type of bullying tactics. It also tells us Mrs Birling, like her husband, has failed to understand the seriousness of this situation.

And how does Gerald show that he is beginning to understand the Inspector means business? (p31)

He, like Sheila, is becoming more aware that the Inspector is seeing through everybody's excuses and arguments. He is beginning to change his mind.

Why does Mrs Birling say the word 'Sheila' "sharply"?

She never wants to give the impression that her children might be going against her or behaving in some way that would cause her embarrassment.

What home-truth does Sheila suggest to Mrs Birling about Eric?

She implies that Eric is well used to drinking. He's not the naive, inexperienced person Mrs wants to believe he is. He has his own problems.

What does Sheila mean when she says they shouldn't "build a wall only to be knocked flat"?

She is showing awareness that there will be danger in trying to create a web of lies around this situation. Another early sign that she is more intuitive than the elders.

P33

What does the Inspector mean when he says "You needn't give me any rope"?

He is letting them know that he has, in his opinion, plenty of information and knowledge to implicate them in this tragedy. They don't need to give him any more. Sheila is aware that "We'll hang ourselves" anyway. He will simply not let them get away with facing their own 'demons'.

P34

Why will Sheila not be persuaded to leave?

She is adamant that she wants to know exactly what Gerald was up to. She will not be sidelined or marginalised. She is showing her growing independence.

Why was Gerald first attracted to Daisy Renton?

Because she was not like the usual unattractive, seedy, almost prostitute types who generally went there. This, of course, makes us wonder why Gerald went there anyway and what it says about his character. Clearly he has loose morals. He was happy to frequent bars looking for women while he had a steady girlfriend.

P35

What type of person was Alderman Meggarty? Why does this surprise Mrs Birling?

He was a womaniser, loud and aggressive. Mrs Birling is surprised because he is a councillor and, in her blinkered view of important people, she can't believe he would be such an unappealing character. This tells us of her snobbery again.

What did Gerald do to rescue her?

He tricked Meggarty into leaving.

P36

What life-story does Gerald get off Daisy?

He gets a vague and undeveloped story about her past. She is secretive and gives little away. She is self-contained and not looking for sympathy. But she is on the verge of becoming desperate. She is clearly reaching a low point.

P37

What reasons does Gerald give for why he was attracted to Daisy?

She was grateful. He liked the fact that there was a spark of humanity and she wasn't just a conquest to him, another girl he'd chased etc. She seemed more normal and likeable.

What does Gerald mean when he says "I didn't feel about her as she felt about me"?

He was aware that, while he did like her, she was more 'into' him than he was her. The girl liked Gerald a lot but he simply couldn't offer that back, even if he wanted to. This is due to his social status/family ties etc.

P39

How did Daisy take the end of the affair? How did it leave Gerald feeling?

She was realistic. She had enjoyed it and was grateful for the time. However she knew he could never take it further. Their social positions meant that anything more serious was impossible.

What did Daisy do after the end of the affair with Gerald?

She went away to be on her own and reflect on her time with Gerald. Rather tragically, we learn that she thought she would never experience such happiness again. This reinforces the low expectations people who are on the poorer edges of society have of themselves. People like Eva/Daisy almost felt as though they didn't deserve happiness.

P40

Why does Sheila begin to see Gerald in a new light? What reason does she give for this change in her thoughts?

While she is clearly angry at him for the affair, she admits that he did behave in a generous way to the girl and that he treated her respectfully and not just as a plaything. She respects his honesty in admitting the truth.

P41

Describe Mrs Birling's conversation with the Inspector. What words would sum up the exchange?

She is offhand, rude and argumentative. She is constantly trying to put the Inspector in his place. He, of course, is completely unruffled by this.

What do you think the Inspector means when he says "Public men have responsibilities as well as privileges" to Mr Birling?

The Inspector means that Birling has a duty of care to his employees. He needs to respect them and treat them well. They are workers not slaves and he has to remember that they have feelings and worries too. Birling is dumbfounded by this. As a capitalist, he simply sees workers as a means to an end or tools to help him make money. He genuinely doesn't see why he has to bestow 'pastoral' care too.

What was Mrs Birling's involvement with Daisy Renton? How did she come into contact with her?

The girl came to ask for a grant of charity from the Foundation Mrs Birling chaired.

Why was she particularly so angry?

She used the name Birling. Daisy/Eva didn't want to give her own name or cause trouble. Mrs Birling was horrified that somebody could try and 'use' her precious family name.

P44

In her longest speech, describe Mrs Birling's attitude and mind-set here as she battles with the Inspector.

She absolutely will not, under any circumstances, accept even the tiniest portion of blame. She completely refuses to believe she is anything other than right. She is dismissive towards her own family and thinks they have been weak under questioning from the Inspector. She seems to have very little humanity in her at all.

P45

How does the Inspector sum up the treatment of Daisy/Eva on lines 10/11? What does he mean?

He tells them that this cruel, pointless rejection (That was the point of the charity after all) was the thing that sent the girl over the edge. It was the final straw for this desperately struggling young girl.

At the bottom of p45 how does the Inspector really begin to criticise the actions of Mrs Birling?

He is brutal in his condemnation. He pulls no punches in reminding Mrs Birling that she has been the most heartless and cruel in this process. She persuaded others and rejected her for ridiculous reasons when it was a matter of life and death. He is devastating in his criticism of her.

What is Birling worried about at the end of p45?

He is worried that this situation will make him look bad in the community. He's not worried at all about the girl of course. Just his own skin.

P46

How does Mrs Birling begin to set herself up for a fall in her words throughout p46?

She begins to heavily blame the father of the girl's child for all these problems. She doesn't have the understanding or vision to realise her own son Eric is actually responsible. Another

example of her being a poor mother. She goes for the simple, easy answer and one that she naturally assumes will leave her without any guilt at all.

Show how the Inspector emphasises his authority

He slams Birling verbally in a way that probably nobody ever had before. "Don't stammer and yammer man!" Birling is used to getting his own way on everything. Nobody dares to ever put him in his place until now. The Inspector has crushed him.

P47

What excuse did Daisy give for coming to the charity? I.e. Why didn't she have any money?

She said she wanted to protect the reputation of the younger man who'd fathered her child. She didn't want to get him into trouble. This highlights the moral differences between the two participants. She, even in her darkest hour, was a good and caring young person.

What quote shows us that Mrs Birling simply won't give in?

"I accept no blame at all"

P48

Who does Mrs Birling blame for the problem? How does Sheila try and stop her? How has the Inspector trapped her?

She blames the unknown father. Sheila, showing more and more maturity and perception realises it's Eric. The Inspector has allowed them to give him the "rope" to hang themselves.

Even Birling clicks "*(Suddenly terrified it's not my boy is it?)*

AIC Act 3

P50

What does Eric mean when he says “You know don’t you?”

Eric realises that The Inspector has simply been leading them to this moment. The moment that Eric has to admit he too was involved. It is an important moment for Eric.

How does Sheila view the situation? How does she sum it up?

She tells Eric it’s time to accept the situation and also that she told her mother that Eric likes to drink. Sheila is making huge steps as a respectable, brave and equal member of the family at this stage. She is maturing in front of our eyes.

Why does Mr Birling think that Sheila is being disloyal?

In his old fashioned way, he thinks the family should always stick together even if it means telling lies or not telling the truth.

P51

What does the stage direction that begins “Eric goes for a whisky” tell us about Eric and his situation?

It highlights his growing dependency on drinking as a means to dull the pain of his miserable existence. He is clearly an experienced and regular drinker.

What do we understand about Eric and the way he picked up Daisy/Eva? How did it happen? How did he behave?

It was unpleasant and almost aggressive. There is almost a suggestion that he half forced her to come with him. This reveals Eric at his lowest point. “I was in that state where a chap easily turns nasty”, suggesting he was almost forcing himself on her.

P52

Sum up how Eric felt about the girl

She was a plaything to him. Gerald had felt much more for her.

What dig does he get in at his father again?

He implies that some of Birling's political friends run around town with prostitutes. This is very strong language from Eric. It is a sign of how he feels desperate and cornered and almost as though he doesn't care anymore that he is so openly criticising his father. Like Sheila however, it is another sign of how the younger members of the family are growing up in this situation.

P53

What news changed the situation quite dramatically? How did he try and help her? What did he have to resort to?

The girl became pregnant. Desperate, Eric stole money from the family firm to give to her.

P54

What do we understand by the quote, "because you're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble – That's why"?

A crucial moment. This tells us that Eric has no real relationship with his father. That Birling is not a man to be relied on or who loves his son enough to look out for him and his welfare, especially when he is so clearly in a bad way. Birling is a million miles away from knowing his own son.

How did the girl react when she found out where the money was coming from?

When she discovered it was stolen she refused to accept any more. She again shows high moral values.

P55

How does Eric react when he hears the news that Mrs Birling had the opportunity to help her?

"The you killed her" He points the blame firmly at Mrs Birling for her despicable actions. "You killed your own grandchild" he says almost cruelly. He is horrified and wants to hurt her.

Explain how the Inspector takes charge again. How does he criticise Mrs Birling?

"Be quiet woman" He then goes on to summarise how each helped to contribute to her death. He saves special mention for her though "Remember what you did Mrs Birling..... Mrs Birling you turned her away when she most needed help"

P56

Look at the Inspector's famous speech, "But just remember this....Good night." What crucial message does he leave us with?

That unless we care for each other, society and life will crumble. We cannot be selfish. We have to look out for each other. In some way, we are all connected. He clearly warns us that if we don't then we are going to Hell. This is just as WW2 is about to begin; the perfect example of people not listening enough to each other.

P57

How do the family react once he's gone?

They argue amongst themselves. They blame each other. Birling worries again about scandal. Sheila shows some acceptance. Eric takes the opportunity again to wind up his father, showing how reckless he is becoming.

P58/59/60/61

How does the mystery begin to unravel?

They begin to retrace the conversation. They begin to pick potential holes in the story. Was everything as it seemed?

P61

What happens when Gerald returns? How does the momentum/mood change? How does Birling react to his arrival?

P62 Gerald is accepted back happily by Mr and Mrs Birling. This again shows how status conscious they are. Remember it's only an hour since it was revealed he had been cheating on their daughter! Gerald confirms that there is no Inspector Goole. Birling is delighted. Any hint of guilt or blame evaporates in his sheer excitement at the chance of there being no scandal.

How does Birling begin to use his authority again?

He almost begins to imply that he wasn't worried by the Inspector all along. This is nonsense of course as the Inspector had completely rattled him.

P63

What conclusion do Arthur, Sybil and Gerald come to? How does Mrs Birling assert herself?

They conclude that it was a hoax all along. They happily kid themselves it was all nothing.

P64/65

How do we observe the crucial difference of opinion between the younger and older members of the family?

The elders are happy, relieved and excited. The younger two are astonished that they now seem to be all happily forgetting about each of their awful behaviours. Whatever the outcome, it must be remembered that all five of them still definitely did all of these bad things.

P66/67/68/69

What crucial idea does Gerald suggest here?

Gerald suggests they had all been talking about a different girl. Nobody saw the same picture. It's possible they were all engaging with different people.

How do they resolve the issue?

Gerald rings the hospital (Note how he refers to himself as being from Croft's- status again trying to impress the receptionist). They confirm there have been no deaths that night.

P70

How is Gerald praised by the elder Birlings here?

They praise him for being cool under pressure. You get the clear feeling they like him more than their own children! Amazing considering what he's admitted to tonight! But they like him because of what he can bring to the family. His family ties.

P71

As we approach the end of the book, what is Sheila's and Eric's outlook?

They are appalled at the way the elders are rewriting history. They (Sheila and Eric) can't forget the lessons learned tonight. Their lives have been changed. This is the crucial difference. The youth are accepting blame and looking to change things for the better. The others are safe and happy in their old, selfish ways. This is the lesson Priestley wanted us to take away. As war began to envelop the world for the second time, Priestley wanted to put his faith and hope in the younger generation. This is why he created the characters of Sheila and Eric to contrast with the hopeless old ways of the parents.