

| Plot | Character | | | Context | |
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| <p>Act 1</p> <p>Set in April 1912, Brumley (Midlands). The Birling family and Gerald Croft are celebrating Sheila Birling's engagement to Gerald Croft with a dinner. Mr. Birling lectures his son, Eric Birling, and Gerald about the importance of every man looking out for himself if he wants to get on in life. Edna (the maid) announces that an inspector has arrived. Inspector Goole says that he is investigating the death of a young woman who committed suicide, Eva Smith. Mr. Birling is shown a photograph of Eva and, after initially denying recognising the woman in the photo, he remembers firing her in 1910 for organising a strike over workers' pay. Sheila recalls also having Eva sacked about her manner when served by her in an upmarket department store. The Inspector reveals that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald reveals to Sheila he had an affair with Daisy Renton.</p> | Inspector Goole | Priestley's mouthpiece; advocates social justice. | Righteous, powerful, unconventional, imposing, sardonic and mysterious. | <p>1912</p> <p>Just before the sinking of the Titanic and a couple of years before WW1. British society was completely divided by class. Those with the most money had the most power. Only men who owned property could vote; women couldn't vote. There was not much government support which is why charities were so important. Things were beginning to change: there was miner's strike in 1912 (the largest the country had ever seen) and the Labour Party formed in 1906 to represent the interests of the working class.</p> | |
| | Arthur Birling | Businessman and capitalist who is against social equality. A self-made man (new money). | Arrogant, pompous, selfish, stubborn, prejudiced and overconfident. | | |
| | Sybil Birling | Husband's social superior; believes in personal responsibility. | Cold, supercilious, prejudiced and remorseless. | | |
| | <p>Act 2</p> <p>Gerald explains to the Inspector that he had an affair with Eva but hasn't seen her since he ended their relationship back in Autumn 1911. Sheila gives her engagement ring back to Gerald. The Inspector turns his attention to Mrs. Birling. She confesses that she also had contact with Eva but that Eva gave herself a different name. Eva approached a charity chaired by Mrs. Birling to ask for help. Eva was desperate and pregnant but help was refused by Mrs. Birling because she was offended by the girl calling herself Mrs. Birling. She tells Eva that the baby's father should be made entirely responsible. She also tells Inspector Goole that the father should be held entirely responsible and be made an example of.</p> | Sheila Birling | Changes her views and pities Eva. Regrets her actions. | Curious, compassionate, astute, remorseful and sensitive. | <p>Women</p> <p>Women in 1912, regardless of social class, were seen as second-class citizens – a fact underlined by their lack of a right to vote. It was the deplorable state of working-class women's lives that prompted Emmeline Pankhurst to found the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. It was a women-only organization that campaigned for the vote for women. Pankhurst believed the lack of the vote was the key factor underpinning the inferior status of women in Edwardian Britain. The suffragettes fought to bring equality for women.</p> |
| | | Eric Birling | Drinks too much; regrets his actions. | Reckless, immature, frustrated and compulsive. | |
| | | Gerald Croft | Businessman engaged to Sheila and politically close to Birling. | Evasive and pragmatic. | |
| | | Eva Smith | Comes to represent victims of social injustice. | Emblematic, vulnerable, principled. | |
| <p>Act 3</p> <p>Eric is revealed as the father. He stole money from Mr. Birling's office to provide money to Eva. The Inspector delivers his final speech. After he leaves, the family begin to suspect that he was not a genuine police inspector. A phone call to the Chief Constable confirms this. Next, they phone the infirmary to be informed that no suicide case has been brought in. Mr. Birling, Mrs. Birling and Gerald congratulate themselves that it was all a hoax and they can continue as before. This attitude upsets Sheila and Eric. The phone rings. Mr. Birling announces to the family that a girl has just died on her way to the infirmary and a police officer is coming to question them.</p> | <p>Theatrical Stagecraft: Dramatic Devices</p> | | | <p>WW1 (1914-1918)</p> <p>WW1 was a watershed moment in European history. Survivors were disillusioned and felt betrayed by the men who sent them to war. Priestley described the war as a 'huge, murderous public folly' and felt that 'the British command specialized in throwing men away for nothing'. WW1 proved to be a turning point for the campaign for women's right to vote. During the war, suffragettes effectively put on hold their campaign of civil direct action in the interests of national unity. As men went to the Western Front, women proved how indispensable they were in the fields and armaments factories. By 1918 women over 30 were given the right to vote.</p> | |
| | Dramatic Irony | The audience knows what the characters don't. | | | |
| | Stage directions | Instructions for the actors; often revealing of a playwright's intentions. | | | |
| | Setting | Constant throughout (the Birlings' Dining Room) but subtle changes e.g. lighting to reflect a change in mood. | | | |
| | | | | | <p>1945</p> <p>Following the end of WW2, the majority of the British people, and particularly the working class and returning servicemen and women, did not want a return to pre-war Conservative economic policies which they blamed for the hardship of the 1930s. There was a mood for widespread social change. At the 1945 general election, Winston Churchill was defeated by the Labour Party headed by Clement Attlee. The Welfare State was created.</p> |