An Inspector Calls

AUTHOR BIO

Full Name: J.B. Priestley
Date of Birth: September 13, 1894
Place of Birth: Bradford, West Riding of Yorkshire, England
Date of Death: August 14, 1984
Brief Life Story: Priestley grew up in Manningham, England. His mother died when he was two years old and, at the age of sixteen, he left school to work as a junior clerk at a wool firm. He served and was injured in World War I and then went to study at Trinity College. Priestley hosted a popular radio show, “Postscripts,” from the beginning of World War II until the show was cancelled in 1940 after members of the Conservative Party—including Margaret Thatcher—complained about Priestley’s broadcasting his left-wing politics. He continued nevertheless to have a political presence in the UK: he and a group of friends founded the 1941 Committee, which advocated for a national wages policy and for railways, mines, and docks to come under public control; in 1942, he co-founded the Common Wealth Party, which sought to advance the causes of “Common Ownership,” “Vital Democracy” and “Morality in Politics.” Priestley wrote novels, plays, and newspaper articles throughout his life, including An Inspector Calls in 1945. He was married three times.

KEY FACTS

Full Title: An Inspector Calls
Genre: Mystery drama
Setting: 1912; a comfortable home in Brumley, England
Climax: Gerald returns to the Birling home after Goole has left, to report that the Inspector wasn’t actually a real inspector, and to hypothesize that the whole thing was a hoax—that there was no single girl that all of the Birlings had offended, and no suicide that they precipitated.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

When Written: 1945
Where Written: England
When Published: 1945 (play premiered in Soviet Union)
Literary Period: mid-20th century British drama, social realism
Related Literary Works: Insofar as the text is a political allegory of class tensions, it is reminiscent of Animal Farm, which also explores political conflict and the rise of Communism in a small representative narrative (though Animal Farm was strongly anti-Communist, Orwell was himself a Socialist). In its suspense and the structuring of its narrative around a scaffolding of revelations and reveals of true identity, it resembles many of Alfred Hitchcock’s 20th century thriller films, including Vertigo, To Catch a Thief, and North by Northwest.

Related Historical Events: The play takes place right before the First World War, during a moment of rising international tensions and significant industrial expansion. The industrial expansion resulted in a gain in influence and wealth for industrialists of the period (like Mr. Birling). The early decades of the 20th century also marked the end of the Victorian era, and the consequent loosening of the formerly rigid class system; the Labour Party, founded in 1900, was beginning to gain leverage and to become increasingly committed to socialist ideas. Socialism and Communism were also on an upswing in many places around the world. The Russian Revolution, in which Communist’s overthrew the Czar of Russia, began in 1917.

EXTRA CREDIT

Ghoulish Goole. Many interpretations of the text consider the Inspector’s ghostly name to be symbolic of the mystery that surrounds his character.

PLOT OVERVIEW

The play begins in a nice dining room, with the prosperous Birling family joyously celebrating the engagement of their daughter, Sheila, to Gerald Croft. Everybody is in good spirits. Mr. Birling gives a toast, and Gerald gives Sheila her engagement ring, which she puts on her finger very excitedly. Mr. Birling encourages Gerald and Sheila to ignore the pessimistic “silly talk” going around these days, and claims that fear of an inevitable war is “fiddlesticks.”

A Police Inspector arrives, and reports that he is investigating the suicide of a young woman who recently swallowed disinfectant and died in the Infirmary. When he mentions that her name was Eva Smith, Mr. Birling identifies that she used to work at his factory, before he forced her to leave when she became the ring-leader of a strike for higher wages.

Sheila returns to the room, and is very upset to hear about the girl’s tragic suicide. The Inspector goes on to tell the family that Eva Smith, after Birling put her out, was hired at a shop—Milward’s—but was fired on the basis of a customer’s complaint. When the Inspector shows Sheila a picture of the
The telephone rings. After Mr. Birling hangs up, he reports that the Police Inspector is on his way to ask some questions. The Birling parents prove these hypotheses to be correct after calls to the Police Department and to the Infirmary. The Birling parents are then called by Mr. Birling to meet him at the Infirmary. He tells them that he has learned from the police that the supposed Inspector was not really an inspector at all, and proposes his further inquiries and reminds him, to Sheila’s frustration, of the Birlings’ high social status. Despite her reluctance, Mrs. Birling finally admits to having used her influence in the Women’s Charity Organization to deny aid for Eva Smith because she was prejudiced against her and offended by the girl’s falsely assuming the name “Mrs. Birling.” After the revelations at the end of the play that the whole inspection was a hoax, Mrs. Birling prides herself on having resisted the Inspector more than the rest of her family. And, like her husband, she feels completely relieved of any responsibility she had felt previously.

Sheila — The daughter of Mr. Birling and Mrs. Birling, Sheila is a young woman in her early twenties who is generally excited about life and is engaged to Gerald Croft. She is most upset by the news of the girl’s suicide, and expresses the most remorse among the Birlings for her involvement in it. Throughout the play, she warns her mother against presumptuously putting up walls between themselves and the less fortunate girl, and, in the end, insists that it remains just as significant that the Birlings did what they confessed to doing despite the absence of a social scandal and legal consequence, or even any suicide.

Gerald Croft — Gerald is engaged to Sheila. During the inspection, Gerald admits to having had an affair with the girl in question—at the time, Daisy Renton—which prompts Sheila to return his engagement ring. Gerald comes out seeming the least guilty of all for the girl’s suicide. In the end, it is he who realizes that the whole inspection, and all of its premises, was a hoax. Nonetheless, he also seems less affected by the Inspector’s casting of blame than Sheila and Eric, and Sheila denies his offer to renew their engagement.

Mr. Birling — Mr. Birling is introduced as a “fairly prosperous” manufacturer and a family man with a wife and two children, Sheila and Eric. He is large-bodied and middle-aged, with easy manners and provincial speech. Birling is identified by the Inspector as the initiator of Eva Smith’s downfall: he refused her request for a raise in his factory and forced her to find work elsewhere. He is portrayed throughout the play as a fierce capitalist, who cares only for the prosperity of his own company—even at the sacrifice of his laborers’ well-being—and for the prospect of ever greater success. He further seems to care more for success than for his own children, as people. When, at the end of the play, the Birlings discover that the Inspector was a fraud and no suicide has taken place, Mr. Birling is triumphant and relieved that the revelations will not precipitate a social scandal. He is resistant to any lesson that might be gleaned from the Inspector’s interrogation, and remains unchanged by it.

Mrs. Birling — Mrs. Birling is described as being cold and Mr. Birling’s “social superior.” Throughout the questioning process, she resists the Inspector’s inquiries and reminds him, to Sheila’s frustration, of the Birlings’ high social status. Despite her reluctance, Mrs. Birling finally admits to having used her influence in the Women’s Charity Organization to deny aid for Eva Smith because she was prejudiced against her and offended by the girl’s falsely assuming the name “Mrs. Birling.” After the revelations at the end of the play that the whole inspection was a hoax, Mrs. Birling prides herself on having resisted the Inspector more than the rest of her family. And, like her husband, she feels completely relieved of any responsibility she had felt previously.

Eva Smith — Eva Smith, has stormed out of the house. Though she resists, Mrs. Birling claims that the only people responsible for the girl’s downfall and suicide are the girl herself and the man that got her pregnant.

Eric re-enters the house, and admits to impregnating the girl and offering her stolen money. He divulges that he stole the money from his father’s office.

The Inspector now shows Mrs. Birling the girl’s photograph. The front door slams, and Mr. Birling discovers that his son, Eric, has stormed out of the house. Though she resists, Mrs. Birling claims that the only people responsible for the girl’s downfall and suicide are the girl herself and the man that got her pregnant.

Eva Smith, a girl, she begins to sob and runs out of the room. Upon re-entering, Sheila explains that, out of jealousy and in a bad temper, she had told the manager of Milward’s to fire the girl after seeing her smile at a salesgirl when Sheila tried on something unflattering.

The Inspector then recounts that, after Milward’s, the girl changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald appears startled by this. When they are left alone for a moment, Sheila discovers that Gerald had been having an affair with Daisy Renton all of the previous summer. When the Inspector returns, Gerald confesses to his acquaintance with Daisy Renton—he met her at the Palace Music Hall, and ended up inviting her to live in a set of rooms that belonged to a friend of his who was temporarily away. Gerald excuses himself to take a walk, and Sheila returns his engagement ring.

The Inspector leaves the Birlings brooding and guilty. Gerald excuses himself to take a walk, and offers her stolen money. He divulges that he stole the money from his father’s office.

When the Inspector returns, Gerald admits to having had an affair with the girl in question—at the time, Daisy Renton—which prompts Sheila to return his engagement ring. Gerald comes out seeming the least guilty of all for the girl’s suicide. In the end, it is he who realizes that the whole inspection, and all of its premises, was a hoax. Nonetheless, he also seems less affected by the Inspector’s casting of blame than Sheila and Eric, and Sheila denies his offer to renew their engagement.
WEALTH, POWER, AND INFLUENCE

Throughout the play, as these acts are revealed, the Birlings' social status becomes a point of conflict amongst members of the family, as the children grow ashamed of their family's ability to use their influence immorally and the parents remain proud of their social and economic position and do not understand their children's concern.

The play demonstrates the corruption implicit within a capitalist economy in which wealth and influence are concentrated in a small portion of the population. The few wealthy people at the top maintain the social hierarchy in order to retain their high position, and have the power, on a petty whim, to push the powerless even further down the ladder. And, in the conflict at the end of the play between the younger and older members of the Birlings, it becomes clear that as the powerful settle into their power, they become blind to the possibility that they may be acting immorally, seeing themselves as naturally deserving of their positions and
therefore of their actions as being natural and right (as opposed to selfish attempts to maintain the status quo that puts them at the top).

2 BLAME AND RESPONSIBILITY

The question asked throughout the play is: who is responsible for the suicide of Eva Smith? Who is to blame? The arc of the play follows the gradual spreading of responsibility, from Mr. Birling, to Mr. Birling and Sheila, to Mr. Birling and Sheila and Gerald, and so on and so forth. Each of the characters has different opinions about which of them is most responsible for the girl’s suicide. Mrs. Birling, most extremely, ends up blaming her own son, by suggesting that the person most responsible is the man that impregnated the girl, before realizing that the person in question is Eric.

In the end, the Inspector universalizes the shared responsibility that the Birlings feel for the girl’s death, into a plea for something like Socialism: “We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.” The lesson of the Inspector, and of the play at large, is that our actions have an influence beyond themselves and therefore that we are already responsible for each other so long as we are responsible for ourselves and our own actions. The play contends that Socialism simply recognizes and builds upon this truth, in de-privatizing wealth and power and thus building an economy and politics on the foundation of shared responsibility.

3 PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE

The Inspector, and the play at large, challenges the “privacy” of the private sphere, by revealing that actions that the family may have conceived of as private and personal really have an effect beyond themselves and their family. For example, Sheila’s revelation that Eric drinks more than his parents had thought—“he’s been steadily drinking too much for the last two years”—seems like private information but turns out to have a greater effect, insofar as it helps to identify (in the Inspector’s alleged story) Eric as the father of the girl’s child.

In addition, what begins as an inspection of truths that had real consequence on someone outside of the immediate Birling family, ends up also uncovering truths and drama that pertain more privately to the family. For example, the Inspector’s discovery of Gerald’s relationship with Daisy Renton results in the severing of his engagement to Sheila. The inspector has to remind the family to keep their private drama out of his investigation: “There’ll be plenty of time, when I’ve gone, for you all to adjust your family relationships.”

This blurring of the line between the public and the private reflects the play’s interest in class politics, in the conflict between those who want to maintain the privatization of wealth and production, and those who desire the communalization of the same. The Socialist perspective—as represented by the Inspector (and by J.B. Priestley)—challenges and seeks to erase the line between public and private, by de-privatizing the economy, but also by making those who are privileged to see that what they consider “private”, by nature of their privilege, has an outside influence on the world from which they are insulated. In other words, the Inspector argues not just for a de-privatized economy but a de-privatized sensibility, a recognition that what seems private to the privileged are in fact strands of a public web of relationships and the moral obligations such relationships create.

4 CLASS POLITICS

Mr. Birling describes the politics of the day as revolving around “Capital versus Labor agitations.” Mr. Birling is a representative Capitalist, who cares only about his company’s profit. He speaks of himself as “a hard-headed, practical man of business,” and looks forward to the prospect of being knighted. The girls who lead a worker’s strike in his factor, meanwhile, represent the Labor side of the conflict; he seeks to make the Birlings realize the implicit corruption of Capitalism by emphasizing how easy it was for them to cause pain for the lower class without even realizing at the time the significance of their own actions.

5 MORALITY AND LEGALITY

The play interrogates the way that people construct, construe, and apply their moral values, especially in relation to legality and illegality. Do actions have moral consequence in themselves, or in relation to their effects on other people; or can we only measure morality in relation to legal rulings? When the legal consequences of the truths revealed by the Inspector’s questioning have been removed (through the revelation that the Inspector is not, in fact, an inspector), there remains a question about what significance and moral weight the uncovered truths hold. The status of their significance changes at each level of revelation: that the Inspector wasn’t an inspector, that the girl wasn’t all the same girl, that the girl didn’t commit suicide.
After the discovery that the Inspector wasn’t an inspector, Eric declares, “the fact remains that I did what I did. And Mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her. It’s still the same rotten story whether it’s been told to a police inspector or to somebody else.” After the discovery that there was no suicide, Mr. Birling declares, “But the whole thing’s different now... And the artful devil knew all the time nobody had died and the whole story was bunkum”; at the same time, Sheila insists, “Everything we said had happened really had happened. If it didn’t end tragically, then that’s lucky for us. But it might have done.” The final turn—the police’s phone call reporting a suicide—confirms Sheila’s view that, given the facts revealed by the Inspector, it was only a matter of luck that something tragic didn’t ensue that time—as something tragic did, in fact, ensue shortly after.

While Mr. and Mrs. Birling feel wholly relieved of their guilt by the final revelation, Sheila and Eric insist at each level that the truths uncovered by the Inspector about the family’s actions still remain significant and entail moral consequences. The play’s conclusion suggests the playwright’s sympathy with Sheila and Eric’s view.

**SYMBOLS**

Symbols appear in red text throughout the Summary & Analysis sections of this LitChart.

**EVA SMITH**

The symbol of Eva Smith is the character that the Inspector constructs by explaining that she has changed her name multiple times, was injured by each of the Birlings in turn, and consequently commits suicide. In fact, the Inspector seems to have created her as an amalgam of several women, each of them separately harmed by the different Birlings. As a combination of many working class women affected by the Birlings, Eva Smith represents the working class, the Labor side of the Labor vs. Capital agitations, who get squashed by the powerful upper class, such as the Birlings.

**QUOTES**

The color-coded boxes under each quote below make it easy to track the themes related to each quote. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

**ACT 1 QUOTES**

There’s a good deal of silly talk about these days—but—and I speak as a hard-headed business man, who has to take risks and know what he’s about—I say, you can ignore all this silly pessimistic talk. When you marry, you’ll be marrying at a very good time.

- **Speaker**: Arthur Birling
- **Related themes**: Class Politics
- **Theme Tracker code**: 4

I tell you, by that time you’ll be living in a world that’ll have forgotten all these Capital versus Labor agitations and all these silly little war scares. There’ll be peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere.

- **Speaker**: Arthur Birling
- **Related themes**: Class Politics
- **Theme Tracker code**: 4

A man has to make his own way—has to look after himself—and his family, too, of course, when he has one—and so long as he does that he won’t come to much harm. But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you’d think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive.

- **Speaker**: Arthur Birling
- **Related themes**: Blame and Responsibility, Class Politics
- **Theme Tracker code**: 2

It’s the way I like to go to work. One person and one line of inquiry at a time. Otherwise, there’s a muddle.

- **Speaker**: Inspector Goole
- **Related themes**: Morality and Legality
- **Theme Tracker code**: 5
If we are all responsible for everything that happened to everybody we’d had anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn’t it?

• Speaker: Arthur Birling
• Related themes: Blame and Responsibility
• Theme Tracker code:

It’s a free country, I told them. It isn’t if you can’t go and work somewhere else.

• Speaker: Arthur Birling, Eric
• Mentioned or related characters: Eva Smith
• Related themes: Wealth, Power, and Influence, Class Politics
• Theme Tracker code:

I can’t help thinking about this girl—destroying herself so horribly—and I’ve been so happy tonight.

• Speaker: Sheila
• Mentioned or related characters: Eva Smith
• Related themes: Blame and Responsibility
• Theme Tracker code:

There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence, Miss Birling, in every city and big town in this country. But these girls aren’t cheap labor. They’re people.

• Speaker: Sheila, Inspector Goole
• Related themes: Class Politics
• Theme Tracker code:

We’re respectable citizens and not dangerous criminals. Sometimes there isn’t as much difference as you think.

• Speaker: Arthur Birling, Inspector Goole
• Related themes: Wealth, Power, and Influence, Blame and Responsibility
• Theme Tracker code:

ACT 2 QUOTES

Miss Birling has just been made to understand what she did to this girl. She feels responsible. And if she leaves us now, and doesn’t hear any more, then she’ll feel she’s entirely to blame, she’ll be alone with her responsibility.

• Speaker: Inspector Goole
• Mentioned or related characters: Sheila, Eva Smith
• Related themes: Blame and Responsibility
• Theme Tracker code:

If there’s nothing else, we’ll have to share our guilt.

• Speaker: Inspector Goole
• Related themes: Blame and Responsibility, Class Politics
• Theme Tracker code:

You know, of course, that my husband was Lord Mayor only two years ago and that he’s still a magistrate?

• Speaker: Mrs. Birling
• Mentioned or related characters: Arthur Birling
• Related themes: Wealth, Power, and Influence
• Theme Tracker code:

I don’t dislike you as I did half an hour ago, Gerald. In fact, in some odd way, I rather respect you more than I’ve ever done before.

• Speaker: Sheila
• Mentioned or related characters: Gerald Croft
• Related themes: Public versus Private
• Theme Tracker code:

We’ve no excuse now for putting on airs.

• Speaker: Sheila
• Related themes: Wealth, Power, and Influence, Blame and Responsibility
• Theme Tracker code:
You've had children. You must have known what she was feeling. And you slammed the door in her face.

**Speaker:** Inspector Goole

**Mentioned or related characters:** Mrs. Birling, Eva Smith

**Related themes:** Blame and Responsibility

There’ll be plenty of time, when I’ve gone, for you all to adjust your family relationships.

**Speaker:** Inspector Goole

**Mentioned or related characters:** Arthur Birling, Mrs. Birling, Sheila, Gerald Croft, Eric

**Related themes:** Public versus Private

This girl killed herself—and died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her. Remember that. Never forget it. But then I don’t think you ever will.

**Speaker:** Inspector Goole

**Mentioned or related characters:** Arthur Birling, Mrs. Birling, Sheila, Gerald Croft, Eric, Eva Smith

**Related themes:** Blame and Responsibility

If all that’s come out tonight is true, then it doesn’t much matter who it was who made us confess.

**Speaker:** Sheila

**Related themes:** Morality and Legality

Whoever that chap was, the fact remains that I did what I did. And Mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her. It’s still the same rotten story whether it’s been told to a police inspector or to somebody else.

**Speaker:** Eric

**Mentioned or related characters:** Mrs. Birling, Inspector Goole

**Related themes:** Morality and Legality

Everything we said had happened really had happened. If it didn’t end tragically, then that’s lucky for us. But it might have done.

**Speaker:** Sheila

**Related themes:** Morality and Legality

There are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, with what we think and do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.

**Speaker:** Inspector Goole

**Mentioned or related characters:** Eva Smith

**Related themes:** Blame and Responsibility, Class Politics

The color-coded boxes under “Analysis & Themes” below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.
ACT 1

The scene is set in the dining-room of a house that belongs to a fairly wealthy manufacturer. The house is described as nice, solid, with good furniture, and an ornate floor lamp. It is “comfortable” but not “cozy.”

The curtain lifts to reveal a family—the Birlings—and one non-family member, Gerald, sitting at the dining-room table. Edna, the maid, is cleaning the bare table of stray champagne glasses and dessert plates. The family begins to drink port, and everyone is wearing appropriate “evening dress.”

Arthur Birling, the father, is characterized as a large man with provincial speech; his wife is cold and her husband’s “social superior.” Sheila, the daughter, is in her early twenties and appears a little uneasy. The family is celebrating a special occasion. Mr. and Mrs. Birling are described in terms of their status markers—their speech, their social positions—which indicates, from the start, the play’s concern with class and status. Also note the different ages of the characters: the established older parents comfortable and proud of their position; the successful thirty-year old; the two twenty-somethings who seem less set in their places, making one more excited by life and the other uncomfortable.

Mr. Birling opens the play by thanking Edna for the port she has brought out of the sideboard, and offering it to Gerald, with a promise that it is the same port that Gerald’s father customarily purchases. When Gerald qualifies that he doesn’t know much about port himself, Sheila expresses relief that her fiancé is not one of those “purple-faced old men” who are knowledgeable in such matters.

The appearance and quality of the Birlings’ dining-room suggests that they are a family of wealth and class.

Gerald encourages his wife to drink, reminding her that it is a special occasion. Edna takes her leave and Birling remarks how nice the evening is. Mrs. Birling reproaches her husband for having made such a comment, but he responds that he was only treating Gerald like a family member.

Sheila mentions, as an instance in which Gerald had seemingly opted out of membership in the family, that he had largely ignored her the summer before. He defensively cites the fact that Mr. Birling knows the port to be the same port that Gerald’s father customarily purchases. He is only treating Gerald like a family member.

In chastising her husband for a rather harmless remark, Mrs. Birling betrays her concern for the family’s conduct and social manners; she clearly wants to make a good impression on Gerald Croft.

Sheila is resistant to the gender roles typical of the period—the man busy with work, and the woman left alone in the house—and is uncomfortable with her mother’s suggestion that marriage will create this role division. Sheila’s resistance suggests that she is more socially progressive than her mother, not surprising given her younger age.

Eric begins to laugh uncontrollably and rises from his chair. Sheila inquires what he is laughing about, and he replies that he just felt the need to laugh; Sheila calls him “squiffy.” Eric provokes Sheila, and she calls him an ass, at which point Mrs. Birling chimes in that once Sheila is married she’ll realize that men with important work sometimes have to spend all their time and energy on business. Sheila says that she will be unable to get used to that, and warns Gerald to be careful.

Eric is acting strangely, for reasons that we do not yet know but will become clearer as the play progresses. The dynamic of the nuclear family is fairly standard: Eric and Sheila tease each other in typical sibling manner, and their mother attempts to put an end to their bickering.
Birling rises to deliver the promised toast. He prefaces the speech by regrettting that Gerald’s parents could not join in on the celebrations because they’re abroad, but then expressing his gladness that they are having such an intimate gathering. He names the night one of the happiest of his life, and tells Gerald that his engagement to Sheila means a “tremendous lot” to him. He mentions that he and Gerald’s father are business rivals—though Gerald’s father’s business, Crofts Limited, is older and bigger—and relishes in the possibility of a future partnership between the Crofts and Birlings. Gerald seconds his desire for this prospect.

Mrs. Birling and Sheila object to Arthur’s discussing business on such a night, so Arthur raises his glass. They all raise their glasses, and Sheila drinks to Gerald. Gerald rises and drinks to Sheila, and then brings out a ring. Sheila asks if it’s the one he wanted her to have, he affirms, and she exclaims that it’s wonderful, shows it to her mother, and slips it onto her finger.

Birling mentions that there’s been a lot of “silly talk” around lately, but he encourages Gerald and Sheila to ignore all the pessimism and to rest assured that the notion that war is inevitable is “fiddlesticks.” He promises Eric, Gerald, and Sheila that in twenty or thirty years everyone will have forgotten about the “Capital versus Labor agitations” that currently seem so prominent.

Mrs. Birling leaves with Sheila and Eric, who is whistling “Rule Britannia,” and Birling sits down with Gerald. Birling tells Gerald, in a confidential manner, that he recognizes that Mrs. Croft may have wanted her daughter to marry someone in a better social position; he lets Gerald know, as a concession for this, that he might be granted a knighthood in the near future. Gerald congratulates him.

Eric re-enters the room, sits down and pours himself a glass of port. He reports, dismissively, that he has left his mother and sister talking about clothes. Birling informs him that clothes mean more to women, because they function as a sign of self-respect.

Birling begins in again on his lecture. He tells Eric and Gerald that a man has to “make his own way,” and not listen to those people who preach about everybody needing to look after everybody else. He concludes his speech with another glass of port.

Birling briefly indicates the political atmosphere of the time—the frightening prospect of war, and heightened political conflict between those who care most for the prosperity of their own business and those who care more for the rights and fair wages of the businesses’ laborers. Birling believes in the current status quo, which places him on top, and dismisses any change to that order as ridiculous.

Birling reinforces a traditional gender stereotype that women care more about their appearance and clothing than men.

Birling speaks out for the “Capital” side of the conflict that he laid out earlier, by arguing for the priority of business and self-interest over communal interest.
Edna enters and announces that a police inspector by the name of Goole has called on an important matter. Birling instructs her to let him in, and jokes with Gerald that Eric has probably gotten himself into trouble. Eric appears uneasy at the suggestion. The Inspector enters and makes an “impression of massiveness, solidity, and purposefulness.” Birling identifies that he must be a new inspector, as he does not recognize him, despite having been an alderman for years and knowing most of the police officers well.

When Birling presses the Inspector on the reason for his appearance, he explains that he is investigating the suicide of a young woman who recently swallowed disinfectant and died in the Infirmary. The Inspector says that he has been to the dead girl’s room, where he found a letter and diary. She used more than one name, he says, but her real name was Eva Smith. Birling appears to recognize the name, and the Inspector informs him that she had been employed in his works. When Birling claims to know no one we’d had anything to do with, the Inspector explicitly asks Gerald to stay.

At the Inspector’s prying, Birling admits that he does remember Eva Smith, and that he had discharged her from his factory. Eric wonders aloud whether it was because of Birling’s discharging her that she killed herself. Gerald asks if Birling would prefer that he left, and Birling say that he doesn’t mind, and then lets the Inspector know that Gerald is the son of Sir George Croft. With this piece of information, the Inspector explicitly asks Gerald to stay.

Birling contests that he had nothing to do with the girl’s suicide, because her time at his business long preceded her death, but the Inspector disagrees, explaining that what happened to her at the business might have determined what happened afterwards, leading up to the suicide. Birling concedes his point, but still denies responsibility, saying that it would be very “awkward” if we were all responsible for everything that happened to anyone we’d had anything to do with.

The Inspector’s introduction of the girl’s suicide establishes the main premise of the play and sends a sudden shock through the comfortable world of the Birling’s. Birling’s claim not to know the girl despite the fact that she worked for him is an attempt to insulate himself from her suicide, to assert to no connection to her or her death, almost to deny that he knew her as a human being. She was just a name on his payroll, he seems to be saying.

The Inspector’s strict procedural protocol of only showing the picture to one person at a time will become very significant later in the play.

Gerald and Eric attempt to look at the photograph as well, but the Inspector does not allow them, preferring to work on only one line of inquiry at a time.
Eric chimes in with a reference to his father’s previous pep talk, and Birling explains to the Inspector that he had recently been giving Gerald and Eric some good advice. Then Birling describes Eva Smith as a lively, attractive girl, who was up for promotion, but who became the ring-leader of a group of girls who went on a strike for a raise—25-shillings per week instead of 23. He refused the girls’ request in order to keep labor costs down, and instructed them that if they didn’t like their current rates, they could go and work somewhere else, given it was “a free country.” Eric retorts that the country isn’t so free if you can’t find work somewhere else. Birling quiets him, but Eric continues to contest his father’s decision, and Gerald defends Birling’s side.

After the Inspector expresses allegiance with Eric’s disapproval, Birling inquires how well the Inspector knows Chief Constable. The Inspector replies that he doesn’t see him often, and Birling warns him that he is a good friend of the Chief.

Eric again displays his growing allegiance with the laborers’ side of the conflict, in defending their right to higher wages. The investigation is beginning to introduce conflict into the family. Birling seeks to shield her daughter from the investigation, for the simple reason that she’s a woman.

When Birling and Gerald chime in that there’s nothing more to be revealed, the Inspector asks if they’re sure they don’t know what happened to the girl afterward, suggesting that one of the remaining Birlings does. The Inspector reveals that he hasn’t come to the house to see Mr. Birling alone.

The Inspector reminds the family that Eva Smith used more than one name, and then tells them that, for the months following her dismissal from Birling’s, the girl was unemployed and downtrodden. He reminds the family that many young women are similarly suffering in their underpaid labor positions. Sheila objects that the working girls are people rather than cheap labor, and the Inspector agrees. He then continues to recount the tale of Eva Smith: she was hired at a shop, Milward’s, but was fired after a couple of months because of a customer’s complaint. When the Inspector says this last bit, he looks at Sheila, who now appears agitated.

Sheila asks what the girl looked like, and then sobs and leaves the room when the Inspector shows her the girl’s photograph. Birling scolds the Inspector for upsetting his daughter and their celebratory evening.

Up until this point, it has seemed as though the Inspector came for the sole purpose of interrogating Mr. Birling, but it comes out now that he has come to question others of the Birling family as well—that he sees multiple people in the family as possibly connected to this suicide.

As at other moments throughout the investigation, the Inspector universalizes Eva Smith’s situation, by comparing her to the countless other girls in her position as an underpaid, downtrodden laborer. Sheila seems, like her brother (and unlike the older members of the family), to be growing sympathetic with the laboring class., seeing them as people and not just resources.
Gerald asks the Inspector if he can look at the photograph, but the Inspector reiterates his preference for maintaining one line of inquiry at a time. Eric exasperatedly interjects that he’s had enough and makes to leave, but the Inspector insists that he stay. He adds that sometimes there isn’t as much difference as it seems between respectable citizens and dangerous criminals.

Sheila re-enters and asks the Inspector if he knew all the time that she was guilty. The Inspector says that he had an idea she might have been, on the basis of the girl’s diaries. Sheila asks the Inspector if she’s really responsible, and he says not entirely, but partly. Sheila admits to her participation in the girl’s firing from Milward’s; her recognition of her own guilt makes her feel even worse about Eva Smith’s fate.

Sheila explains that she had told the manager of Milward’s to fire the girl, threatening that if they didn’t fire her, Mrs. Birling would close the family’s account there. Sheila admits that she was acting out of a bad temper, which was provoked by seeing the girl smile at a salesgirl while Sheila was looking at the mirror trying on something that didn’t suit her and had looked better on the girl. When Sheila effusively expresses her remorse, the Inspector harshly responds that it’s too late.

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Sheila’s reasons for demanding that Eva Smith be fired from Milward’s were petty and thoughtless. Because of her family’s prominence and high economic position, Sheila was able to have a significant influence on the life of another person—to satisfy her own vanity by having another woman fired. The hurt Sheila caused was much greater than what she endured.

The Inspector points out the hypocrisy in Gerald’s wanting to protect Sheila from unpleasant things, in light of his previous activities with Daisy Renton. It is clear that Gerald only wants Sheila to leave so that she won’t hear more about his infidelity. Sheila has caught on to the logic and rigor of the Inspector’s investigation, and is confident that it will be exhaustive.

ACT 2

The scene and situation remains the same as at the end of Act 1, except that the main table is slightly more upstage. The Inspector remains at the door, and then enters the room and looks expectantly to Gerald. Gerald suggests that Sheila should be excused from the proceedings, but she insists on staying for the rest of the interrogation. The Inspector asks Gerald if he thinks women shouldn’t have to deal with unpleasant things, and then reminds him of one woman who wasn’t spared.

The Inspector continues on with his narrative of the dead girl’s difficult travails, now adding that after she was fired at Milward’s, she changed her name to Daisy Renton. At the mention of the name, Gerald looks startled and pours himself a drink. The Inspector and Eric depart, leaving Gerald and Sheila alone; Sheila questions Gerald about his startling at Daisy’s name, and he admits that he knew her. She asks if it was Miss Renton that he was seeing during the spring and summer that he was so busy, and he grants that it was and apologizes.

The inspection begins to incite various personal conflicts within the family; here, it provokes Gerald to expose his unfaithfulness to Sheila, thus weakening their formerly strong engagement.
When Sheila again insists on staying, Gerald suggests that she only wants to see someone else go through the questioning. His suggestion offends her and she accuses him of judging her to be selfish and vindictive. The Inspector offers his interpretation that Sheila simply doesn’t want to be alone with her responsibility and that, if nothing else, we have to “share our guilt.” Sheila agrees with him, but then begins to question his strange manner for a police officer.

Before he can respond, Mrs. Birling strides in. She has been informed of the proceedings, and insists to the Inspector that the family will not be able to assist him any more. Sheila begs her mother not to act so stridently and risk saying or doing something that she’ll later regret. She and Gerald and Mr. Birling, she explains, had all begun confident until the Inspector began questioning them.

Mrs. Birling suggests that Sheila go to bed, because she won’t be able to understand the motives of a girl “of that class.” Sheila again refuses to leave, and again warns her mother against building a wall between herself and the girl that the Inspector is bound to tear town. Mrs. Birling is bound to tear town. Mrs. Birling continues on in this vein, taking offense at the Inspector’s inquiry and reminding him of her husband’s high position as a magistrate and former Lord Mayor.

Previously so content and apparently in love, Gerald and Sheila have become increasingly antagonistic with one another since the revelation of Gerald’s affair. The Inspector makes another general remark about the necessity of sharing guilt, which renews suspicion about his unusual investigative methods and effusive theorizing.

Sheila has clearly been influenced by the proceedings thus far, and disapproves of her mother’s continued stridency. She tries to convince Mrs. Birling of the importance of humility at this point in the investigation.

Mrs. Birling reports that her husband is in the other room calming Eric down from his excitable mood. When she explains that her son isn’t used to drinking so much, Sheila corrects her by revealing that Eric has been consistently over-drinking for the past two years. Mrs. Birling doesn’t believe it, but Gerald testifies that Eric is indeed a heavy drinker. Sheila reminds her mother that she had warned her not to presumptively build walls between herself and others that she deemed less respectable.

The Inspector is letting on that Eric, too, played a part in Eva Smith’s downfall, but Mrs. Birling in the arrogant blindness of her privileged position is blind to this implication.

Birling enters and reports that Eric has refused to go to bed as his father asked him, because the Inspector has requested that he stay. He asks the Inspector if this is true, and then encourages him to question the boy now, if he is going to at all. The Inspector insists that Eric wait his turn. Sheila provokes her mother, “You see?” but Mrs. Birling doesn’t understand.

Again Sheila appears to have already learned and internalized lessons from the interrogation—in addition to humility, she has developed an increased respect for the lower classes and greater hesitance to draw sharp lines between classes of people. Mrs. Birling, meanwhile, stubbornly invokes the family’s social status, thus betraying her own ignorance of the lessons to be learned from the proceedings, and refusing to believe that people of her class could even understand those of the lower class.

Birling takes offense at the Inspector’s tone and handling of the inquiry. The Inspector coolly proceeds to ask Gerald when he first got to know Daisy Renton. His presumption of an acquaintance between Gerald and the girl surprises the Birling parents. Gerald half-heartedly attempts to seem surprised by the Inspector’s presumption, but then he gives in and confesses that he met the girl in the bar at the Palace Music Hall, a favorite destination for “women of the town.”

The inspection has resulted in numerous personal revelations, including this revelation of Eric’s drinking habits. Sheila uses this information, and her mother’s surprised reaction to it, to support her insistence that Mrs. Birling needs to be more humble and not so presumptuous, that wealth and the trappings of “respectability” do not automatically equal moral rightness.

Again, suspicion is raised at the Inspector’s manner. As at their discovery of Eric’s drinking habits, the Birlings are surprised by the revelation of Gerald’s affair. The Birling parents are continually taken aback by the actual behavior of their children and relations, and yet remain seemingly incapable of drawing lessons from it.
Gerald explains that he was going to leave the bar when he noticed a girl who appeared different from the rest. In the middle of describing this girl, he exclaims “My God!” having just internalized the girl’s death. He continues his description of her as charmingly dressed, and notes that at the moment he noticed her she was being harassed by Old Joe Meggarty. Mrs. Birling bristles at the idea that Gerald is speaking of Alderman Meggarty, whom she had always thought respectable, but Gerald and Sheila confirm that Meggarty is a renowned womanizer.

Gerald goes on to describe his first meeting with Daisy Renton—he took her out of the bar to the County Hotel, where he asked her questions about herself. She vaguely mentioned her jobs at Birling’s and offered her to live in a set of rooms that belonged to a friend of his who was away on a trip. He assures the Birlings that he did not put her there in order to sleep with her, and that the affair only came after. Gerald portrays his own role in Daisy Renton’s narrative to be rather innocent and well intentioned—he helped her in a time of impoverishment and need, and the affair, according to him, only came secondarily. And this may even be true, but it also suggests he did not understand the level of influence he would have over her once he put her up.

Gerald reports that he broke off the affair in the first week of September, right before he was to go away for several weeks; she took it very well, and Gerald gave her a small parting gift of money to help her support herself for a while. She didn’t mention to Gerald what she planned on doing afterward, but the Inspector fills him in that she went away to a seaside place to be alone. Upset by the proceedings, Gerald excuses himself to walk outside and be alone for a bit. Sheila returns her engagement ring to him before he leaves. She respects him for his honesty, she says, but believes that they just aren’t the same people who sat down to dinner, and that they would have to re-build their relationship anew. Birling tries to convince Sheila to be more reasonable, but Sheila replies that Gerald knows better than her father does what she means; Gerald concurs.

Mrs. Birling announces that it seems they’ve almost reached the end of it, but Gerald interrupts that he doesn’t think so, before he walks out the door. Sheila points out that the Inspector never showed Gerald the picture of the girl, and the Inspector responds that he didn’t think it necessary.

Gerald apologizes to the Inspector, but Sheila insists that she rather more deserves the apology. The Inspector asks firsts whether the girl became his mistress and then whether he was in love with her. Gerald responds affirmatively to the first question and hesitatingly to the second.

The investigation veers into the personal when the Inspector inquires about the terms of Gerald’s affair and his level of affection. Gerald was willing to have an affair with a poorer woman he did not love—he was in it for enjoyment. Also note how Gerald doesn’t think to apologize to the woman to whom he is engaged.

Gerald comes off relatively cleanly. Yet while, from his point of view, the affair ended smoothly, and with Daisy Renton’s compliance, that Daisy Renton went off to be by herself suggests that she may have needed to emotionally recover; that she was more in love with this man who had helped her than he ever understood.
The Inspector shows the photograph to Mrs. Birling, who denies recognizing it. The Inspector accuses her of lying. Birling demands that the Inspector apologize for his accusation, but the Inspector instead retorts that public men “have their responsibilities as well as their privileges.” Birling responds that the Inspector was never asked to talk to Mr. Birling about his responsibilities. Sheila contributes her feeling that the Birlings no longer have a right to put on airs. She then confronts her mother, insisting that she could tell by her expression that Mrs. Birling indeed recognized the photograph. Mrs. Birling, like Mr. Birling earlier, refuses to admit she knows or recognizes the girl, even though Sheila can see that she does. The Inspector bluntly does not believe this, and his response to Mr. Birling suggests that Birling and his family have been enjoying the privileges of their public success while not recognizing their responsibilities. Sheila again tries to make her parents realize the lessons before their eyes: that they shouldn’t presume their own superiority or doubt the integrity of the investigation.

The Inspector now focuses on Mrs. Birling, clearly indicating that he knows that she does know the girl and about her participation in the girl’s fate.

Mr. Birling asks why his wife should answer the Inspector’s questions, and the Inspector informs him that the girl had appealed to the Women’s Charity Organization two weeks prior. According to the Inspector, the girl initially called herself Mrs. Birling, which Mrs. Birling notes having found very impertinent. At the Inspector’s provocation, Mrs. Birling admits that she was prejudiced against the girl’s case and used her influence to assure that the girl be refused aid from the committee.

Mrs. Birling refuses to play into the Inspector’s motive to awaken the Birlings to their responsibility for the girl’s death. She sees her role on the charity organization not as to help people but to wield influence in deciding who does and doesn’t deserve aid.

The Inspector asks Mrs. Birling why the girl wanted help, and Mrs. Birling initially refuses to answer, determined not to cave under his pressure as the other three did, and convinced that she is not ashamed of anything she’s done. She explains simply that she wasn’t satisfied with the girl’s claim and so used her influence to deny her aid, and then reiterates that she’s done nothing wrong.

The Inspector states that he thinks she has done something very wrong that she will regret for the rest of her life. He wishes that she’d been with him at the Infirmary to see the dead girl, and then he reveals the more devastating fact that the girl had also been pregnant when she killed herself. Sheila is horrified and asks how the pregnant girl could have wanted to commit suicide; the Inspector answers that she had been “turned out and turned down too many times.”

Mrs. Birling joins her husband, daughter, and daughter’s fiancé in admitting that she, too, played a part in Eva Smith’s downfall. Based on her personal annoyance at the girl, Mrs. Birling denied her aid—an action similar, though more serious, to Sheila getting the girl fired.

The front door slams, and there is some question about whether Gerald has returned or Eric has left. The Inspector continues his interrogation of Mrs. Birling by identifying her as a prominent member of the Brumley Women’s Charity Organization. He asks about a meeting of the interviewing committee a couple of weeks previous.
The Inspector adds that it was because she was pregnant that she appealed to the Women’s Charity Organization. Mrs. Birling repeats what she reports having said to the girl—that she ought to go appeal to the child’s father, as providing for the child was his responsibility. Sheila tells her mother that she thinks what she did was “cruel and vile.” Sheila’s disapproval of her mother for refusing the girl aid mirrors Eric’s disapproval of his father for refusing her a raise. Both Eric and Sheila continue to express growing sympathies with the lower class, while the Birling parents remain defensive of their use of power and influence and willingness to stand in judgment of the lower classes (despite the fact that their own class has been revealed by the Inspector to be not as respectable as it first appeared).

It comes out that the child’s father had offered the girl money, but that she didn’t want to take it because it was stolen. Mrs. Birling stubbornly refuses to accept any culpability for the girl’s suicide, and instead places guilt on the girl herself. She thereby demonstrates allegiance with her husband’s philosophy about the priority of self-responsibility over mutual responsibility.

ACT 3

The scene is the same as at the end of Act 2. Eric is standing near the entrance of the room and asks if they know. The Inspector confirms that they do, and Sheila reveals that their mother placed blame on whichever young man got the girl into trouble. Eric bitterly accuses his mother of making it difficult for him, and Mrs. Birling defends that she couldn’t have known the man in question was him, as he’s not the kind of person to get drunk. Sheila corrects her as she did before, which prompts Eric to blame Sheila for betraying his drinking habits. The Birling parents begin accusing Sheila of family disloyalty, when the Inspector cuts them off and encourages them to address their family relationships after he’s finished.
Eric pours himself a drink and begins to explain his story: he met the girl the previous November in the Palace bar, while he was "a bit squiffy," and started talking to her. He clarifies that she wasn’t there to "solicit." He went back to her place that night. At her father’s insistence, Sheila removes her mother from the room. Eric continues: he saw the girl a number of times after, and one of the times, she told him she was pregnant. The girl didn’t want to marry him because he didn’t love her. He gave her fifty pounds to support her.

When Mr. Birling asks where the fifty pounds came from, Eric confesses that he took it from his father’s office. Mrs. Birling enters again, curious, and her husband informs her of both of the son’s wrongdoings—impregnating the girl and stealing Birling’s money. Eric explains that he got the money by collecting small accounts, giving the firm’s receipt, and then keeping the money for himself. When his father asks him why he didn’t just ask him for help, Eric replies that he’s not the “kind of father a chap could go to when he’s in trouble.”

The Inspector leadingly asks Eric if the girl found out that his money had been stolen, and Eric says that she had and that she refused to see him afterward, but then he asks how the Inspector had known that. Sheila reveals that Mrs. Birling sat on the committee that assessed the girl’s need for aid. Eric turns to his mother to blame her for the girl’s suicide and begins to threaten her. Eric avenges the blame that his mother placed on him by returning the gesture and blaming her in turn. At the same time, the girl who Mrs. Birling refused aid turned down on account of her low morals now is revealed as quite moral—refusing money in a time of need. The girl’s use of the name Mrs. Birling in front of the charity organization also takes on a new light, as she may have been referencing the fact that she was carrying Eric Birling’s child.

The Inspector states that he does not need to know any more, and reminds the family that each member is responsible for the death of Eva Smith. He tells them to never forget it. Mr. Birling offers the Inspector a bribe of thousands of pounds, but the Inspector refuses it.

The Inspector deduces a moral from the investigation—though Eva Smith has gone, there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths still alive, who have hopes and suffering and aspirations, and who are all implicated in what we think, say, and do. He insists that everyone is responsible for each other, and then walks out.
Sheila is left crying, Mrs. Birling is collapsed in a chair, Eric is brooding, and Birling pours himself a drink and then tells Eric that he considers him to be most blameful. He fears for the public scandal that will surely result from the investigation and that might harm his chances at a knighthood. Eric asks what difference it makes if he gets a knighthood now; Birling warns Eric that he’ll be required to repay everything he’s stolen and work for nothing until he has.

The Birlings recover from this bombardment of information. Mr. Birling places most blame on Eric, presumably because his contribution to the affair – given its illegality – will result in the greatest social scandal and will do most harm to the family’s name.

Sheila and Mr. Birling split in their respective opinions of the moral consequence of the Birlings’ actions; Sheila thinks that they have ethical significance regardless of their legal assessment; Birling, on the other hand, cares only about the legal and social consequences.

Gerald confirms Sheila’s earlier hypothesis that the Inspector was bluffing about his affiliation with the police department. Suddenly the legal ramifications of what the Inspector revealed disappear.

The Birling parents are very excited by this news, and Birling calls Chief Constable to verify that there is no Inspector whose name is Goole or who matches his description. Birling exclaims that this makes all the difference, and again Sheila and Eric insist that it doesn’t. Birling reasons that the inspection was probably set up by someone in the town who doesn’t like him.

Mrs. Birling reminds her family that she was the only one who didn’t give in to him, and suggests that they now discuss the affair amongst them and determine if there is anything to do about it. Birling agrees with his wife, and adds that that the Inspector may not be the end of it.

Mrs. Birling sees the interaction with the Inspector as one based on power; only she didn’t give in to him. Now she wants to keep the entire affair private and handle it themselves (and also prepare to deal with any other consequences beyond the Inspector).

Birling demands that Eric, who is looking sulky, begin to take some interest in the matter. Eric responds that his problem is rather that he’s taken too much interest, and Sheila joins him in this sentiment. Mr. Birling and Mrs. Birling voice their desire to “behave sensibly” in the circumstance, but their children rebut that they can’t pretend that nothing’s happened, when the girl is still dead and the family members still did the things they confessed to doing. Both sides continue to protest and defend their own positions.

The rift widens between the older Birlings who wish to put their deeds and the inspection behind them, and those (the children) who cannot forget what they’ve done and what happened to the girl with whom they were connected.
Gerald proposes that the one fact that Eric and Sheila are assigning great significance—that Eva Smith is dead—may not even be a fact after all. He asks the Birlings how they know that they’ve all committed offenses to the same girl, suggesting that the photographs the Inspector showed the family members might actually have been distinct photographs, and not of the same girl. Birling catches on, and reasons that they only had the Inspector’s word for it, but now that they know that he lied about his identity, he might well have been lying about it all.

Gerald asks what happened after he’d left. Mrs. Birling recounts that the Inspector accused her of seeing Eva Smith only two weeks previous, and that she had assented even though the girl hadn’t called herself Eva Smith before the Committee. She admits that she had felt compelled to provide what the Inspector expected from her. Mrs. Birling revisits her performance in the questioning, and retrospectively sees that she had been manipulated into answering as the Inspector wanted her to; she thus tries to use the Inspector’s newfound guilt to bolster her own innocence.

Eric still doesn’t believe Gerald’s claim, and insists that the girl that he got pregnant was the same that asked his mother for aid. Gerald proposes that even that could have been nonsense. Eric fights back, arguing that it’s not nonsense because the girl’s still dead, but Gerald asks “what girl?” Eric still holds to the idea that the girl he knew is dead, even though he has no evidence for it apart from the Inspector’s testimony.

Birling triumphantly continues to hypothesize that the Inspector simply shocked them into submission with his initial description of the girl’s suicide, in order to more easily bluff them throughout his inquiry. Gerald suggests that they call the Infirmary to confirm whether or not there was any suicide at all, and though Birling objects that it will look “queer,” he proceeds, and discovers from the hospital that they haven’t had a suicide for months.

Again, the case is further unraveled, and its ethical significance further confused, when it turns out that no suicide took place. Yet, oddly, as Eva Smith ceases to be a real person, she becomes even more of a symbol of all poor women and people affected by the blind and uncaring power of the rich.

In contrast to their parents and Gerald, Sheila and Eric firmly believe that the investigation and the truths it revealed remain significant. They take the position that uncaring acts toward others that could result in harm to others, even if no such harm occurs, are immoral and must be responded to as such. Sheila’s refusal to renew her engagement to Gerald is a refusal to go back to the unthinking, comfortable state she occupied before.
Just as Birling begins to make fun of his overly serious children, the telephone rings. After Birling hangs up, he reports that it was the police, alerting him that a girl has just died on her way to the infirmary, after swallowing some disinfectant, and that a Police Inspector is on his way to ask some questions. The Birlings stare “guiltily and dumbfounded.” As Sheila rises to stand, the curtain falls slowly.

The play concludes on an ambiguous note: did the Inspector know that a girl had or was going to commit suicide by disinfectant, or is the play just a constructed political allegory that ultimately proves Sheila’s point: “If it didn’t end tragically, then that’s lucky for us. But it might have done”? Taken symbolically, it’s possible to see this sudden death as a response to the question about morality when there are no consequences: that even if some immoral acts based on denying the humanity of others don’t produce consequences, they will eventually result in consequences, not just for those harmed but for those like the Birling’s who do the harming. Sheila standing as the curtain falls seems to indicate not just her willingness but her desire that the Birling’s be forced to face what they have done.