

Arthur Birling: *The famous younger **generation** who know it all.*

Explore the importance of the different generations in the play.

You **must** refer to the context of the play in your answer.

Undoubtedly, the theme of youth and age is vital within the play 'An Inspector Calls'. Priestley subtly implies the importance of growing, changing and learning to take responsibility for others through the juxtaposition of the 'older generation's' reactions to the Inspector's revelations, with that of the 'younger generation'. Certainly, Birling's ill-informed naivety, revealed through his foolish statements about the Titanic, the war and labour unrest, is carefully designed by Priestley to ensure the audience reacts against Birling and his Capitalist worldview. When, shortly after some of his most obviously incorrect predictions, Birling smugly lectures Eric and Gerald about looking after 'number one', Priestley is obviously implying that this point of view is not only incorrect, but also to be laughed at. Both contemporary and modern audiences are able to judge Birling against their own knowledge of the world in which they once lived and the history of the world in which they live now.

In stark contrast to the reaction of the older generation and status quo, as represented by Mr and Mrs Birling and, to a lesser extent, Gerald, is the journey that Sheila and Eric go on throughout the play. Sheila, who is the first to be 'inspected' of the two, is perhaps the first to make the changes that Priestley is so keen to see in his audience. It is Sheila, who is so similar in many ways to Eva - young, pretty, female, powerless (although in a very different way) who is shown to most quickly and passionately embrace the Inspector's, and therefore Priestley's, political and moral message. At the start of the play she is seen as a child to be silenced and 'sent to her room'. Gerald's production of the ring - 'is it the one you wanted me to have?' - silences her and renders her accusations of Gerald's ignoring her 'last summer' almost ridiculous. Again, when the Inspector arrives and begins his questioning, it is Sheila who most obviously shows her remorse - 'oh how awful!' - and who is quickest to take responsibility for what she has done. This is in clear contrast to Mr Birling who refuses point blank to take responsibility for his part in Eva's death.

Similarly, Priestley creates the character of Eric, probably the most privileged character on the stage, to show that even he can change and learn. As Sheila says at the end of the play, to both their parents and to Gerald, 'it's as if you haven't learnt anything'. Eric agrees - 'everything's changed' - and thereby shows clearly what Priestley wants and expects from his audience. If Eric, the young public-school educated, 'varsity' graduate can see that 'we are all part of one body' then anyone can. Interestingly, Eric's part in Eva's death is one of the worst - when they first meet he drunkenly assaults her, enables her to become a prostitute and then makes her pregnant. Despite the fact that his 'misdemeanours' come at the end of a long line of wrongs by the Birlings and Gerald against her, this doesn't lessen his part in her suicide. However, it is perhaps he that shows the most powerful reaction to her death - drinking heavily, stealing from his father's business, and then, when the Inspector begins his questioning, leaving the room - as though he cannot face up to what he is hearing. When he returns, his outbursts are the most emotional and raw. By the end of his 'inspection' he is willing to go to jail, take full responsibility and admit fully his part in Eva's death.

Conversely, Mrs Birling, another member of the 'older generation', one which audiences would clearly recognise as a member of the ruling class - the class that presided over the deaths of millions in the wars, the class that denied the women the vote, the class that had run the country unchecked for years - are therefore being invited by Priestley to judge her on that basis. It is she that shows the least remorse, the cruelest reaction, the coldest response to what the Inspector says - 'I did my duty'. Her use of the word 'duty' stands in contrast to the Inspector's use of the word earlier in Act 1. Mrs Birling represents the way in which Priestley viewed the bourgeoisie and their grasp on power - economic, political and social. Her off-hand 'Edna will get it' at the start of the play sets her up as being someone completely at home with a serving class. Her acceptance that she had power at the Brumley Women's Charity does nothing to sway her view on her own behaviour - merely stating again that it was her 'duty' when in reality she had simply been angered by Eva's use of the name 'Mrs Birling'. The irony that Eva was protecting her son seems lost on Mrs Birling, even at the end. Mrs Birling's cruelty at sending a penniless, homeless mother out into the street isn't lost on the audience, ensuring that they don't sympathise or side with her point of view at any time.

Another way in which the generations are important in the play is through the way in which they react collectively to the news that Inspector Goole is potentially a fraud - Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald connive to get themselves off the hook - their fear of being caught out and the issue being made public, of being 'dragged through the courts' is paramount in deciding their actions. To Sheila and Eric however, it makes little or no difference. When Gerald suggests that Eva / Daisy may have been more than one girl, or that there was no one girl who killed herself, both Sheila and Eric respond by saying it doesn't matter - they know they did what they did to *someone* and that that is enough for them to have realised that the 'Inspector' right - that we *are* responsible for those around us, that our actions do have consequences. Sheila says that they are 'scaring' her, that what the Inspector said frightened her, but that what her parents and Gerald are saying is much worse - again, speaking the words of the Inspector and therefore Priestley. For Sheila, a young woman in 1912, with no political or economic power other than that given to her by her father or husband, to speak with the voice of the Inspector, to begin to question her parents and fiance in the way she does, would have echoed the growing political dissent of both the Suffragettes and the wider labour movement. It would also echo the growing socialist movement in the post-WW2 period, in which those that had lived through the war had seen class barriers beginning to erode even further.

Finally, herself a member of the 'famous younger generation', there is Eva. At the heart of the play, although the audience never meet her, is a selfless, moral and innocent young woman. Used and abused by her elders and 'betters', Eva maintains a firm morality throughout the play - she stands up for her co-workers at Birlings and Co; she is a 'good sport' when Gerald, who has used her as his mistress, asks her to leave the flat he has set her up in; she refuses to take stolen money from Eric, or marry him, when she finds out she is pregnant. Priestley has created a young woman who can be both a role model to Eric and Sheila and of course to the audience too. Through Eva, Priestley is able to show the effect of the selfishness of the Birlings, the cruelty of the capitalist system, and ultimately the pointless waste of a human life, which could have been avoided, and still can, if people realise that they are indeed 'bound up together like bees in a hive'.