

Social Class

Key Words

Against other social classes

- Absolve (be free from)
- Shirks (avoids/neglects)
- Obdurate (stubborn)
- Social duty vs moral duty dichotomy (contrast)
- Prejudicial treatment
- Avarice (greed)
- Callousness (cruelty)
- Unchecked privilege
- Upper echelons of society
- Exploitation
- Segregative ideology
- Individualistic capitalist notion
- Obliviousness (unaware)

For the unity of social classes

- Humanistic perspective
- Metamorphosis (change)
- Social justice
- Moral imperative
- Moral compass
- Collective social conscience
- Inclusive
- Yearns for solidarity
- Progressive
- Social responsibility
- Interconnectedness

Priestley's intentions

- Priestley shows that we are all interconnected and in order to achieve unity, society should strive towards a **society built on empathy, compassion, and social responsibility opposed to hatred, segregation and irresponsibility**.
- He utilises his **allegorical diatribe** (teaching a message while criticising) to both educate his audience and criticise the **oppressive barriers of social class**, arguing that upholding these divisions only exacerbates societal suffering and destruction.
- The underlying theme of social class pervades the entire play, with Priestley illustrating how it **shapes the foundational structure of society**. He suggests that without unity and collective responsibility, societal progress will stagnate.

Mr Birling

"As if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive - community and all that nonsense"

- **Zoomorphism:** Mr. Birling employs **zoomorphism** (giving a human animal qualities) to characterise society, particularly likening the lower classes to "bees." This direct comparison reflects Mr. Birling's **degradation** and **mockery** of the concept of collective responsibility, portraying it as an **animalistic** and **primal behaviour** fit only for insignificant creatures like "bees."
- He dismisses the idea of **intertwining his responsibilities** with those of others and perceives the notion of ending his negligence as **trivial** (unimportant) "nonsense."
- **Hyphen:** The deliberate insertion of a hyphen prompts a **theatrical pause**, compelling the actor portraying Mr. Birling to hesitate before articulating the word "community." This pause emphasises his **physical repulsion** to the concept, suggesting an inability to even verbalise it.
- Acting as a **microcosm** (something small representing something larger) for capitalist ideologies, Mr. Birling becomes vilified for his rejection of the idea of "community" and his preference for **materialism over human relationships**.

"Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges' (Act 2 said by Inspector)

- **Syntax:** The **syntax** (word order) of the phrase places "responsibilities" before "privileges," reflecting the direct order of importance emphasised by the Inspector to Mr. Birling.
- However, Mr. Birling **inverts** this sequence, prioritising his privileges and **materialistic gains** over his responsibilities and the development of a **collective social conscience** (knowing right from wrong in society).
- **Short fragmented sentences:** The concise, fragmented structure of "public men" followed by "Mr. Birling" mirrors Mr. Birling's **fragmented perception of responsibility** and accountability for his **exploitative treatment** of the lower classes.
- He perceives his social status as granting him the authority to **dehumanise** those beneath him and **absolve (be free from)** himself of any responsibility for the suffering he causes them.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** Mr Birling perceives his **social status** as granting him the authority to dehumanise those beneath him and absolve (be free from) himself of any **responsibility** for the suffering he causes them
- **Older vs younger generation:** Mr Birling's obdurate (stubborn) nature as an older **generation member** is clear in regards to his unchanging prejudices and discrimination against the **lower classes**.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Mr Birling personifies **capitalism** and thus prioritising his privileges and materialistic gains over his **social** responsibilities and the development of a collective social conscience (knowing right from wrong in society)
- **Guilt:** He dismisses the idea of intertwining his responsibilities with those of others and perceives the notion of ending his negligence as trivial – he has no **guilt** or compassion for the lower **social classes** and his detrimental negligence of them.

Mrs Birling

"I consider I did my duty" (Act 2)

- **Noun "duty"** - The noun "duty" could be a tool to explore the **disparity in the perspectives of capitalists and socialists**, for capitalists, **upholding the class system was paramount**, thus for Mrs Birling, her **duty and personal responsibility may be to uphold the class gap** by refusing Eva help.
- However, this stance contrasts sharply with her anticipated role within her organisation, where she is expected to adopt a philanthropic (charitable) position. Priestley introduces the audience to the **social duty vs. moral duty dichotomy** (a contrast between two things).
- **Personal pronoun**: The audience awaits with hopeful anticipation as Mrs. Birling begins her speech with the personal pronoun "I," expecting her to demonstrate personal **remorse and guilt**. However, she consistently rejects the idea of being held accountable for any action that doesn't align with the **pristine persona** she wishes to portray.
- Through this, Priestley **critiques the classism which penetrates every aspect of Edwardian life**, rendering even the **welfare organisations hollow, corrupt and performative**.

"I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class—" (act 2)

- **Repetition on "girl"**: The term "girl" conveys notions of innocence and vulnerability, shedding light on Mrs. Birling's understanding of the innocence inherent in individuals like Eva, while simultaneously showcasing her **willingness to exploit them and rationalise it for capitalist advancement**.
- Additionally, the repetitive use of "girl" showcases how this **exploitative and prejudicial treatment of lower social class** individuals repeatedly commences within society, with figures such as Mrs. Birling shielded from the consequences by their elevated social status.
- **Demonstrative adjective on 'that'**: She groups together the lower classes through the demonstrative adjective "that" to dismiss them as **an aggregate** (meaning they are all grouped together as one) **inferior and homogeneous (all the same)** group that all behave in the same way.
- The demonstrative adjective not only emphasises the **distinctions in their social classes**, but also illustrates how Mrs. Birling is entirely governed by the **arrogance of her social status** - she can't even bring herself to specify Eva's social class, considering it so far beneath her.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** Mrs Birling's demeanour is conceited (vain) and calculated, typical of someone of her **social standing** who might typically navigate such situations effortlessly with rehearsed social grace. However, she fails to realise that she will not remain unscathed (without suffering) for her and her family's **irresponsibility** this time.
- **Older vs younger generation:** Mrs. Birling, entrenched in her upper-class status and **generation**, arrogantly refuses aid to **lower classes**, even in philanthropy.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** For **capitalists**, upholding the **class system** was paramount, thus for Mrs Birling, her duty and personal responsibility may be to uphold the class gap by refusing Eva help.
- **Guilt:** Mrs Birling consistently rejects the idea of **guilt** or being held accountable for any action that doesn't align with the pristine persona she wishes to portray within her **social class**.
- **Gender:** Despite belonging to a marginalised group as a women, Mrs. Birling exploits those in the lower classes, leveraging their heightened oppression to reaffirm her own power.

Sheila

“Look Mummy - isn’t it a beauty?” (Act 1)

- **Short simplistic language:** In Act 1, Sheila's **speech is short and simplistic**, reflecting not only how society silences her as a young woman perceived as **inferior** but also highlighting her **disenfranchisement** (lack of a vote). This lack of voice could be seen as Priestley's critique of the **limited political agency** women had during the Edwardian Era.
- Despite her **privileged social status**, Sheila remains **oppressed and marginalised** (group treated insignificantly). Her language, marked by terms like "mummy," suggests an **infantile and sheltered perspective**, illustrating how her social class shields her from life's harsh realities.
- **Objectification:** Sheila's mesmerisation at the "beauty" of the ring is almost ironic as she is only valued for her perceived "beauty" and external looks by society. The **objectification** extends to both the young females we encounter – Sheila and Eva.
- Both are similarly described as "pretty" showing how despite their differing social classes, they were both subject to the **same oppressing and objectifying social perceptions**.

“But these girls aren’t cheap labour - they’re people” (Act 1)

- **Connotation of “girls”:** Sheila's vocabulary shift, particularly her focus on "girls," exposes her father's **exploitative capitalism**. "Girls" connotes innocence and vulnerability, suggesting Sheila now recognises how the upper class, imbued with capitalist views, **preys on the disadvantaged social classes**.
- This revelation, unimaginable for her sheltered past self, fuels her disgust with the **dehumanising and unscrupulous behaviour** of capitalists.
- **Humanistic perspective:** The Inspector's arrival **frees her from the shackles of her oppressive privileged existence**. Exposed to the **human cost** of excessive capitalism, she sheds her former self-serving docile perspective and embraces a humanistic outlook, valuing individuals over profit.
- Thus, act one's docile Sheila, **cocooned** (wrapped) in privilege, undergoes a **metamorphosis** (change) under the Inspector's scrutiny. Her **infantile facade crumbles**, revealing an emerging champion for **social justice**. This symbolises the advancement of **women's rights in 1945**, depicting women's empowerment and their role in advocating for social justice for all oppressed members of society.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** Sheila now recognises how the **upper class**, imbued with capitalist views, preys on the disadvantaged. This revelation, unimaginable for her sheltered past self, fuels her disgust with the dehumanising and **irresponsible** behaviour of capitalists
- **Older vs younger generation:** Sheila becomes a foil to her stagnant parents of the **older generation**. Act one's docile Sheila, cocooned (wrapped) in privilege, undergoes a metamorphosis (change) under the Inspector's scrutiny whereas her parents remain entrenched in their dehumanising beliefs about **social class**.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** The Inspector's arrival frees her from the shackles of her oppressive privileged existence. Exposed to the human cost of excessive **capitalism**, she sheds her former self-serving docile perspective and embraces a **humanistic outlook**, valuing individuals over profit
- **Guilt:** Sheila experiences profound remorse and **guilt** for her sheltered ignorance regarding **social class**. Her awakening to the human toll of capitalism liberates her, transforming her into a moral compass for her family.

Eric

“Why shouldn’t they try for higher wages? We try for the highest possible prices” (Act 1)

- **Rhetorical question:** Eric is questioning the ethics behind his **avarice** (greed) father’s **exploitative attitude** towards business and relationship with lower social classes. This is a pivotal turning point for his character, as the audience begins to see him **deviate** from the *[half shy]* presentation into the *[assertive]* one foreshadowed at the beginning.
- The emergence of socialist ideals within Eric's consciousness is **dismantling his prior obliviousness to the suffering inflicted upon others** by capitalist ideologies.
- **Alliteration:** The alliterative phrase “*possible prices*” illuminates Eric’s emphasis on the **outdated and unjust social systems** that have been created and upheld by older generation members like his parents.
- He exposes and questions the **systemic bias** that favour the wealth accumulation of upper-class capitalists, leveraging a **laissez-faire (minimal intervention)** governmental stance. He has realised this enables figures like his father to exploit and silence working-class individuals for **personal monetary gain**.

“She was pretty and a good sport” (act 3)

- **Connotations of ‘sport’:** The term “*sport*” evokes connotations of games and amusement, shedding light on Eric's perception of his relationship with Eva as **a form of selfish entertainment**. This exposes the **callousness** (cruel) with which he **exploited and objectified her**, reducing her to a **mere source of gratification**.
- Eric’s callous alcohol fuelled relationship with Eva is a **microcosm** of the **toxic dynamics perpetuated by unchecked privilege and substance abuse within Edwardian society**.
- **Syntax of pretty:** Even in her death, Eric still possesses power over her through reducing her to her superficial appearance, focusing first on her physical “*pretty*”(ness).
- **The syntax (word-order)**, with her physical attributes preceding her character, reflects his **shallow perception**, reducing Eva to a **mere object of desire** rather than recognising her intrinsic worth as a human being. Thus, Eva is emblematic of the **disposable treatment of women** in the early twentieth century by the **heartless upper echelons of society**.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** Eric has come to understand that responsibility transcends one's own **social class**. He is disturbed by the collective actions of himself and his family, recognising the interconnected nature of everyone's **responsibility**.
- **Older vs younger generation:** Eric is questioning the ethics behind his avarice (greed) **father's** exploitative attitude towards business and relationship with **lower social classes**
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** The emergence of **socialist** ideals within Eric's consciousness is dismantling his prior obliviousness to the suffering inflicted upon the **lower classes** by capitalist ideologies
- **Guilt:** Eric's growing sense of personal accountability and **social awareness** signifies that he is on a quest for redemption (save from sin) from his capitalist sins as he feels **guilt** for his immoral actions.
- **Gender:** Eric's callous alcohol fuelled **relationship** with Eva is a microcosm of the toxic dynamics perpetuated by unchecked **privilege** and substance abuse within Edwardian society.

Gerald

“We’re respectable citizens and not criminals” (Act 1)

- **Collective pronoun “we’re”**: The utilisation of the collective pronoun “we’re” serves to **propagate a segregative ideology**, as Gerald employs it to unite the Birlings against perceived “criminals.” However, the **irony** lies in Gerald’s unfounded assertion of the Birlings’ respectability, which **unveils aristocratic biases as fundamentally ignorant**.
- Additionally, it underscores how the wealthy, consumed by materialism, often lack insight into morality or even real life itself, this belittling their **perceived shrewdness** (having good judgement).
- **Alliteration on ‘citizens’ and ‘criminals’**: The alliteration of “citizens” and “criminals” creates a sense of similarity, reflecting Priestley’s portrayal of **blurred lines between morality and criminality** as one ascends the social hierarchy.
- Much like Priestley’s use of **dramatic irony and satire** to mock Mr. Birling, he **subtly ridicules Gerald’s pretentious demeanour**, revealing how the wealthy often harbour biases that align only with their narrow worldview. Priestley highlights this is only **exacerbated** through capitalist ideologies.

“Everything’s all right now, Sheila [holds up the ring] what about this ring?” (Act 3)

- **Cyclical narrative**: Gerald conducts the play to follow a **cyclical structure**, focussing back on his and Sheila’s engagement. This is reflective of his unwillingness to change and his overarching desire to **absolve himself from guilt and responsibility**.
- Despite belonging to the younger generation, he **shirks** (avoid/neglects) accountability, disappointing the audience with his **character arc**. Unlike Sheila and Eric, who are impressionable and adaptable, Gerald’s **obstinate** (stubborn) nature remains unchanged.
- **Ring as a metonym**: The use of the noun “ring” as a **metonym** (when a noun or an attribute of something is used in place of its actual name another example could be referring to the British monarchy as ‘the Crown’) for marriage displays Gerald’s materialistic view of marriage, **devoid of any emotion or love**.
- He **reverts to this symbol of traditional power and possession** in order to reassert himself; he finds comfort in the **ingrained societal beliefs** which make life ‘easy’ for him.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** Gerald derives comfort from the entrenched societal beliefs ingrained by his **social class**. Despite being aware of the **irresponsible** nature of these beliefs, he relies on the protective facade they offer, and hopes it can continue to shield him as it once did.
- **Older vs younger generation:** Gerald easily assimilated (blended) into the higher **echelon of society** as he is a paragon (perfect example) of social superiority. His ease and comfort in his current circumstances foreshadow his resistance to change, contrasting with the more malleable (able to change) qualities of other **members of the younger generation**.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** He is a victim to **capitalist** ideologies ingrained within him, as he is unable to escape the persona crafted for him before he even had agency (a choice) over his own identity – he is a marionette (puppet) of his **social class**.
- **Guilt:** He shirks (avoid/neglects) accountability, disappointing the audience with his character arc. This reluctance to feel **guilt** and remorse may stem from a fear of jeopardising his social standing and being ostracised (isolated) by the **elite**.

The Inspector

“It’s better to ask for the earth than take it” (Act 1 said to Mr Birling)

- **Syntax on ‘ask’:** The **syntax** on “*ask*” prior to “*take*” is used by the Inspector to highlight the hierarchical order of importance crucial for societal collective responsibility. It emphasises that it is imperative to “*ask*” and share resources, in contrast to the **individualistic capitalist notion** of “*taking*” for personal gain.
- The Inspector demonstrates that the act of “*taking*” often exacerbates inequality and perpetuates the cycle of poverty for those in lower social classes. Through his direct critique of Mr. Birling, who embodies capitalist ideology, the Inspector **condemns the prioritisation of individual greed** and self-interest over community well-being.
- **Connotations of ‘take’:** To “*take*” carries connotations of stealing, a notion **vehemently** (strongly) condemned in biblical teachings as a **mortal sin**. As religion was the **foundation of morality** in the Edwardian era, capitalist ideals often disregard these teachings, **prioritising individual gain** over ethical considerations.
- Juxtaposingly, socialism can be viewed as a return to society's moral foundations, emphasising communal values and collective responsibility over **individualistic desire**.

“We are members of one body” (Act 3)

- **Biblical allusions:** He also **directly relays the biblical teaching**, used in baptism, that we are “*members of his body*” in Christ. This is parallel language to “*we are members of one body*”. Thus, the Inspector, alike to Jesus, promotes the union of society and togetherness- reinforcing his spreading of Christianity and its **foundational teachings**.
- Alike to Jesus providing **salvation for mankind**, the Inspector’s final speech can be seen as being the **salvation for the Birlings** as he reminds them to “*Remember that. Never forget it.*”
- **Singular image on ‘one’:** The singular image of “*one*” serves as a poignant reminder of the profound interconnectedness that binds humanity together. Therefore, he teaches the Birlings it is their **moral imperative** to recognise and **fulfil their duty to care** for their community and members of society regardless of their social class.
- By understanding that we are all interconnected, the Inspector teaches both the Birlings and the audience that society can strive towards a **society built on empathy, compassion, and social responsibility opposed to hatred, segregation and irresponsibility**.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** The Inspector shows the need for the abolition of segregation between the **social classes**. He illustrates that creating unity, promoting **responsibility** and recognising the interconnectedness of humanity is essential to abolishing oppressive social hierarchies.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** The Inspector demonstrates that the individualistic **capitalist** notion of 'taking' often exacerbates inequality and perpetuates the cycle of poverty for those in **lower social classes**.
- **Guilt: Guilt** is an instrumental tool utilised by the Inspector to catalyse a change within the characters and prompt introspection. Embracing remorse and guilt necessitates compassion and understanding – two crucial elements for constructing a progressive and **equal society**.