

Responsibility

Key Words

Responsible

- Equitable (fair) society
- Compassionate
- Conscientious (careful about others)
- Prudent (wise)
- Resolute (committed) in their responsibilities of social justice
- Principled (has strong moral principles)
- Altruistic (selfless)
- Virtuous (moral)
- Benevolent (kind and loving)
- Humanitarian (focus on people in need)
- Solicitous (care for others)
- Demands social justice
- Metamorphosis (changes)
- Interconnectedness
- Disillusioned (seen reality) of irresponsible capitalists
- Moral compass

Irresponsible

- Exploitative
- Segregation
- Animalistic treatment
- Barbaric (cruel)
- Value materialism over human
- Absolve (free from) responsibility
- Dehumanise
- Entrenched worldview (stuck)
- Obdurateness (stubbornness)
- Unlawful
- Injurious (immoral)
- Negligent
- Disregardful (disregards duties)
- Unprincipled (have no moral principles)
- Depraved (evil and wicked)
- Callous (no compassion)
- Insensitive (no understanding for others)
- Uncompassionate Conceited (vain)

Priestley's intentions

- Priestley crafts a **political diatribe** (criticising the politics at the time) to illustrate how Capitalism actively encourages irresponsibility through its ideologies and a disregard for others within society. He argues that socialism, **synonymous** (closely linked) with responsibility, stands as the sole remedy for achieving a **progressive and equitable (fair) society**
- Priestley shows that collective responsibility is a **by-product** of adopting socialist beliefs. He asserts that this collective responsibility serves as a **solution to the division and segregation prevalent in society**, ultimately creating inevitable social cohesion.
- Priestley demonstrates that collective societal responsibility shifts accountability for **segregation, exploitation, and poverty** away from individual groups, encouraging unity in pursuit of a shared goal: creating a **fair and compassionate society**.

Mr Birling

"As if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive - community and all that nonsense" Act 1

- **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

- **Social class:** 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:** He persists in holding onto his entrenched worldview as a product of the **older generation**, displaying obdurateness (stubbornness) and resistance to change. He is a stagnant character as he maintains a dehumanising and **irresponsible** perspective, refusing to adapt or grow.
- **Capitalism vs Socialism:** Serving as a microcosm exemplifying **capitalist** ideologies, Mr. Birling faces condemnation from the audience for his dismissal of the fundamental societal value of **responsibility**, alongside his prioritisation of materialism over human relationships
- **Guilt:** Mr. Birling exhibits a complete absence of **guilt** regarding his consistent display of unscrupulousness and **irresponsibility**. Devoid (lacking) of remorse, he remains fixated on preserving his reputation and facade. His primary concern lies not in the impact of events on individuals but rather on how they will affect his social standing.

Mrs Birling

“He certainly didn’t make me confess” (Act 3)

- **Connotations of “confess”**: The verb “confess” has connotations of crime, and by stating she hasn’t committed any **unlawful acts**, she subtly implies her lack of responsibility.
- Her firm denial of accountability comes **effortlessly**, reflecting the acceptance and even promotion of selfishness and consequently, irresponsibility within **capitalist ideologies**, without **moral or legal condemnation (punishment)**.
- **Imperative verb “make”**: The imperative verb “make” hints at another reason as to why she so actively rejects responsibility- **it is a way of keeping afloat in the power struggle between her and the inspector**.
- Mrs. Birling’s choice of words subtly suggests that admitting responsibility would be **conceding** (admitting something is true) to the inspector, posing a threat to her status in the **capitalist hierarchy** – she is safeguarding her position within the societal structure dictated by capitalist ideologies.

[Enters briskly and self-confidently, quite out of key] (Act 2)

- **Her entry into act two**: Her entry into act two is **conducted entirely under the arrogance of her social superiority**. Her **ostentatious** (showy) display of class renders her character **discordant** (not fitting) within the **narrative of grief, remorse, and suicide**.
- This further **exacerbates her emotional detachment**, as she maintains the same [cold] demeanour observed in Act 1.
- **Adverb ‘briskly’**: The use of the adverb “*briskly*” indicates that Mrs. Birling is unwilling to pause and contemplate the adverse effects of her family’s **unscrupulousness (immorality)** and exploitation.
- Her 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.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Social class:** 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.
- **Old vs Younger generation:** Mrs Birling's boastful lack of **responsibility** is a foil to both her children – both Sheila and Eric develop a collective social conscience. She persists in holding onto his entrenched worldview as a product of the **older generation**, displaying obdurateness (stubbornness) and resistance to change, especially in the face of the Inspector.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Serving as a microcosm exemplifying **capitalist ideologies**, she is conducted entirely under the arrogance of her social superiority opposed to **responsibility**. Her adherence to capitalist ideologies not only supports but also fosters and encourages this behaviour.
- **Guilt:** Mrs Birling exhibits no trace of **guilt or responsibility**, her ostentatious (showy) display of class renders her character discordant (not fitting) within the narrative of grief, remorse, and suicide.

Sheila

“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**.
- 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.

“[Rather wildly, with laugh] No, he’s giving us the rope- so that we’ll hang ourselves.” (Act 2)

- **Stage direction [wildly, with laugh]**: The stage direction "[wildly]," depicts Sheila's **disillusionment (seen the reality)** with capitalist ideals and middle-class etiquette. She liberates herself from these constraints, embracing her **unrestrained** nature without apology.
- Coupled with her [laugh], this suggests she finds capitalism absurd, laughing at its societal significance.
- **Symbolism of ‘rope’**: “rope” has fibres that are all intertwined, this symbolising how Sheila has recognised that everybody in society is **intertwined with their responsibilities**. Each individual is all **woven into the fabric of our communities and society and not independent pieces**, but interconnected threads creating a larger united body.
- Thus, Sheila understands, through the Inspector's symbolic gesture of the "rope," that she and her family bear a moral duty to protect the “millions and millions” that suffer.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Social class:** 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 scathingly criticises her **parents' generational blindness** to the consequences of their actions. Witnessing the extreme harm they've caused, she demands greater **responsibility** and accountability.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Sheila becomes disillusioned with **capitalist** ideologies as she recognises that everybody is inextricably linked to their **responsibilities**. Socialism has freed her from the shackles of her oppressive privileged existence
- **Guilt:** Sheila's embrace of a humanistic outlook deepens her compassion, leading to all-consuming feelings of remorse and **guilt** for her past ignorance and role in perpetuating the relentless exploitation of the lower classes.

Eric

“I did what I did. And mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her” (act 3)

- **Personal pronoun on “I”:** The recurrent use of the personal pronoun “I” serves not only to illuminate Eric's growing sense of **personal accountability** and **social awareness** but also signifies the maturation of his **introspection** (reflecting on yourself) – he is on a quest for **redemption** (save from sin) from his capitalist sins.
- Eric is transitioning from the [*half shy*] demeanour initially presented in Act 1, now **compelling his family to confront their own moral failings** and take ownership of their unethical behaviour.
- **Parallelism (repetition of “did what” in each part of the sentence):** The parallelism, characterised by the repetition of “did what” in each segment of the sentence, showcases the **interconnected nature of everyone's responsibility** – Eric emphasises that their **negligence and exploitation are burdens** they must collectively accept.
- The parallelism surrounding ‘did what’ introduces an almost **ambiguous** quality as there is no details on what they specifically “did”. This compounds how they are **microcosms** (something small representing something larger) of the upper-middle class and therefore symbolises how they “did what” they pleased to the lower classes **without remorse or accountability** from anyone.

“But don’t forget i’m ashamed of you as well - yes both of you” (act 3)

- **Connotations of “ashamed”:** The term “ashamed” conveys a sense of embarrassment, revealing **Eric's deep disillusionment** and embarrassment has stemmed from his realisation of capitalists' **inherent exploitation** of individuals and prioritisation of self-interest.
- As a representative of the younger generation, Eric faces ridicule for his progressive outlook. However, he adopts a **condescending demeanour** towards his parents, showcasing his fearlessness in challenging their **regressive** beliefs and highlighting his commitment to catalysing change.
- **Hyphen:** The use of the hyphen in “– yes both of you” simplifies the sentence, akin to the Inspector's concise speech, Eric is simplifying to his **obdurate** (stubborn) parents of the older generation the importance of **collective social responsibility**.
- Eric's adoption of short sentences, mirroring the Inspector's style, may also signify his **growing power post-liberation from capitalism's constraints**. In Act 1, the Inspector's brevity (concise use of words) denotes authority, a trait echoed by Eric as he speaks concisely to showcase his **newfound power rooted in moral conviction**.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Social class:** 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:** As a spokesperson for the **younger generation**, Eric encounters ridicule for his progressive stance. Nevertheless, he assumes a condescending demeanour towards his parents, demonstrating his courage in confronting their outdated beliefs and underlining his dedication to instigating change while embracing **responsibility**.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Eric's deep disillusionment and embarrassment arise from his realisation of **capitalism's** inherent exploitation of individuals and its prioritisation of self-interest over **responsibility**.
- **Guilt:** Symbolising the political shift towards socialism in 1945, Eric emerges as an emblem of change, liberated from the confines of capitalism. His emancipation stems from the cultivation of a social conscience, accompanied by feelings of **guilt** and remorse towards others.

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.

“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

- **Social class:** 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:** 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.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Gerald's segregative ideologies and strong belief in the infallibility (inability to be wrong) of aristocracy and **capitalism** are clear. He cannot conceive of a world where equality, fairness and **responsibility** could be extended to the upper classes
- **Guilt:** Gerald's swift disregard for the devastation inflicted upon both Eva and his marriage highlights his callousness and absence of remorse. His primary concern lies in preserving and returning to a high social status rather than being **responsible** and feeling **guilt** for his actions.

The Inspector

“If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught in fire and blood and anguish” (act 3)

- **Polysyndeton (repetition of 'and')**: The **polysyndeton**, shown by the repetition of "and," highlights the **perpetual** torment awaiting those who **shirk** (avoid) their moral and civic responsibilities. The Inspector's **prophetic and omniscient** (all-knowing) presentation imbues this message with heightened **gravity** (seriousness) and significance.
- Additionally, it may allude to the Second World War, as Priestley utilises the Inspector as his **mouthpiece** to utter the word "**anguish**," this symbolises **humanity's failure** to learn from past mistakes, leading to further "**blood and anguish**".
- **Biblical allusions**: '**fire and blood and anguish**' have biblical allusions to hell. Thus, the Inspector could be portrayed as an **agent of God** who is trying to bring the Birlings' back to the **foundation of morality** - religion.
- Their **digression** from these religious teachings, since they embodied some of the **seven deadly sins** of greed and pride (especially Mr Birling priding himself on being a "**hard-headed practical man of business**") means that the Inspector's role as a **moral agent of God** is even more fundamental.

“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.
- 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

- **Social class:** 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's teachings makes socialism appear to bring society back to the foundations of reality - religion. He is presented as a moral agent of God, and through his clear **socialist** stance, it makes socialism seem inextricably linked with religion, morality and **responsibility**.
- **Guilt:** By promoting introspection and the cultivation of a social conscience, the Inspector does not explicitly aim to evoke guilt from the Birlings. Rather, he recognises guilt as a natural human response to the suffering inflicted. The **guilt** experienced by a Birling serves as a catalyst for their transformation into a **responsible** member of society.