

# Older vs Younger Generations

## Key Words

### Responsible

- Stubborn
- Remorseless (no guilt)
- Exploitative
- Protect carefully crafted facade
- Derisive (mocking)
- Repudiate (refuse to accept)
- Callous (cruel)
- Obdurate (stubborn)
- Stagnant (stay the same)
- Self-serving outlook (selfish)
- Condescending (talk down)
- Belittles (makes feel inferior)
- Ostentatious (showy)
- Conceited (vain)
- Entrenched in their views (stuck)
- Shirks (avoids) responsibility

### Irresponsible

- Collective social conscience
- Liberated
- Disillusioned (seen the reality)
- Unrestrained
- Intertwined with responsibility
- Moral duty
- Moral compass (moral direction)
- Proxy (take on someone's role)
- Foil to their stagnant parents
- Criticise generational blindness
- Metamorphosis (change)
- Dismantles their obliviousness
- Deviate (move away from)
- Progressive (go forward)
- Newfound power rooted in morality
- Malleable (able to change)

## Priestley's intentions

- Priestley illustrates that the **malleable** (easy to change) and open-minded nature of the younger generation will **catalyse** (kick start) **social reform and lead to a more progressive society**. Thus, their willingness to embrace change and challenge established norms leads to positive change and advancement.
- Priestley **equates** (links) the older generation with **stagnation**. He demonstrates through the **cyclical narrative** that the ignorance and irresponsibility of the older generation perpetuate a cycle of "*anguish*." Thus, the only route to break free from this **cyclic torment is by abolishing these out-dated and oppressive generational perspectives**.
- In his **political diatribe** (criticising politics at the time), Priestley vehemently (strongly) **denounces** (criticises) the **obdurate** (stubborn) nature of the older generation while starkly contrasting it with the open-mindedness of the younger. He presents the audience with a clear choice between these two perspectives, urging them to consider which path will lead to **social reform and which will result in regression**.

# Mr Birling

## “There’ll be a public scandal” (act 3)

- **Euphemistic language:** Rather than admitting to the grave crime he has contributed to, Mr. Birling employs **euphemistic** (substituting it for a phrase less harsh) language to brand it as a mere 'scandal.' This **exacerbates** his stubbornness as a representative of the older generation, as he adamantly refuses to acknowledge the truth and feels **no remorse** for his **exploitation** of Eva.
- Alternatively, It also implies his hesitancy to confront the crime, perhaps driven by the fear that doing so would dismantle the carefully **crafted facade he maintains for public perception**.
- **Stagnant character:** Mr. Birling persists in his **self-serving outlook**, thus is presented as a stagnant (doesn't change) character as he ignores his **moral and civic obligations** as a member of society.
- His lack of character development is disheartening, yet unsurprising for the audience, as Priestley establishes early on that capitalist characters from the older generation **prioritise social status over compassion, remorse and social reform**.

## “The famous younger generation who know it all. And they can't even take a joke - ” (Act 3)

- **Irony:** It's ironic that Mr. Birling **derisively** (mockingly) labels the younger generation as 'know-it-alls,' given that he himself is the only character who asserts to "know it all," referencing events like the "Titanic" and dismissing concerns as "silly little war scares." Priestley deliberately set the play in 1912 to **fragmentize (break) the "know it all" ignorance of the older generation**.
- To some degree, by labelling them as the "younger generation," Priestley aligns Sheila and Eric with his **contemporary audience**, aiming for them to feel provoked by Mr. Birling's ignorant sarcasm. Priestley's intention is to urge his audience to **repudiate** (refuse to accept) the capitalist perspectives held by their parents.
- **Speech is cut off:** Following Mr. Birling's **remorseless and callous dismissal** of the suicide as a mere 'joke,' he is abruptly interrupted by the telephone, echoing the earlier interruption by the Inspector in Act 1.
- Perhaps Priestley opted for the form of a play to convey his **allegorical diatribe** (criticism while teaching a message) enabling him to visually depict Mr. Birling's beliefs as emblematic of the capitalist older generation—ones that should be physically and symbolically removed from society.

## How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** 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.
- **Social class:** 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 persists in his **self-serving capitalist outlook**, thus is presented as a stagnant (doesn't change) character as he is entrenched in the traditional values of his **generation**.
- **Guilt:** Mr. Birling's callous indifference for Eva's suffering and his lack of **guilt** highlights the **older generation's** deficiency in compassion and empathy, a theme emphasised by Priestley as a contributing factor to the occurrence of two world wars.

# Mrs Birling

“Sheila, what an expression! Really the things you girls pick up these days” (Act 1)

- **Exclamative sentence:** She is presented as a **marionette (puppet) of her class as she is complicit in upholding its conventions**, the exclamative sentence emphasises her frantically trying to **iron out any social faux pas (socially awkward or improper) so they operate seamlessly within the expectations of their class**, she is **reluctant to deviate from these in any way**.
- As a member of the older generation, and being of the most superior social standing of her family, she is **almost held in aspic within the hard-wired conventions of a capitalist and classist society**, thus anything that threatens these conventions threaten her.
- **Condescending noun “girls”:** She patronises Sheila through the **condescending noun “girl”**, reinforcing the infantile preservation we see Sheila endure in Act 1. This could be done as Sheila comes to symbolise **emancipation** (freedom), Mrs Birling wants to keep her docile and submissive as she fears **any changes to convention that may put her class position under threat**.
- Mrs Birling **belittles Sheila in order to dismiss her behaviour and portray it as foolish or uncouth**, she reinforces the separation between the older generation who are **robust to these newer ways of thinking** and the younger ones that seem vulnerable to ‘*pick[ing]*’ them up as if they were a disease

[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 which is the antithesis to the ‘*hysterical*’ and **remorseful** presentation of her daughter.
- **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

- **Responsibility:** 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**.
- **Social class:** Mrs. Birling, entrenched in her upper-class status and **generation**, arrogantly refuses aid to **lower classes**, even in philanthropy.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Her firm denial of accountability comes effortlessly as she has practised this for years as a member of the **older generation**. This reflects the acceptance and even promotion of selfishness and, consequently, irresponsibility within **capitalist** ideologies.
- **Guilt:** She is presented as a marionette (puppet) of her class and **generation** as she is complicit in upholding its conventions. Thus, she is more preoccupied at maintaining her pristinely created public facade than feeling emotions of remorse and **guilt**.
- **Gender:** Mrs Birling wants to keep **Sheila** docile and submissive as she fears any changes to convention that may put her class position under threat and change the society that she has experienced in the **older generation**.

# Sheila

“[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 whilst laughing at how persistently delusional her parents are – they want **shirk** (avoid) their responsibilities and moral wrongdoings.
- **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.

“What he made me feel. Fire and blood and anguish” (Act 3)

- **The Inspector's proxy (taken on someone's role when they leave)**: Following the Inspector's final speech, Sheila serves as his **proxy**, exemplified by her precise emulation, including the deliberate repetition of the polysyndeton on "and."
- This illuminates Sheila's desperate attempt to emphasise the **relentless consequences of lacking social conscience to her obdurate (stubborn) parents of the older generation and her fiancé indoctrinated with capitalist beliefs**.
- **Personal pronoun**: Sheila is now a **moral compass** to her family, showcasing her evolution towards empathy as her use of the personal pronoun "me" shows she now experiences genuine remorse.
- However, her **awareness extends beyond personal remorse**, she has developed an understanding of the **systemic consequences of capitalist ideologies on society as a whole**.

## How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility** : 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.
- **Social class**: 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**: Socialism emancipates Sheila from the shackles of **capitalism's** inherited oppressive ideals, allowing her to grasp the systemic consequences of capitalist ideologies on society at large. She comprehends how the **older generations** strive to preserve this dehumanising system.
- **Guilt**: Sheila's **guilt** and compassion catalyses her into becoming the Inspector's proxy to which she acts as a moral compass **to her parents** by delivering the teachings of socialism

# 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**.

“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

- **Responsibility** : 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**.
- **Social class**: 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 others by capitalist ideologies - he's realised this exploitative system is actively sustained by the **older generation**.
- **Guilt**: Eric's immense **guilt** and shame allows him to be malleable (easily shaped) by the Inspector's teachings. He thus tried to teach his obdurate (stubborn) parents of the **older generation** the importance of collective social responsibility.

# Gerald

[The easy, well- bred young man about town] (Act 1 stage direction)

- **Animalistic image on 'bred'**: For Priestley's contemporary audience, the stage direction "bred" evokes **imagery of animal breeding**, conjuring a metaphorical image of Gerald as a product of **meticulous cultivation**, much like a carefully bred animal.
- This suggests that Gerald has been groomed from birth to embody the **archetype of the aristocratic and charming "man about town."** Thus, 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.
- **Adjective on 'easy'**: The adjective on 'easy' implies that Gerald easily **assimilated** (blended) into the higher echelon of society as he is a **paragon (perfect example) of social superiority**. This 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.
- This reluctance to embrace socialist principles may stem from a fear of **jeopardising his social standing and being ostracised (isolated) by the elite**.

"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**, focusing 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:** 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 and **irresponsible**.
- **Social class:** 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:** Gerald can be seen as a product of **meticulous cultivation**, much like a carefully bred animal, to be a paragon (perfect-example) of an aristocratic **capitalist**. Despite being a member of the **younger generation**, he remains inextricably (closely linked) linked to this persona.
- **Guilt:** Gerald shows a hint of remorse, yet he falls back into the familiar social faux pas of the **older generations**, prioritising the preservation of a flawless facade over acknowledging and confronting his **guilt**.