

Guilt

Key Words / Phrases

Not Guilty

- Moral blindness
- Hypocrisy
- Impenitent (showing no regret)
- Unremorseful (feeling no guilt)
- Unconscionable (feeling no remorse)
- Remorseless exploitation
- Irresponsible self-serving outlook
- Derisive (mocking)
- Repudiate (refuse to accept)
- Callous (cruel)
- Absolved (free from)
- Blameless
- Unaccountable
- Conducted under social superiority, not guilt
- Unscrupulous (immoral)
- Emotional detachment

Guilty

- Moral awakening
- Sincerity
- Penitent (showing regret)
- Remorseful (feeling guilt)
- Contrite (feeling remorse)
- Agents of social reform
- Guilt's transformative power
- Catalyses (produces) moral growth
- Catalyses (produces) social reform
- Rueful (guilty)
- Benevolent (loving and caring)
- Empathetic
- Perspicacious (keen to learn)
- Humanistic perspective (care for people)
- Scrupulous (moral)

Priestley's intentions

- Priestley illustrates the **transformative power of guilt and remorse** in evoking change. By experiencing these **profound** (intense) and **visceral (deep instinctual)** emotions, individuals are compelled to **engage in introspection (looking at yourself deeply)**, gaining a profound understanding of the weight of their actions and **catalysing** (producing) moral growth.
- Priestley utilises guilt as a metric to measure the morality of each character. The **presence or absence of guilt** serves as a gauge of their moral development over the course of the play. He makes **impenitence** (not feeling shame) synonymous with capitalists, demonstrating their **moral blindness** as they're preoccupied with public image.
- By **permeating** the theme of guilt in the play, Priestley illustrates how feelings of guilt and compassion possess the potential to **catalyse societal transformation**. Through the characters of Sheila and Eric, who serve as **microcosms (something small representing something larger)** for social reform and change, he urges the audience to recognise its potential to driving societal change

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:** 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.
- **Social class:** 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
- **Older vs younger generation:** 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.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Mr Birling is so entrenched in his **capitalist ideologies** that he absolves (frees) himself from feelings of **guilt** and remorse. He perceives his social status as granting him the authority to dehumanise those beneath him.

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 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 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.
- **Social class:** Mrs Birling constantly 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**.
- **Older vs younger generation:** 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**.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Mrs. Birling consciously evades empathy and understanding to absolve herself of **guilt** for her dehumanising and exploitative treatment of the lower classes. Despite her outwardly philanthropic stance, she prioritises the **capitalist ideology** of prioritising self-interest over the needs of others.

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 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.

“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'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.
- **Social class:** 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.
- **Older vs younger generation:** 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
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Sheila begins to understand that **capitalism** favours self-interest, even in the face of neglecting others. This revelation, unimaginable for her sheltered past self, fuels her disgust and **guilt** towards the dehumanising and unscrupulous behaviour of capitalists

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

- **Responsibility:** 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.
- **Social class:** 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.
- **Older vs younger generation:** 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
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Despite Eric's prior alcohol-fueled perspective, the Inspector enlightens him with a fresh outlook on society and how **socialism** can encourage societal flourishing. His **guilt** plays a pivotal role in opening up this new perspective, as it disillusioned him from capitalist ideals.

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:** 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.
- **Social class:** 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**.
- **Older vs younger generation:** 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**.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** Gerald shows a hint of remorse, yet he falls back into the familiar self-prioritising **capitalist ideologies**, favouring the preservation of a flawless facade over acknowledging and confronting his **guilt**.

The Inspector

“As if she were an animal, a thing, not a person” (act 3)

- **Beastly image on ‘animal’**: Eva serves as a microcosm for the exploited lower class, and the depiction of her as an *“animal”* presents a beastly image that symbolises the **dehumanising** treatment endured by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.
- This symbolises the **systemic dehumanisation** inflicted upon the lower classes – they not only suffer physical and emotional degradation but constantly battle **social injustice and inequality**.
- **Asyndetic listing**: The use of an asyndetic list (listing with commas instead of 'and') conveys a sense of relentless repetition, vividly illustrating how Eva **endured relentless marginalisation and exploitation** both due to her lower societal status and her gender.
- The list depicts the extent of **dehumanisation and objectification** endured by a single individual at the hands of the Birlings, aiming to elicit a **cathartic** (purge of emotions) response of guilt. The sheer magnitude of suffering endured by the *“millions and millions”* remains **incomprehensible**, amplifying the Inspector’s message that collective responsibility is crucial to tackle this.

“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.

How It Links To Other Key Themes

- **Responsibility:** 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.
- **Social class: 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**.
- **Capitalism vs socialism:** The Inspector personifies **socialism** as he encompasses and propagates (spreads) socialist ideologies of fairness, developing a collective social conscience and being united in social reform. He is able to galvanise support for these ideals by evoking powerful emotions of **guilt**, remorse, and self-reflection from the younger generation, who start to recognise the flaws in their behaviour.