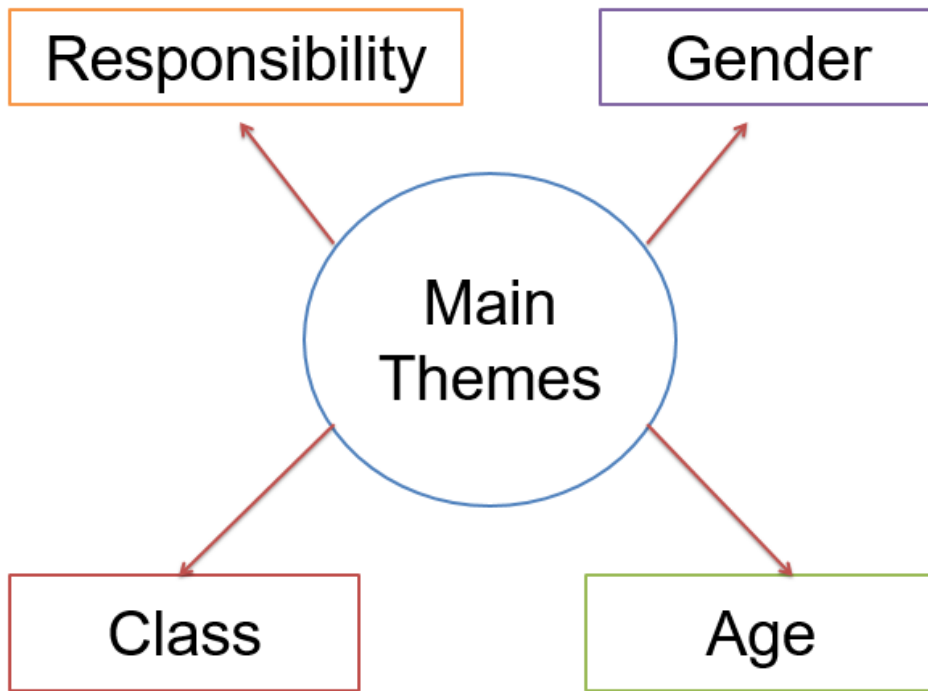


## An Inspector Calls Themes



### Responsibility

The play is concerned with both **personal responsibility** and **social responsibility**

- Primary theme
  - Words 'responsible' and 'responsibility' are used by most characters throughout the play
  - The Inspector wanted each member of the family to share the responsibility of Eva's death:  
*"One Eva Smith has gone - but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do."*
  - The Inspector gives the Birling's a warning:  
*"And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, when they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish."*
- What would Priestly want his audience to think of when providing the Birling's with such warnings?



## Character

## Attitude to Social Responsibility

Mr. Birling

**"... a man has to make his own way – has to look after himself – and his family too, of course when he has one..."**

Doesn't believe that an individual has a social responsibility to others.

Mrs. Birling

Sees social responsibility in a limited way – while she is involved with a woman's charity she has a very narrow sense of responsibility. She takes no responsibility for Eva's death.

Eric

Has some innate sense of social responsibility **"Why shouldn't they try for higher wages."** He felt enough responsibility to offer Eva money.

Shelia

Shelia's sense of social responsibility is awakened throughout the play and she feels compassion for workers like Eva **"But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people."**

## Class

Apart from Edna, the maid, the characters in the play are from the rich, upper classes. However, a lot can be learnt about the lower classes through the attitudes of the characters and their interactions with Eva Smith.

Again make sure that you consider how each character views the lower classes at the beginning and the end of the play.

This theme is linked heavily with Priestley's socialist views and the time periods in which the play were set and written (1912 and 1945).

Make sure that you understand Priestley's background and personal political views.



Character	At the start of the play this character was...	To this character Eva was...
Mr. Birling	Keen to cement his social rise through Shelia's marriage. Insecure about his social status.	Simply cheap labour – he did not think of her as a person.
Mrs. Birling	Social superior to her husband and gets embarrassed by his social gaffes.	An upstart who deserves what she gets.
Shelia	Happy taking advantage of the benefits of her social class – spending time in expensive shops.	Someone beneath her social status who deserved to be fired out of spite.
Gerald	Prepared to marry Shelia despite her lower social status and the disapproval of his mother.	A mistress to be used and discarded as he pleases.
Eric	Feels awkward about the benefits from his social status.	Easy sex at the end of a drunken night out.

## Gender

Because of her sex Eva was in an even more vulnerable position. When the play is set women were not yet valued in their own right by society and had not been awarded the right to vote.

Even upper class women had limited choices and were under the control of men. The situation was even worse for working class women. Eva Smith encompasses this plight and her life is heavily influenced by the men she encounters.

Why do you think Priestley decided to have the play based on the death of a young working class woman rather than the death of a young working class man?



# Age

The older and younger generations deal with the Inspector's call in different ways.

## The Old (Mr. and Mrs. Birling)

The old are set in their ways. They are confident that they are right and the young are wrong.

They will do anything to protect themselves and their reputation – Mr. Birling's first thought is to cover up a scandal

They have never been forced to examine their actions and they cannot do this now "you can't teach an old dog new tricks".

Mr. and Mrs. Birling have much to fear from a visit from the real Inspector – they will lose the thing they value most.

## The Young (Shelia and Eric)

More open to new ideas. Their views change throughout the play and they express sympathy for the striking workers

They accept responsibility for their actions and their effects.

Eric and Shelia examine their role in Eva's death.

They have less to fear from the real Inspector as they have already admitted their wrong doing and it is suggested they will change.