

## Revision Activity: The Characters

### Edna

Edna's role in the play is seemingly insignificant, but she is the character that introduces the Inspector to the Birlings and she is the only genuine working class presence in the whole play. Like Eva, Edna is ignored by the other characters for most of the play which is hugely symbolic in itself.

### Mr Birling

Mr Birling is described as "a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties but rather provincial in his speech." He is proud that he has built up his business and made so much money himself.

Birling boasts of his achievements to others, particularly Gerald and Eric, explaining how he was once Mayor and is hoping to get a knighthood soon. Plus, he uses his connections as a way of trying to influence the Inspector and protect his family's reputation.

Birling is very pleased his daughter is marrying someone whose family is higher up in society than he is and wants himself and his family to continue to rise up socially. He tells Gerald: "it's exactly the same port your father gets." Marrying Gerald will also mean Birling and Co potentially merging with Crofts Limited rather than competing as rivals.



Birling seems confident that war will not happen and mentions about the Titanic being unsinkable, even though the war takes place just two years after 1912 when the play is set, and the Titanic sinks just a few days after it is set. Priestley shows Birling to be wrong about everything, including his optimism.

When the Inspector questions Birling, he never once admits responsibility for Eva Smith's death and says he paid his workers the 'usual rate' – no more or less.

Birling is more concerned with maintaining his reputation than taking any kind of responsibility, and is particularly concerned when it is revealed that Mrs Birling was responsible for turning away a pregnant Eva looking for help with the charity she was chairing. ("I must say, Sybil, that when this comes out at the inquest, it isn't going to do us much good. The press might easily take it up—"). This, coupled with the fact Eric was stealing money from the company, means Birling is incredibly keen to cover up as much as he can to protect his reputation.

In fact, Birling attempts to bribe the Inspector to hush up the investigation ("Look, Inspector – I'd give thousands – yes, thousands...") which of course the Inspector refuses. It seems as though Birling may not be getting his precious knighthood after all, and the merger of Birling and Co with Crofts Limited seems unlikely.

As soon as the Inspector leaves, Birling works with his wife and Gerald to discredit Goole by claiming he is a fake and that no girl has died at all – it is all a hoax.

It seems like Birling might be right, only for a phone call at the end to confirm that a girl had killed herself and a police inspector is coming round to ask the family questions. Imagine how a man like Birling feels at this point. What message was Priestley trying to give to people like Mr Birling?

### Why is Mr Birling important?

- He represents middle class men who have made money via capitalism.
- He refuses to accept responsibility for anyone else except himself.
- He represents capitalism and its ideals.
- He also represents an older generation that is less likely to be influenced by ideas of socialism.



### **Mrs Birling**

She is initially describes as being "about fifty, a rather cold woman and her husband's social superior" suggesting Mr Birling may have married her for her social standing.

Mrs Birling is shown throughout the play to be very snobbish – thinking herself better than people from other classes – and having very forthright and sanctimonious views.

She criticises her husband for failing to follow accept social conventions and etiquette ("Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things-") and is cruel in the way she describes Eva ("girls of that class"). She even refuses to believe that Eva would not accept money from Eric when she knows it is stolen because Eva was working class ("She was giving herself ridiculous airs.")

Mrs Birling sees herself as a powerful figure and tries to use her social standing and power to get rid of the Inspector, but it fails. She also denies recognising Eva from the photo she is seen despite the fact she was the last person in the family to have seen her alive.

She refuses to believe that Eric is a drunkard, that Gerald had an affair and even that Alderman Meggarty is anything but a morally perfect person. As chair of her charity, Mrs Birling used her power to ensure Eva received no financial aid despite her being heavily pregnant.

Mrs Birling refuses to take responsibility for Eva or her future baby and instead says the father should take the responsibility – the dramatic irony here being that Sheila and the audience have already worked out that Eric is the father, and thus Mrs Birling has just pinned all the blame on her own son unknowingly.

Like Mr Birling, Sybil Birling always sees Eric and Sheila as children and not as adults and will not change her view on this throughout the whole play.

Moreover, just like Arthur, Sybil tries to find any way out of accepting responsibility for Eva's death by developing a theory that Goole is a fake and the death a hoax. When it is revealed that Eva has died at the end of the play, Mrs Birling knows her reputation will be damaged, her daughter is no longer marrying an aristocrat and her son is a drunkard who got a young girl pregnant and stole money from the family business.

### **Why is Mrs Birling important?**

- She represents many of the upper and middle class attitudes from the time: arrogance, sanctimony, snobbishness and selfishness.
- She is part of the older generation that refuses to change or accept new ideas. She is happy to live in the status quo.
- She uses her influence to hurt other people rather than help them – it is difficult for the audience to do anything but dislike Mrs Birling, as is the case with her husband.

## **Sheila Birling**

Sheila begins the play very much as childlike: "a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited." She is innocent and naïve, living in a world where her biggest concerns are engagement rings and dresses.

She is engaged to be married to Gerald Croft, the son of wealthy aristocrats, but suggests she is not entirely happy after mentioning about Gerald not going near her one summer. This implies she has more depth to her than we first think.



Unlike her parents, Sheila immediately feels empathy and pity for Eva when she hears her story and takes responsibility for her role in her death when she knows what consequences her actions have had. By getting Eva fired from the Millwards department store, Sheila realises she has forced Eva into a more difficult life.

As the play progresses, Sheila appears more understanding and perceptive of those around her: she sees Gerald's reaction to the name Daisy Renton and explains that the Inspector already knows how all the characters are connected to Eva.

She tries to protect her mother later in the play – a brilliant reversal of roles from the beginning – but her mother inevitably and unknowingly denounces her own son.

Sheila shows a growing maturity as she explains she is not angry at Gerald but rather respects him more for his honesty as he retells his relationship with Daisy.

In the final act of the play, Sheila shows a confrontational side and an anger at her parents for refusing to accept any responsibility for Eva's death ("pretend that nothing much has happened." "It frightens me the way you talk").

It is clear that Sheila has changed by the end of the play and like her brother Eric is now more socially responsible. She is the kind of younger head that could lead to a changing society, or face the harsh consequences of fire, blood and anguish as the Inspector elucidates.

## **Why is Sheila important?**

- She shows how gender roles are clearly defined at the start of the play: she is meant to be the sweet, innocent and naïve girl that gets married.
- As the play progresses, her character changes and she becomes far more determined, confrontational and aware.
- By the end of the play she represents a younger generation that is far more willing to take responsibility for the people around them.

## **Eric Birling**

At the start of the play, Eric is described as "in his early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive." He is an awkward character that doesn't seem to fit in very well with his family. This awkwardness seems to be explained once we find out that he got an unmarried girl working class girl pregnant and stole money from his parents.

Eric is not naïve like his sister and is even willing to briefly challenge his father: "What about war?" It also suggests all is not well in his relationship with his dad.



Moreover, it is soon revealed to the characters and the audience that Eric is a drunkard and drinks alcohol heavily, as Gerald explains: "I have gathered that he does drink pretty hard."

Like Sheila, who says that the workers are not cheap labour but rather people, Eric shows empathy for the workers of the factory: "Why shouldn't they try for higher wages? We try for the highest possible prices. And I don't see why she should have been sacked just because she'd a bit more spirit than the others. You said yourself she was a good worker. I'd have let her stay."

Eric's drinking can likely be equated with his thoughtless actions and the consequences he can now see as a result of what he did. He got a young girl pregnant by violently threatening her, and can see how he has contributed to Eva's death.

Eric, like Sheila, is disgusted by his parents' reactions as the end of the play, and even tells his father: "I don't give a damn now whether I stay here or not." Whilst Birling thinks he may be able to protect his reputation, it appears his children have lost any respect they might have had for him.

Eric has changed by the end of the play and realises his actions had consequences. He is now aware of his social responsibilities.

### **Why is Eric important?**

- He represents the younger generation that are more socially responsible than their parents.
- He drinks because he feels guilt about what he did: by violently forcing himself on Eva, he got her pregnant and helped to drive her towards suicide.
- Because he accepts responsibility by the end of the play, the audience come to respect Eric a lot more.

## **Gerald Croft**

Gerald Croft works at his father's company, Crofts Limited, a rival to Birling and Co. Although engaged to be married to Sheila at the start of the play, we find out that his parents - Sir George and Lady Croft - are higher up the social hierarchy than the Birlings (Mr Birling and Mrs Birling) and are aristocrats. It is also suggested by Mr Birling that Gerald's parents do not approve of the marriage to Sheila - they are, after all, not at the engagement party. Gerald is an attractive, popular man of about 30 years old.

As the play develops, it is revealed that Gerald had an affair with Eva Smith when she was calling herself Daisy Renton. He met her at the Variety Theatre in town and 'rescued' her from Alderman Meggarty (a well-known and highly respected dignitary) who Gerald describes essentially as a womanizer.

Gerald and Daisy enter into a relationship behind Sheila's back (during the same summer when he wouldn't go near Sheila, as she reminds him in Act One). Gerald eventually breaks it off and gives Daisy money to keep her going. He tells her he has to go away on business.

It is the shock of hearing the name 'Daisy Renton' that reveals to Sheila and the Inspector that Gerald knew Eva, and after all is revealed about his relationship with her, Gerald goes outside for fresh air to reflect on his relationship with her.



Gerald is older than both Sheila and Eric, but is not as old as Mr and Mrs Birling. He initially takes some responsibility for Eva's death, but then like Mr and Mrs Birling at the end of the play is all too willing to cover it up and deny that Goole is a real inspector. He seems happy enough at the end when it seems that Mr and Mrs Birling might be right. Gerald is more concerned with protecting his reputation than he is taking responsibility for others.

### **Why is Gerald important?**

- He represents the upper classes in the play
- We - the audience - want him to change, after all, he did help Daisy with money, but he doesn't.
- He represents how the old class system is hard to remove - aristocrats don't want to lose their power and their status.

## The Inspector

Inspector Goole is described as "an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness. He is a man in his fifties, dressed in a plain darkish suit. He speaks carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking" when he enters in Act One.

Despite questioning a family of wealthy members of the upper middle classes, the Inspector appears calm and assertive throughout. He uses his language like a machine to gain control over the other characters and seems to have already pre-planned exactly who is going to speak to and when and how he will speak to them.



As Sheila comes to understand, the Inspector already knows how all the characters are connected to Eva. Because of this, it seems to give him a ghost-like or supernatural quality to him.

Although Mr Birling tries to bribe him, Goole is not in the slightest bit interested. Nor does Birling's apparent connections to the police or those in politics have any effect on the Inspector.

His final speech seems like a politician or a sermon to a congregation.

When he leaves and we find out he was not a real police inspector, it confuses us about who he was and why he was there, but the second phone call at the end confirming a young girl has died adds in another 'supernatural' layer to the play.

He seems to be operating on a different level of consciousness to the other characters and this has led to a number of theories about who or what Inspector Goole is.

Could he be a ghost? The name 'Goole' could be a pun on 'ghoul', which is another word for a spirit or ghost. Could he be the voice of Priestley or the voice of God? Could he represent the voices of the working classes as a collective? You can choose for yourself.