

Social, historical context

1912 – when the play was set. Just before WW1 and the sinking of the Titanic. JBP wanted to make sure audiences recognised/remembered the problems from 1912 society (class system, Capitalism, sexism) and weren't tempted to go back to living like that.
1945 – when the play was written and performed. After WW2, society changed. The benefit system was introduced, greater equality for women and less of a class divide because of different classes and different genders mixing in the war effort. JBP supported these changes and wanted to promote them in his play by making Capitalists appear ignorant and selfish.
Socialism – JBP was a keen socialist. He wanted everyone to look after each other rather than just caring about themselves. Used the play to promote this.
Capitalism – JBP hated Capitalists (those who thought that everyone should only care about themselves and that making money was more important than human rights). He created Mr and Mrs Birling as Capitalists, in order to make Capitalism seem out-dated and selfish.

Main Characters

Mr Birling	Arrogant and Capitalist businessman who hates social equality and loves money. Sacks Eva from his factory when she asks for equal pay for women and threatens a strike.
Mrs Birling	Snobbish and cold-hearted Capitalist who believes everyone is responsible for themselves. Doesn't help Eva when she comes to the charity for help.
Inspector	Priestley's mouthpiece. Keen Socialist who fights for community responsibility and gets the Birlings to face up to what they have done.
Sheila	The daughter. Gets Eva sacked from the shop for smirking at her. Starts off as a spoilt rich girl but quickly changes. Feels sorry for Eva and starts to become Socialist as the play progresses. Ashamed of her parents by the end.
Eric	The son. Drinks too much and has a one-night stand with Eva. Gets her pregnant and steals from his dad to give her money. Regrets his actions and changes his ways. Ashamed of his parents at the end
Gerald	Sheila's fiancé. Businessman who has Capitalist ideals and is similar to Mr Birling politically. Shows some regret for his affair with Eva, but happy to act like nothing has happened when it suits him.
Eva/Daisy	Only ever described by others, never seen. She has committed suicide. She represents working class women of the time and is seen to have better values than the Birlings.

Plot

ACT 1	The family are celebrating Sheila and Gerald's engagement. Birling makes speeches saying there will be no war, and the Titanic is unsinkable. Inspector arrives and tells them Eva Smith has committed suicide. Mr B admits sacking her but takes no blame for her suicide. Sheila admits getting her sacked. She feels guilty and ashamed.
ACT 2	Inspector gets Gerald to admit having an affair with Eva Smith (now called Daisy Renton after a name change). Sheila is upset and questions their relationship. Inspector gets Mrs B to admit not helping Eva when she came to the charity for help when she became pregnant. Mrs B is adamant it should be the father's responsibility. We realise that the father of Eva's baby was Eric.
ACT 3	Eric's involvement with Eva is revealed and a possible rape is hinted at. The Inspector gives his final speech about fire, blood and anguish - warning the family that if they don't start to take responsibility for others, they will live to regret it. Inspector leaves. Gerald finds out the Inspector wasn't real. Mr B phones and confirms this, as well as no dead girl! Mr and Mrs B (and Gerald) celebrate and act like nothing has happened. Sheila and Eric still feel guilty and can't go back to how they were before. At the end, the telephone rings and they are told that a girl has just committed suicide and an inspector is on his way over to ask some questions.

Themes

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES - Older generation = symbol of Capitalism, so they do not change their ways and reluctant to accept blame for their role in Eva's demise. Younger generation become a symbol of Socialism as the play progresses. They accept blame and want to change.
SOCIAL CLASS – Class influences the Birlings' behaviour and causes them to treat people differently. It had existed for a long time and Priestley didn't agree with it. The characters represent the classes: Eva = working class; Birlings = middle class; Gerald = Upper. Priestley challenges their views and behaviour in order to challenge the class hierarchy in society.
PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY – Inspector is used to express importance of social responsibility. Older Birlings represent how higher classes focus on improving their own lives not helping others. Inspector encourages all to take personal responsibility. Inspector changes Sheila & Eric's viewpoint, but not others who think of self not society.
MORALITY – This is a sense of right and wrong. The family consider themselves moral due to their social status. Inspector shows how they lack social morality and compassion for the people around them. He links them to the 7 deadly sins.

Key quotations

"We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other." Insp. Act3
"You'd think we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive" Mr B. Act 1
"Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility." Mrs B Act 2
"These girls aren't cheap labour – they're people" Sheila. Act 1
"Mother –You mustn't try and build up a kind of wall between us and that girl." Sheila. Act 2
"Used her for the end of a stupid drunken evening, as if she was an animal, a thing, not a person." Insp. Act 3
"It's bound to be unpleasant and disturbing" Gerald. Act 1 and Inspector Act 2
"You're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble." Eric. Act 3
"She was in great agony" Insp. Act 1

Vocabulary

Omniscient = someone who knows, or seems to know, everything. **Patriarchal** = a system in which men have the power and importance. **Affluent** = when you have a lot of money. **Altruistic** = showing concern for the happiness/welfare of others rather than yourself. **Prosperous** = rich and successful. **Conceited** = someone who is too proud of their abilities and achievements. **Mouthpiece** = someone who speaks on behalf of others. **Exploit** = taking advantage of someone/something. **Conscience** = a person's moral sense of right/wrong. **Ignorant** = not knowing things they should know.