

1. Context

Playwright: John Boynton Priestley (1894-1984)

Set: Fictional town Brumley 'an industrial city in the north Midlands' in 1912

Pre and Post War – Before the first world war there was deemed to be a general air of complacency regarding the prospect of any war taking place. There were strong distinctions between upper and lower classes, and women were subservient to men in society. After the second world war ended in 1945, class distinctions had been greatly reduced by the two wars and women had earned a more valued place in society. After 1945 there was a greater desire for social change.

Socialism – Socialism is an approach to economic and social systems that is characterised by social ownership, democratic control and high levels of equality. Socialism is generally concerned with ensuring that disparities between wealth and social status are erased from society. After the two World Wars British society was far more open to socialist ideas.

2. Key Vocabulary

	Definition
Capitalism	Private wealth, individualism and self-reliance
Socialism	Group ownership and benefit for the many
Conservatism	Commitment to traditional values and ideas with opposition to change or innovation.
ideology	A belief system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy.
Patriarchy	A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it
Hierarchy	A system in which members of an organization or society are ranked according to relative status or authority
Proletariat	The working class
Bourgeoisie	The Upper class
Prejudice	Preconceived judgments of a person or group of people not based on reason or experience.

4. Key Dramatic Devices

lighting	A change in lighting shows the change in a atmosphere that the Inspector brings, indicating the truth being revealed.
Stage directions	Sets the scene for tension, class and relationships at the beginning; emphasises change in Sheila and Eric.
Doorbell	The doorbell interrupts Birling's speech on his capitalist ideas that community is 'nonsense'. The Inspector disrupts this.
Photograph	The Inspector only shows the photograph to one person at a time. This means that no one character can ever be sure that they have seen the same photograph as any other character. This adds to the sense of mystery which surrounds the girl and the inspector.
Dramatic Irony	Birling's first speech is full of inaccuracies. This makes us question the reliability of his capitalist judgements. Mr Birling's hypocrisy is also shown through the use of dramatic irony.
Contrasts	Priestley juxtaposes the beliefs of Birling and the Inspector. He links Sheila and Eva to highlight the differences in their lives because of their different social classes.
Change/Growth	Throughout the play, certain characters (Sheila and Eric) change as a result of the Inspector and the experience and some do not (Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald.)
Entrances	The timing of Mrs Birling, the Inspector and Eric's entrances are significant.

5. Themes

Class	Before World War Two, Britain was divided by class . Two such classes were the wealthy land and factory owners and the poor workers. The war helped bring these two classes closer together and rationing meant that people of all classes were eating and even dressing the same. The war effort also meant that people from all classes were now mixing together. Priestley wanted to highlight that inequality between the classes still existed and that the upper-classes looked down upon the working-class in post-war Britain.
Social Responsibility	Priestley felt that if people were more considerate of one another, it would improve quality of life for all. This is why social responsibility is a key theme of the play. Priestley wanted his audience to be responsible for their own behaviour and responsible for the welfare of others.
Age	Priestley uses this theme to show how he believed that there was hope in the younger generation's ability to learn and change. The older characters' opinions and behaviours are stubbornly fixed. Mr Birling refuses to learn and Mrs Birling cannot see the obvious about herself and her children. Eric and Sheila however are younger - they accept their mistakes and offer the chance for a brighter future.
Gender	During WW2 many British men went away to fight during the war and their positions in work had to be filled by women. This helped change existing perceptions. Men had to acknowledge the fact that women were just as capable as them. As a result of this, many women enjoyed a newfound freedom that working and earning money allowed them. Not all men saw this change in attitude as a good thing and stayed stuck in the past. Priestley explores the impact of these new gender roles through the independence of Eva Smith and the sexist attitudes of Mr Birling.

6. Big Ideas

1. Priestley teaches us that a successful and just society must have social responsibility.
2. Priestley exposes the class and gender divides within society at the time.
3. Priestley offers us hope for the future and the ability to change.

7. Big Methods

1. The Inspector as a **mouthpiece** for socialist views (and later, Sheila takes on the role of the Inspector).
2. **Structure of the play**
Priestley uses a **cyclical structure**. The play begins and ends with the a 'sharp ring'. Although the event and setting itself is the same, the context in which it occurs has changed dramatically.
3. The idea that the play is about **conflict** is established through Priestley's use of contrasts throughout the play.
Old and younger generation
Men and women
Class
Setting (places)