An Inspector Calls:
Characters
What Great Looks Like
Mr Birling
Mr Birling introduction.

Mr Birling is an immoral, arrogant and injudicious character used by Priestley as a dramatic vehicle to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the elder generation. Priestley deliberately presents him as a detestable and morally inferior character in order to encourage the audience to dislike his capitalist values. Through his negative portrayal of Mr Birling, Priestley intends for us as the audience to reflect on our own behaviours in the hope that this will create a more caring and equal society in which everyone acknowledges that “we are members of one body”

Questions.

1. List three adjectives used to describe Mr Birling.
2. What is he used as a dramatic vehicle for?
3. How does Priestley want us to feel about Mr Birling? Why?
4. Which quotation shows that we should build a united society?
Mr Birling – “lower costs and higher prices”.

In the opening act of An Inspector Calls, Priestley uses juxtaposition to present Mr Birling as an injudicious character. This can be seen when Birling proudly espouses the idea of “lower costs and higher prices.” Birling’s desire for higher prices shows that his overall business aim is to reduce cost and this highlights that he prioritises profit over staff welfare as he clearly has no care or concern for the effect that lowering wages will have on his workers; seeing them as no more than “cheap labour.” This then illustrates that he is an exploitative character because he is taking advantage of his workers who have no protection or employment rights and is in fact proud of this professional approach and hopes it will lead him to a time when “Crofts and Birling are no longer competing but working together.” Furthermore, this dismissive attitude towards his workers shows that he lacks compassion for the lower classes and shows that he only cares about his own success because he is an individualist who believes that “a man has to look after himself.” Thus, from the offset of the play, the audience is exposed to Birling’s egotistical and wealth-orientated values and we are immediately encouraged by Priestley to question his capitalist views. The word “lower” emphasizes that Mr Birling is a selfish man who is continually striving for greater profit because it suggests that he wants to reduce his costs even further than they currently stand. Furthermore, the use of juxtaposition exaggerates a firm belief in capitalism that would horrify an audience in 1945 because, by this time, Labour had won the election and there was a distinct lean towards socialist ideals. Priestley deliberately sets the play in 1912 to expose the changes within society as Mr Birling’s actions can be seen as reflective of life in 1912 as, given high levels of unemployment, many employers took advantage of their workers and exploited them for greater profit – an approach to business that would appal an audience in 1945.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Mr Birling – “Yes. Yes. Horrible Business”

Upon the arrival of The Inspector, Priestley employs dismissive language to illustrate Mr Birling’s lack of sympathy and refusal to acknowledge his responsibility. He resists engaging in meaningful dialogue with the Inspector and simply attempts to terminate the conversation stating “Yes. Yes. Horrible business.” This highlights that Mr Birling feels no emotional involvement or empathy for the plight of Eva Smith – or the wider working classes as he evidently is not visibly upset by the news of her death. This also illustrates Mr Birling’s individualist nature as it is clear that he simply wishes to continue celebrating the engagement of Sheila and Gerald; arguably because he does not want to risk losing Gerald Croft as a future business partner. Indeed, in referring to Eva’s demise as “business” suggests that he is cold hearted and is only able to understand the world in terms of finance and monetary worth – he appears to have no emotional reaction when faced with the reality that one of his workers has died and indeed seems entirely detached from her death. Arguably, in describing her death as “horrible” we see that Mr Birling is attempting to appear upset by the news, perhaps in the hope of maintaining his reputation as a “hard headed man of business” yet lacks conviction and in fact appears entirely unsympathetic. It is clear to the audience that Mr Birling sees the awful information as irrelevant and inconvenient as it seems that he is attempting to brush the news away. The use of repetition replicates the speed at which he is speaking and conveys the impression that Mr Birling wishes for the conversation to end – highlighting his evasive attitude. Furthermore, the use of stage direction “rather impatiently” makes Mr Birling appear so dismissive that the audience of 1945 is left angered by his lack of sympathy and grows to dislike and distrust him even more. This sense of distaste towards Mr Birling would have been further promoted by the political changes of 1945; with the establishment of the Welfare State and the election of the Labour party, socialism was growing and the idea that the population were “members of one body” and the notion of collective responsibility was growing ever popular.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Mr Birling – “I can’t accept any responsibility”

Towards the end of Act 1, Priestley uses assertive language and personal pronoun to present Mr Birling as a dismissive and injudicious character. This can be seen following the Inspector interrogation, when Mr Birling confidently says “I can’t accept any responsibility.” This highlights Mr Birling’s arrogant and dismissive nature as he evidently has a narrow minded and simplistic understanding of Eva’s death. Given his position as the patriarch of the Birling family, Mr Birling is unable to fathom that his discharge of Eva started the “chain of events” that led to her untimely demise as he is entirely new to the concept of being criticised or questioned. This further illustrates that Mr Birling is morally inferior to his children - who are used to represent the changing values of the younger generation – as it is clear that, unlike Sheila and Eric who acknowledge that “we all helped to kill her”, Mr Birling is stubborn and will never listen to the inspector’s prophetic message because he is terrified of tainting his reputation, or worse still, causing a “public scandal” The use of personal pronoun “I” emphasises Mr Birling’s individualist nature as it is clear that Mr Birling only thinks about himself. We realise that Mr Birling does not believe in “community”, as he sees the idea of being “like bees in a hive” as just “nonsense”, and instead believes that “a man has to make his own way.” Priestley intends the audience of 1945 to despise a man with such an egotistical understanding of the world as he wants us to reflect upon our own treatment of others as we question the stubborn elder generation of 1912 who had traditional, capitalist views and were not used to being held to account.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Mrs Birling introduction.

Mrs Birling is an elitist, dismissive and injudicious character used by Priestley as a dramatic vehicle to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the elder generation. Priestley deliberately presents her as a morally inferior and detestable character in order to encourage the audience to dislike her elitist values. Through his negative portrayal of Mrs Birling, Priestley intends for us as the audience reflect on our own behaviours in the hope that this will create a more caring and equal society in which everyone acknowledges that “we are members of one body”

Questions.

1. List three adjectives used to describe Mrs Birling.
2. What is she used as a dramatic vehicle for?
3. How does Priestley want us to feel about Mrs Birling? Why?
4. Which quotation shows that we should build a united society?
Mrs Birling – “As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!”

Mrs Birling is presented as having traditionally elitist views throughout the play. This is emphasised as Priestley employs euphemistic language when Mrs Birling arrogantly asserts “as if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!” To refer to Eva with this pejorative implies that Mrs Birling perceives Eva to be morally inferior to her given her lower social status. This elitist understanding of morality is highly ironic given that the audience is aware that Eva did in fact “refuse money” as she knew it was stolen – thus highlighting her well rounded moral compass. This derogatory comment also alludes to the notion that Mrs Birling lacks compassion for Eva’s vulnerable state and in turn is unable to empathise with her as she thinks “she only has herself to blame.” At this point, it is clear that Mrs Birling’s upper class and privileged position has led her to a feeling of distaste towards the lower classes and it is evident that she is morally inferior to her daughter Sheila who has – as a result of the inspector’s prophetic message – accepted that “these girls aren’t just cheap labour they’re people” and understood that it is important to support those most vulnerable in society rather than blame them for their downfall. In referring to her as a “sort” of girl, we see that Mrs Birling is attempting to conceal her prejudice through the use of euphuism but that her attempt to remain polite lacks conviction. It is clear that she does not want to overtly describe the presumed sexual activities of Eva as she believes this will taint her reputation, but yet her stereotypical preconceptions remain clear. The irony here is clear as Mrs Birling believes that speaking plainly of Eva’s pregnancy is too abhorrent for a woman of her social calibre to even articulate and yet she feels no sense of guilt for her own immoral actions. The use of an exclamatory sentence highlights her frustration and illustrates the ingrained nature of her beliefs and this would infuriate an audience in 1945. Given the support of women during the war, the gender boundaries that defined life in 1912 were starting to erode by 1945 and, as such, the audience would be horrified to see such disrespectful and misogynistic views being expressed about women – particularly when coming from a woman.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?

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Within Act 2, Priestley employs an imperative verb to present Mrs Birling as dismissive and hypocritical. When asserting her lack of responsibility, Mrs Birling authoritatively says “Go and look for the father of the child. It’s his responsibility.” At this point, dramatic irony allows the audience to see Mrs Birling’s hypocritical nature as she is damning of the father’s involvement and dramatically blames him for his actions, yet immediately regrets this public outburst when discovering that her own “half shy, half assertive” son Eric is in fact the “father of the child.” This also alludes to the notion that Mrs Birling is morally inferior to her own daughter Sheila who immediately accepts responsibility for her actions and claims that she will “never ever do it again to anybody” unlike Mrs Birling whose immediate reaction is to enforce blame onto others. This then exposes the dichotomy between the younger and elder generations; it is clear that Mrs Birling works to represent the hostile and unyielding elder generation who refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and instead blame others for Eva’s comeuppance. The imperative “go” illustrates Mrs Birling’s frustration and shows that she is no longer attempting to conceal her anger with the inspector and is now using her higher social status to instruct him as to how to behave. The use of assertive short sentences would again encourage an audience in 1945 to be disgusted with Mrs Birling as her dismissive attitude towards Eva’s demise would be sickening to a society that had endured years of death and destruction during WW1 and WW2 – to see such an evasive perspective towards death would be horrifying after such suffering. Unfortunately, Mrs Birling’s attitude is reflective of upper class members of the bourgeoise in 1912 whose attitudes towards the working classes were incredibly derogatory and mirrored the division in society.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Mrs Birling – “I’m very sorry but I think she only had herself to blame”

Despite the inspector’s prophetic message, Mrs Birling continually refuses to accept responsibility and Priestley uses assertive language to highlight her lack of compassion towards Eva’s demise. Following her interrogation, Mrs Birling makes it clear that she has not learnt from her mistakes as she says “I’m very sorry but I think she only had herself to blame.” In starting with apologetic language, we see that Mrs Birling is attempting to appear polite and forgiving so as to not further impact her reputation as her “husband’s social superior” and yet the dismissive tone contradicts this sentiment and so Mrs Birling’s desire to appear compassionate lacks conviction. Instead, we see that Mrs Birling is in fact lacking in compassion as she seems evasive and uninterested in continuing to listen to the inspector’s accusations. The hurried tone of her speech illustrates her impatience with the inspector and conveys the impression that she is not emotionally affected by the idea that “two hours ago a young woman died in the infirmary” because she does not see it as directly being connected with her own life – she refuses to accept her position within “the chain of events” as she is unable to acknowledge that “we are all responsible for each other.” Her attempt at appearing “sorry” is not believed by the audience as she does not appear credible in her sympathy as immediately after trying to appear compassionate, to continues to blame Eva for her own downfall. The use of assertive language would encourage the socialist audience of 1945 to despise Mrs Birling’s lack of empathy and Priestley tries to utilise this hatred to encourage the audience to reflect upon their own actions and consider how they treat the “millions and millions of Eva and John Smiths” that are still alive within society.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Sheila
Sheila Birling is transitional, sympathetic and compassionate character used by Priestley as a dramatic vehicle to promote socialism, encourage the collapse of boundaries within society, and highlight the changing values of the younger generation. Priestley deliberately presents her as a responsible and morally superior character in order to encourage the audience to respect and admire her response to the Inspector. Through his favourable portrayal of Sheila Birling, Priestley intends for us as the audience to reflect on our own behaviours in the hope that this will create a more caring and equal society that will not be destroyed in “fire, blood and anguish”

Questions.

1. List three adjectives used to describe Sheila Birling.
2. What is she used as a dramatic vehicle for?
3. How does Priestley want us to feel about Sheila Birling? Why?
4. Which quotation shows what could happen to the world?
Sheila Birling – “but these girls aren’t just cheap labour – they’re people”

Priestley intended to highlight the changing values of the younger generation and it is through is portrayal of Sheila Birling that he illustrates a shift towards socialism within the younger members of society. He uses juxtaposition to illustrate Sheila’s socialist tendencies when she openly questions her father and says “but these girls aren’t just cheap labour – they’re people” highlighting that she is adopting a humanist point of view whereby she understands that girls like Eva Smith are also valuable members of society. This shows that she is instinctive, insightful and perceptive as she realises that her father’s individualist desire for “lower costs and higher prices” is impacting the most vulnerable “people” in society. The transition in her character from the beginning of the play illustrates how society is capable of changing and shows that even those that are naïve and privileged can be taught to accept that “we are members of one body.” The passionate language used when Sheila states that Mr Birling’s workers are “people” provokes empathy for Eva and encourages us to begin to admire Sheila’s increasingly outspoken nature. The phrase “aren’t just cheap labour” illustrates that Sheila is desperately trying to negate the capitalist views she has been brought up with and immediately shows that she is morally superior to her parents who remain focused on their own success. An audience in 1945 would be surprised to see a daughter of the 1912 upper classes opening question and criticize the patriarchal control within her family and yet, given the elevated position of women in society following the war, would admire her bravery and socialist perspective.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Sheila Birling – “I’ll never ever do it again to anybody”

Later in the text, Sheila establishes a voice and begins to question the authority of Gerald and her father Mr Birling, as well as voicing her evident frustration with the elder character’s denial. She states that it “frightens” her how her parents talk, as she can see the effects of their actions and has been enlightened by the words of The Inspector. Unlike her parents, she almost immediately accepts responsibility for her involvement in the death of Eva, apologising profusely and saying “I’ll never ever do it again to anybody.” Here, the use of repetition emphasises her grief and desire to correct her misdemeanours as she develops a pleading tone; exaggerated further when she exhorts ‘I know I’m to blame – and I’m desperately sorry.’ We begin to see Sheila’s departure from the immature and naive ‘pretty girl in her early twenties’ that she was at the start of the play. Indeed, when initially introduced to Sheila the audience was aware that her value was somewhat reduced to her physical attractiveness as opposed to her morals or intelligence and yet now we see a sense of maturity developing as she immediately listens to the inspector and acknowledges her wrongdoings. She is now plagued by remorse and no longer ‘rather pleased with life’ – perhaps reflecting the idea that, through the Inspector’s arrival, Sheila has been exposed to the realities of society and is no longer blinded to the issues that surround the working classes. This would please an audience in 1945 as, given the increasing popularity of the labour party, society was beginning to understand that society as a whole will only benefit when everyone plays their role within the “hive.”

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Towards the end of the play, Priestley employs Biblical language to show that Sheila has been emotionally affected by the inspector’s prophetic message and has accepted that the world will be destroyed in “fire, blood and anguish” if society does not learn that “we are all responsible for each other.” This highlights that Sheila has acknowledged the inspector’s omniscient and ominous warning and is now desperately imploring her parents to accept responsibly for their actions and change their ways. This also shows that, since the inspector’s departure, she has replaced his position as Priestley’s mouthpiece and is now directly reflecting his own socialist views. This exposes the changing values of the younger generation as it shows that unlike her parents who remain dismissive of Eva’s death – Sheila is plagued by guilt and knows that she will be punished for her actions if she does not repent for her sins. In echoing the inspector’s warning of “fire” we see that Sheila is terrified of the destruction that will be brought if people continue to “take” the Earth rather than “ask” for it. Reference to such violent punishment and devastation would resonate with an audience in 1945 as they had suffered much torment during the world wars and would be grateful to be finally experiencing a time of peace. Priestley intended to play on this fear of war to encourage society to consider their actions and acknowledge that greed and arrogance only results in division, fighting and suffering.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Eric
Eric introduction.

Eric Birling is transitional, remorseful and passionate character used by Priestley as a dramatic vehicle to promote socialism, encourage the collapse of boundaries within society and highlight the changing values of the younger generation. Priestley deliberately presents him as a repentant character in order to encourage the audience to respect and admire his response to the Inspector. Through his honest portrayal of Eric Birling, Priestley intends for us to reflect on our own behaviours in the hope that this will create a more caring and equal society that will not be destroyed in “fire, blood and anguish”

Questions.

1. List three adjectives used to describe Eric Birling.
2. What is she used as a dramatic vehicle for?
3. How does Priestley want us to feel about Eric Birling? Why?
4. Which quotation shows what could happen to the world?
Within An Inspector Calls, Eric can be seen as a character with socialist values. From the offset of the play, Priestley employs assertive language to hint that Eric is morally superior to his parents. This can be seen when Eric questions his father’s treatment of his workers and says “Why shouldn’t they try for higher wages?” This instantly suggests that Eric has socialist tendencies because even though he has been brought up in the capitalist world of privilege, he evidently has empathy for the plight of the working classes and understands their need for greater pay. This also alludes to the notion that Eric is morally superior to his parents as his views directly juxtapose Mr Birling’s belief in “lower costs and higher prices” and suggest that, unlike Mr Birling, Eric places value on staff welfare as opposed to simply being concerned by wealth and reputation. Furthermore, this highlights that Eric is being used by Priestley to represent the changing values of the younger generation as even from the start of the play it is clear that he has the compassion for the working classes that his parents lack. Eric’s assertive manner shows that he is clearly not intimated by his father’s influence and power and is still confident to question his father’s out dated capitalist beliefs with a sense of authority. At this point in the play, the audience within 1945 would be impressed with Eric’s socialist values as following the election of the labour party, socialism was growing in popularity across the UK. We can see that Eric’s behaviour is contesting expectations of young men in 1912 as during this time period, it would be very rare to see the younger generations of the upper classes questioning their parents’ views.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Within the final act, Priestley employs assertive language to illustrate that Eric has transitioned from a naive and privileged boy who is “half shy, half assertive” to a man who has become morally superior and has a clear sense of responsibility. Priestley shows that Eric has accepted collective responsibility for his actions and is imploring his parents to do the same. He tells them “we all helped to kill her” which highlights that he feels a sense of remorse and guilt for his actions as he realised that he was in some way responsible for Eva’s demise. This works to convey the impression that he is morally superior to his mother, Mrs Birling, who continues to dismissively react to Eva’s comeuppance suggesting that “she only had herself to blame”. This then illustrates that he has far more compassion than the elder generation as he is visibly showing his regret. Moreover, this shows to the audience that he has listened to the Inspector’s prophetic message that “we are members of one body” because he has reflected upon his actions and acknowledged that his behaviour directly affected Eva’s downfall. A 1945 audience would respect this change in Eric as clearly he is starting to develop socialist views, and given the election of the labour party, more and more members of the public were leaning towards socialism. Eric’s behaviour at this point can be seen as contesting expectations of 1912 as it would be unusual for a boy to question his parents, particularly within the upper classes, where fathers held patriarchal power over their families.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Priestley uses fragmented and violent language to highlight Eric’s devastation and anger. After hearing that his own mother, Mrs Birling, refused to support Eva in her time of need, he shouts “you killed them both – damn you damn you!” This illustrates his overwhelming anger towards his mother and shows that he is furious with her lack of empathy. This also shows that he desperately wants Mrs Birling to suffer for her actions as he repeatedly shouts “damn you”, arguably suggesting that he wants her to be punished in the “fire, blood and anguish” prophesised by the inspector. Moreover, this violent outburst shows that Eric is no longer “half shy” as has transitioned to a point where he is not longer hesitant to criticize his parent’s. It is clear that he is emotionally devastated by the news of Eva’s death and thus we see Eric as far more compassionate than the elder generation who dismissively suggest that “she only had herself to blame.” The repetition of “damn you” conveys a violent impression of hatred towards his mother who refused to help “a girl of that class” and shows that Eric is desperate for her to suffer. An audience in 1945 would be astonished to see a member of the 1912 younger generation speak so critically and with such unrestrained anger towards their parents – as this contested expectations of society at the time - and yet would admire his desire for Mrs Birling to accept responsibly for her actions.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Gerald
Gerald Croft is traditional, wealthy and dismissive character used by Priestley as a dramatic vehicle to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the values held by the elder generation. Priestley deliberately presents him as a selfish and morally inferior character in order to encourage the audience dislike him and the wider upper classes. Through his undesirable portrayal of Gerald Croft, Priestley intends for us to reflect on our own behaviours in the hope that this will create a more caring and equal society in which everyone acknowledges that the lower classes are not just “cheap labour – they’re people”

Questions.

1. List three adjectives used to describe Gerald Croft.
2. What is he used as a dramatic vehicle for?
3. How does Priestley want us to feel about Gerald? Why?
4. Which quotation shows how the lower classes should be seen?
Gerald Croft—“I don’t come into this suicide business”

Priestley regularly employs dramatic irony to highlight the ignorance of the upper classes and this is true of when Gerald assertively announces his innocence and says “I don’t come into this suicide business.” This shows Gerald arrogance as he is not in any way nervous or tentative about questioning the inspector’s authority. Arguably, this is due to his privileged upbringing and in turn suggests that he is not used to being questioned or criticized about his behaviour and in turn sees the concept of the inspector integrating him as absurd. This then further alludes to the notion that he sees himself as “respectable citizen” who is somewhat superior to the Birling family and conveys the impression that he sees his innocence as unparalleled and unquestionable. Moreover, this suggests that Gerald Croft is an ignorant character who is unable to acknowledge his own mistakes as is clarified later in the play when he refuses to acknowledge his position within the “chain of events” and instead comforts his conscience by seeing the inspector’s interrogations as a “hoax.” In referring to the “suicide” as “business” we once again see Gerald’s lack of compassion towards the working classes as it is clear that he remains emotionally detached from the notion that “a girl died in the infirmary.” This dismissive attitude would anger the audience and this sense of distaste towards Gerald would have been further promoted by the political changes of 1945; with the establishment of the Welfare State and the election of the Labour party, socialism was growing and the idea that the population were “members of one body” and the notion of collective responsibility was growing ever popular.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Gerald Croft—“nearly any man would done”

Priestley employs dismissive language to show that Gerald refuses to accept full responsibility for his actions. When questioned about whether he “adored” the attention given to him by Daisy, he admits that he did but that reminds the inspector that “nearly any man would have done.” Here, we see that Gerald is begrudgingly admitting some sense of guilt but only following the prompting of the inspector and Sheila—it is clear that he feels upset by the events yet maintains a sense of detachment as if he is unable to see the correlation between his involvement in the “chain of events” and Eva’s ultimate downfall. This also then shows that Gerald is desperate to deflect blame from himself by claiming that his behaviour is normal for all men—perhaps suggesting that he is so embedded within the patriarchal society of 1912—which overtly promoted male dominance—that he is unable to detangle his own behaviour from his gender. At this point, we see that Gerald prioritises defending his behaviour, or protecting himself from “public scandal,” rather than changing his attitudes or perspectives. Thus, he differs from the rest of the younger generation—namely Sheila and Eric—who accept that “we all helped to kill her” and focus on changing their natures rather than finding excuses to justify immoral acts in the way that Gerald does. Indeed, Gerald can be seen as perceptive and analytic as he attempts to reason with the inspector in an attempt to explain his behaviours, and even investigates the validity of the inspector’s message but it is clear that he is so preoccupied with protecting his untainted reputation that he ignored the principle of the inspector’s words. A 1945 audience would be frustrated to see that Gerald is unable to move away from the traditional capitalist views held by the upper classes as the behaviour of Sheila and Eric had given them hope that society was changing for the better.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Gerald Croft—“Everything’s alright now Sheila”

At the end of the play, Priestley uses assertive language to illustrate that Gerald is an ignorant character limited by his traditional views. It is clear that he has not changed or learned anything from the inspector’s prophetic message, which is why Sheila is unsure whether to take back the engagement ring. Gerald tries to guide Sheila into thinking everything is satisfactory and tells her with confidence that “everything’s all right now, Sheila” This shows that Gerald has not gained a sense of social responsibility unlike Eric and Sheila and still fights to uphold the class system – he has not transitioned from naivety to social awareness in the way that they have. When he thinks a scandal has been averted, he wants to resume his engagement, forgetting that he abandoned Daisy Renton/Eva Smith and this shows that he has not been affected by the inspectors ominous warning. In this way, we see that Gerald Croft is caught in the middle between tradition and modernity and it is clear that he has finally he sided with the older generation, probably because his aristocratic ancestries influence him to want to keep the status quo and protect his own interests in the attempt to avoid a “public scandal”. We see that Gerald is ironically trying to educate Sheila about the position that the Birling family now find themselves and yet it is in fact Sheila who is the most insightful and is aware that, without change, they are simply heading towards “fire blood and anguish”. She even sarcastically says “I suppose we’re all nice people now” which shows that Gerald has lost his control and dominance over her as he can no longer coerce her easily into thinking the same as him. An audience in 1945 would be angry that Gerald is so easily able to dismiss the death of Eva and use of assertive language would encourage the socialist audience to despise Gerald’s lack of sympathy. Priestley tries to utilise this hatred to encourage the audience to reflect upon their own actions and consider how they treat the “millions and millions of Eva and John Smiths” that are still alive within society.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
The Inspector
The Inspector introduction.

Inspector Goole is an omniscient, prophetic and systematic character used by Priestley as a dramatic vehicle to promote socialism and encourage the collapse of boundaries within society. Priestley deliberately uses him as a mouthpiece as he presents him as an empathetic and morally superior character in order to encourage the audience to admire his own socialist agenda. Through his esteeming portrayal of the Inspector, Priestley intends for us to reflect on our own behaviours in the hope that this will create a more caring and equal society in which everyone acknowledges that “we are responsible for each other”

Questions.

1. List three adjectives used to describe the inspector.
2. What is he used as a dramatic vehicle for?
3. How does Priestley want us to feel about Inspector Goole? Why?
4. Which quotation shows how we should treat each other?
The Inspector—“It's better to ask for the Earth than to take it”

Priestley uses assertive language to establish the inspector as an authoritative and omniscient character. When responding to Mr Birling's capitalist views, the inspector reminds the Birling family—and the audience—that “it's better to ask for the Earth than to take it.” This alludes to the notion that, unlike most people that encounter him, the inspector is not intimated by Mr Birling's social status and is confident to criticize and question his treatment of the lower classes. This in turn highlights the inspector's socialist ideals and thus suggests that he is acting as a mouthpiece for Priestley's own socialist agenda as he is reminding the audience how we should treat the “millions and millions of Eva and John Smiths.” At this point, it becomes clear that the inspector is far morally superior to Mr Birling who is less concerned about staff welfare and more concerned about profit—focusing on “lower costs and higher prices.” In this sense, the inspector is overtly highlighting the hypocrisy in Mr Birling’s individualist actions—he is desperately trying to show Mr Birling that he is “taking” the “Earth” yet punishing those who “ask” for it. In reminding Mr Birling that it is “better” to ask than to take, Priestley is exposing the notion that the inspector is praising Eva's bravery and thus empathises with her decision to request greater wages in turn showing his sympathy for the wider working classes. Given the rise in socialist ideals within 1945, and the development of the Welfare State, the audience would applaud such overt criticism of capitalism and would immediately respect the inspector's message.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
The Inspector— “We are members of one body”

Priestley employs an inclusive pronoun and metaphorical language to remind the Birling family – and the audience – that “we are members of one body”. Here, Priestley is showing the inspector as omniscient and prophetic and this is highlighted further by the elusion to biblical references which emphasise the Inspector’s belief in human love and parity. We see that the inspector is promoting equality and desperately trying to remind us that we are all “we don’t live alone” and that we must accept that we “are responsible for each other” because he is desperate to see society change. This entire extended speech is composed of complex sentences, which are referential, and short sentences that are expressive and passionate. Priestley makes great use of these short sentence structures in order to deliver his opinions as facts and in turn present the Inspector as authoritative and influential. This intended effect is to make both the characters and the audience inspect their own consciences. Furthermore, the use of short sentences may perhaps symbolise the current limits of society, which could be challenged if everyone accepted each other. The Inspector’s use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ contrast with the language of Mr and Mrs Birling who normally use ‘I’ as their primary concern is themselves and this expose their contrasting natures. The use of ‘we’ further emphasises Priestley’s ideas of collective responsibility and reminds us that we must “learn that lesson.” Through the Inspector’s final dramatic speech, Priestley skilfully warns the audience of the potential social disasters of failing to support or help those in need in society and as such the audience would perhaps be uncomfortable during this moment within the play, yet would admire the socialist message being spread through the words of the inspector.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
The Inspector—“Fire and blood and anguish”

Priestley uses biblical language to present the inspector as prophetic and ominous in his final warning to the Birling family. Before his dramatic departure, he cautions the Birlings—and the audience—that if society does not “learn that lesson” it will be taught in “fire and blood and anguish.” Within this, the inspector appears omniscient and God-like and in this sense he is presented as an omnipotent being of great authority because it is clear that his knowledge of the world suprises the constraints of time. This is exaggerated when he reminds the Birlings that ‘the time will soon come’ because modal verb ‘will’ creates an impression that the Inspector knows what happen later, making him appear as a prophetic messenger who has been sent to warn the Birlings about what will happen in the future if they do not change their ways. The Inspector’s speech has strong links to religion and perhaps suggest that the inspector is alluding to the notion that those that sin will suffer more than “public scandal” but will be punished in hell. In this sense the religious imagery causes the inspector to appear almost angelic as if he is trying to help them avoid this fate. Furthermore, this dramatic end to his final speech could be seen to reference the impending wars and remind the audience that selfishness and greed brings nothing more than destruction to the earth. In suggesting that the Birlings will be punished with “anguish”, Priestley is also perhaps alluding to the notion that, regardless of privilege, wealth and status, everyone will reach their comeuppance and no one is able to avoid the “fire” that is brought on in war. Reference to such violent punishment and devastation would resonate with an audience in 1945 as they had suffered much torment during the world wars and would be grateful to be finally experiencing a time of peace. Priestley intended to play on this fear of war to encourage society to consider their actions and acknowledge that greed and arrogance only results in division, fighting and suffering.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Eva Smith
Eva Smith is a vulnerable, lonely victim of injustice. She is used by Priestley as a dramatic vehicle to represent the demonised and neglected working classes and to promote socialism. Priestley deliberately presents her as a moral yet abused character in order to encourage the audience to sympathise with her and the wider working classes. Through his symbolic portrayal of poverty, throughout his depiction of Eva’s mistreatment, Priestley intends for us to reflect on our own behaviours in the hope that this will create a more caring and equal society in which everyone acknowledges that the lower classes are not just “cheap labour – they’re people”

Questions.

1. How is Eva presented?
2. What is she used as a dramatic vehicle for and why?
3. What is she a symbolic portrayal of?
4. How does Priestley want the audience to feel towards her and why?
Eva Smith – “lower costs, higher prices”

Priestley uses juxtaposition to illustrate that Eva, and wider working classes whom she represents, are unappreciated and underpaid. This can be seen when Birling proudly espouses the idea of “lower costs and higher prices.” Birling’s desire for higher prices shows that his overall business aim is to reduce cost and this highlights that he prioritises profit over staff welfare as he clearly has no care or concern for the effect that lowering wages will have on his working class workers; seeing them as no more than “cheap labour.” This then illustrates that that Priestley is critical of the exploitative nature of capitalism as it is clear that Mr Birling is taking advantage of his workers who have no protection or employment rights and is in fact proud of this professional approach and hopes it will lead him to a time when “Crofts and Birling are no longer competing but working together.” Furthermore, this dismissive attitude towards his workers shows that Mr Birling, and the upper classes whom he symbolises, lack compassion for the lower classes and shows that he only cares about his own success because he is an individualist who believes that “a man has to look after himself.” Thus, from the offset of the play, the audience is immediately encouraged by Priestley to question the strong capitalist views of the Birling family, and sympathise with those who live in abject poverty. The word “lower” emphasizes that life will continue to worsen for those in poverty because Mr Birling is continually striving for greater profit; it suggests that he wants to reduce his costs even further than they currently stand and thus we know that life will become even harder for women like Eva Smith. Furthermore, the use of juxtaposition exaggerates a firm belief in capitalism that would horrify an audience in 1945 because, by this time, Labour had won the election and there was a distinct lean towards socialist ideals. Priestley deliberately sets the play in 1912 to expose the changes within society as Mr Birling’s actions can be seen as reflective of life in 1912 as, given high levels of unemployment, many employers took advantage of their workers and exploited them for greater profit – an approach to business that would appal an audience in 1945.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Eva Smith – “as if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!”

Eva Smith is a symbolic portrayal of the working classes and it is clear that those with traditionally elitist views believe that she – and those in poverty whom she represents - are morally inferior to those with wealth. This is emphasised as Priestley employs euphemistic language when Mrs Birling arrogantly asserts “as if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!” To refer to Eva with this pejorative implies that Mrs Birling perceives Eva to be morally inferior to her given her lower social status. This elitist understanding of morality is highly ironic given that the audience is aware that Eva did in fact “refuse money” as she knew it was stolen – thus highlighting her well rounded moral compass. This derogatory comment also alludes to the notion that Mrs Birling lacks compassion for Eva’s vulnerable state and in turn is unable to empathise with her, and the wider working classes, as she thinks “she only has herself to blame.” At this point, it is clear that Mrs Birling’s upper class and privileged position has led her to a feeling of distaste towards the lower classes and it is evident that she is morally inferior to her daughter Sheila who has – as a result of the inspector’s prophetic message – accepted that “these girls aren’t just cheap labour they’re people” and understood that “these girls aren’t just cheap labour they’re people” and understood that it is important to support those most vulnerable in society rather than blame them for their downfall. In referring to her as a “sort” of girl, we see that Mrs Birling is attempting to conceal her prejudice towards those in poverty through the use of euphuism but that her attempt to remain polite lacks conviction. It is clear that she does not want to overtly describe the presumed sexual activities of Eva as she believes this will taint her reputation, but yet her stereotypical preconceptions remain clear. The irony here is clear as Mrs Birling believes that speaking plainly of Eva’s pregnancy is too abhorrent for a woman of her social calibre to even articulate and yet she feels no sense of guilt for her own immoral actions. The use of an exclamatory sentence highlights her frustration and illustrates the ingrained nature of her beliefs and this would infuriate an audience in 1945. Given the support of women during the war, the gender boundaries that defined life in 1912 were starting to erode by 1945 and, as such, the audience would be horrified to see such disrespectful and misogynistic views being expressed about women – particularly when coming from a woman.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?
Eva Smith – “there are millions and millions and millions of Eva and John Smiths”

Within the closing speech from The Inspector, Priestley employs hyperbole to illustrate that Eva’s suffering is reflective of the lives of many. He reminds the Birling family – and the audience – that there are “millions and millions and millions of Eva and John Smiths” thus conveying the notion that Eva is one of many demonised members of the working class and that her suffering is not unique because poverty is widespread problem which affects “millions” across the nation. In this, Priestley is reminding both the Birling family and the audience that although Eva was seen as just “cheap labour” by the upper classes, society can still change how it treats the lower classes in the future and therefore we see that Priestley is encouraging us to change how we treat those living in poverty so that they do not continue to perish in “fire, blood and anguish” It is clear that The Inspector is a mouthpiece for Priestley and thus by the Inspector treating Eva with sympathy, we see that we too should treat those that are “penniless” with compassion and kindness. In the repetition of “millions” we see that Priestley is working to exaggerate the widespread nature of poverty and the audience is encouraged to realise that “we are all members of one body” - regardless of wealth. The audience of 1945 would be heartened to see that Priestley is promoting a socialist view towards the treatment of the poor as; following the election of the labour party, there was a strong lean towards socialist values.

1. What device is being used and how is the character being presented?
2. What does this quotation show about the character?
3. How would an audience in 1945 react and why?