

PART 1- MORALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN 'AN INSPECTOR CALLS'- MR BIRLING



“... as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive”

This is the first in a mini series of posts on morality and relationships in An Inspector Calls all aimed at higher ability students for the English Literature GCSE.

To what extent can Edwardian England be viewed as a moral society?

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How can the Birlings be considered moral when they commit cardinal sins?

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Character: Mr Arthur Birling

Class: Aspiring upper

Cardinal Sin: Greed

The greed and avarice in Mr Birling's character is evident from the start of the play when he hijacks his daughter's engagement party to push his business agenda despite the protests of his wife and daughter. His comments on being "friendly rivals" with "Crofts Limited" and how he is now looking forward to working together "for lower costs and higher prices" signal how he is treating his daughter's lifelong commitment as a business merger. His primary happiness in Sheila's forthcoming nuptials are entirely down to the fact that her children (his grandchildren) will ultimately gain entry into both the exclusive upper echelons of society and inherit a far more profitable business.

To an extent, his motives are understandable: he is a self-made man, he has had to work hard to consider every action in terms of developing his business, he has attempted to gain entry into the upper classes through marriage to Sybil, and is further attempting entry into the aristocracy through gaining his "knighthood", however, his methods are callous and cold, his view of Eva Smith and others like her as "cheap labour" is dehumanising and demeaning. He is the ultimate capitalist who views even his son as a liability and expects him to pay back the "fifty pounds" he stole despite the fact that Eric, whilst committing a legal crime, was simply attempting to right a moral crime.

Interestingly, Arthur Birling is more concerned about the theft and it becomes clear that the reason for his concern is entirely due to the fact that there are consequences. He is a character ruled by his ego, his actions are modulated by the consequences and not by any elevated moral views of right and wrong. In his view, nobody is going to hold Eric or the Birlings to account for what was done to Eva, his rhetorical question, “if we are all responsible for everything that happened to everybody we’d had anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn’t it?” indicates that he accepts no responsibility because he feels none towards her. The adjective “awkward” is an unusual choice, he is not seeing the gravity of the situation because moral crimes are intangible and thus outside the remit of any legal code, even in a society that is predominantly-ostensibly- Christian. Awkwardness just implies some discomfort, perhaps socially, and that can be either weathered in his view or paid off, “I would give thousands”.

He is quick to brush off the moral implications when Gerald investigates and discovers it is all a “hoax” and it becomes evident that his greed blinds him to all else. He even goes so far as to suggest that Sheila should forgive Gerald for his infidelity advising her to “ask Gerald for that ring [she] gave back to him” indicating his eagerness and desperation that his plans for a business dynasty with the Crofts isn’t disrupted.

Priestley portrays the grasping Arthur Birling as everything that is wrong with the capitalist ideology. He is driven by his ego, ruthlessly hiring and firing employees all with the aim to achieving “lower costs and higher prices” and his obsession with his imminent “knighthood” all illustrate his lack of care for those less fortunate than him. His careless disregard for the justice in Eva’s strike action catalyses her downward spiral but due to this he also unwittingly sets in motion the family’s eventual fall.

PART 2- MORALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN ‘AN INSPECTOR CALLS’- SHEILA BIRLING



Inspector: In fact, in a kind of way, you might be said to have been jealous of her?

Sheila: Yes, I suppose so.

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Character: Miss Sheila Birling

Class: Upper class young (unmarried) woman

Cardinal Sin: Envy

Sheila Birling is next and she represents the cardinal sin of envy- arguably a sin frequently associated with young women. In 'An Inspector Calls', however, Sheila's envy is caused due to a number of reasons.

Firstly, her argument with her overbearing mother over a dress ("mother had been against it") opens the door to her darker emotions. She is angry at her mother, perhaps indicating a rebellious phase (later than usual due to the infantile way her parents treat her). Once she tries the dress on and realises her mother "had been right", her anger perhaps becomes tinged with fear (NOTE: fear leads to the dark side hence her envy!) and insecurity at this obvious sign that she perhaps does not belong in the class she was born to the way her mother does. She lacks the inbred instincts.

It is important to note at this stage that Sheila is the product of a union between an upper class woman, Mrs Birling is her husband's "social superior" and a middle class man who is "rather provincial in his speech." Her mother, in essence, likely traded her more refined bloodline for money- a common enough arrangement during the Edwardian era when upper class families bankrupted themselves, squandering away fortunes of inherited wealth through mismanagement and a contempt towards earning money. Whilst the cash injection would have been a welcome way to shore up finances, the upper class, with their classist views, would never entirely welcome the "rather provincial" Mr Birling into their ranks and that coolness would extend, to a certain extent, to the children of such a union.

Sheila's engagement to the aristocratic Gerald, son of SIR Croft, is quite the coup which is why Arthur Birling is so very pleased the night of their engagement, asserting, "[t]his is one of the happiest nights of [his] life". The Crofts however, are noticeable in their absence ("It is a pity Sir Croft and- er- Lady Croft couldn't be with us"), choosing to signal their lukewarm response to Gerald marrying down through "a very nice cable". Arthur Birling even acknowledges their displeasure telling Gerald that "Lady Croft- while she does not object to [his] girl- feels [Gerald] might have done better for [himself] socially."

Secondly, Eva who was "a very pretty girl" triggers Sheila's envious and vindictive reaction. It is interesting that Eva, a working girl from the lower class, appears more at ease and secure in herself than Sheila, who claims "she looked as though she could take care of herself", even despite of the recent hardships she has endured at Arthur Birling's hands. Eva has already stood against injustice and perhaps this strength of character lends her a confidence that Sheila, her parents' darling, has not yet developed.

However, it is evident that Sheila's actions are unusual, she herself claims, "[i]t's the only time i've ever done anything like that", and her quick assumption of responsibility suggests that this is genuinely the case. It is therefore likely that the altercation between mother and daughter was more responsible for Sheila's power play over Eva than a petty jealousy that does not seem entirely consistent with the superego she develops as the play goes on. Whilst this does not excuse her actions, her quick acceptance is less of a reversal in character than a stiffening of her resolve and the Inspector's approval and support further strengthen her. The development of her superego begins almost immediately signifying that her conscience and morality is what rules her and positions her as a character the audience ultimately admires.

As one of the younger generation, she represents hope for a better, more moral, even socialist future. As a character who lives through the imminent world wars, Sheila is the character Priestley exhorts the post war audience to be like: a person with a developed superego, who supports the socialist principle of being "members of one body".

PART 3- MORALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN 'AN INSPECTOR CALLS'- GERALD



“... soft brown hair and big dark eyes... “
“... but how do you know it's the same girl?”

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Character: Gerald Croft

Class: Upper class young man

Cardinal Sin: Lust

Gerald Croft, as Sheila's fiancé and the son of an aristocratic couple, represents the sin of lust. As a young gentleman, Gerald is expected to embody the virtues and qualities of a "well-bred" young man, in fact he is initially described as the "easy well-bred young-man-about-town" indicating his secure status in society and the ease with which he navigates his world. We see the manner in which he converses with Mr Birling is in stark contrast to the interactions between father and son (Arthur B and Eric) and we realise that Gerald's aristocratic breeding has lent him a sense of assurance that Eric lacks.

Gerald's mother, we discover, "comes from an old country family, landed people and so forth", indicating he comes from inherited wealth which during the Edwardian period was considered superior to those who made their money through trade such as Arthur Birling. A point in his favour is that he clearly disregards his parents' old-fashioned purist views of keeping the classes distinct and proposes to Sheila despite their disapproval. A Marxist interpretation could be that Gerald has more modern views and is well aware of the advantages of joining his family (and company!) with the Birlings'. Marrying Sheila will give him wealth and a business merger that will help them "work together for higher costs and lower prices" and will promote the capitalist agenda. His views align with Mr Birling's, he is a capitalist, concerned primarily with bourgeois notions of keeping wealth in the hands of the wealthy. When the Inspector relates Eva's story, Gerald supports Mr Birling declaring, "[he] couldn't really have done anything else", which interestingly, Eric vehemently denies.

Gerald is deceptively charming and his engagement to Sheila initially positions the audience on his side, almost as though he is a romantic hero of some kind. However, Sheila's snide remark about "last summer" when he "never came near [her]" hint at some misdemeanour and create tension. We begin to suspect, like Sheila, that his actions were due to another woman and we see that Gerald's behaviours are entrenched within the aristocratic privileges of the time. It was acceptable for a husband to have a mistress and it was the wife's duty to "get used to that" as Mrs Birling informs Sheila.

When he describes his encounter with 'Daisy', he focuses on her beauty, her "soft brown hair and big dark eyes", and he portrays himself as her unlikely rescuer. Whilst Sheila sarcastically says she's "supposed to be engaged to the hero of it all", Gerald appears to genuinely see himself as 'Daisy's' rescuer. He claims "Old Meggarty... had wedged her into a corner with that obscene fat carcass" of his. The descriptive noun phrases create a grotesque contrast between 'Daisy' and Meggarty and highlight Gerald's preoccupation with appearance.

Gerald's hypocrisy and calculation become evident when he seeks ways in which to evade the responsibility the Inspector attempts to make them feel. His declarative, "[i]t's a hoax of some kind", and the interrogative, "[b]ut how do you know it's the same girl?" reveal a character who is ruled by his ego, he is aware of the consequences and simply works logically towards developing a workable theory that will allow them to escape criminal consequences. He apologises to Sheila stating, "I did keep a girl last summer... [a]nd I'm sorry Sheila", but his apology lacks sincerity as immediately following it he searches for ways to mitigate the aftermath.

Gerald, represents 'old money' and the capitalist principles that maintain the power of the upper classes. To Priestley's post war audience, his manipulative and conniving ways, despite being presented with his "easy well-bred" manner, are damaging to society. They are partly to blame for the lost generation of young soldiers during the war, frequently sent to their deaths by the incompetence and ruthlessness of upper class officers whose very ranks were given not based on merit but on outdated notions of upper class superiority

due to the circumstances of their births. Whilst Gerald represents lust, his hypocrisy is ultimately what leads to the entire family's downfall as he is the one who initiates the search to evade the responsibility they ought to feel.

PART 4- MORALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN 'AN INSPECTOR CALLS'- MRS SYBIL BIRLING



“... she'd impertinently made use of our name...”

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Character: Mrs Sybil Birling

Class: Upper class married woman

Cardinal Sin: Pride

There are few characters in literature whose downfall is as anticipated as the detestable Sybil Birling. Her sin is her pride and superiority in her class and it dictates all of her actions in the play. She is described as a “rather cold woman” and “her husband's social superior”, both noun phrases that depict her as a stiff, unlikeable figure from the start. Her chiding of Mr Birling, “(*reproachfully*) Arthur you're not supposed to say such things...” illustrates the difference between the couple as she seeks to educate him of the ways of the upper class where she harks from. Furthermore, she does not take a drink to toast the couple with until she is pressed to do so by Arthur Birling, “[s]pecial occasion” and Sheila, “[y]ou must drink our health”, perhaps indicating her strict adherence to the protocols of the upper class where men sit and take port at the dinner table, whilst women withdraw and take tea separately. It could however, also hint at a slight jealousy

of the fact that whilst she married down (presumably to bolster her family's finances), her daughter Sheila is marrying up into aristocracy.

We also see that Sybil Birling is very much a character invested in preserving the status quo when it comes to upper class protocols and privileges. Her instruction to her daughter that she will "have to get used to" Gerald's "important work", a euphemism for the sanctioned infidelity allowed the upper class men of the period, is horrifying in the matter of fact manner she says it in indicating that she is more a supporter of the privileges of rank than concerned at the marital happiness of her daughter.

Mrs Birling's imperious manner is further evidenced when she cuts in prior to Gerald's interrogation claiming the Inspector is "impertinent" and has a "peculiar and offensive manner". She reiterates her husband's social accolades of "Lord Mayor" and "magistrate" in the mistaken belief that his status and rank will protect them all in the way of previous generations when the upper class were frequently seen as above the law and could usually use their contacts, power and wealth to evade criminal consequences for corrupt acts.

The blinkers that permit her to overlook her husband's infidelities however, also mean that she has no awareness of Eric's social problems (more on this later) and when Sheila says Eric "drinks too much", she is aghast almost pleading with Gerald, "you must know it isn't true". This blindness extends to "Old Joe Meggarty" who she knows respectably as "Alderman Meggarty" and the rest of the family know as a "notorious womaniser". Being forced to face the scandalous behaviour of a respected man, one moreover, who holds the position her husband previously held should force her to view her own husband in that position and maybe consider his actions. Needless to say, Sybil Birling is too much a product of her class to examine this more closely and instead she turns with self-righteous fury on the "young man" who made Eva pregnant.

It is deeply ironic that Sybil, so called after women gifted with divine foresight, prophetesses who can foretell the future, is so very blind. She is provided with both the means and the opportunity to help the hapless Eva. The clues are all there, Eva "called herself Mrs Birling" and describes the man who impregnated her as "a youngster- silly, wild and drinking too much". Sybil Birling, by blinkering herself to the truth of the natures of those closest to her, shuts down the foresight gifted to her by her namesake. Her pride in her social status means that she purposely works towards preserving the privileges of the upper class even to the point where corruption festers in the heart of her own home. Hypocritically, she is quick to point the finger when the "young man" is not her own son, but she feels nothing for Eva, even when Eric asserts that she "killed them both", "your own grandchild", making the familial relationship explicit.

Priestley's portrayal of the pride inherent in the upper classes is contemptuous and the audience is positioned firmly against Sybil Birling and her classist ways as he reveals that her blinkered manner conceals the rot and corruption at the heart of the upper class. Mrs Birling is ruled by her ego and her lack of superego contributes to the downfall of the family. Priestley presents the idea that redemption can only be achieved through taking responsibility for one's actions and to developing a more socialist attitude towards the world.

PART 5- MORALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN 'AN INSPECTOR CALLS'- ERIC BIRLING



“...you lot may be letting yourselves out nicely, but I can't...”

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Character: Eric Birling

Class: Upper class young man

Cardinal Sin: Lust and Sloth

In my view, Eric is one of the most interesting characters in the play. Our first impression of him is quite poor: he is immature, appears to get drunk easily and whilst his father is overbearing, their relationship appears strained and they disagree on everything from their politics to the way they should treat employees. In the opening stage directions, he is described as “half-shy, half-assertive” indicating that his discomfort which strikes us as odd considering he is in his own home. He is a character we can view in binary opposition to Gerald as there are only a few years that separate them but a world of difference in terms of their attitudes, their outlooks and their general demeanours. The adjective “shy” is an interesting choice as it portrays him as younger than he is but also presents him as quite endearing, however, juxtaposed with “assertive”, we can see Priestley is hinting at the strength of character that lies beneath this coltish, immature young man.

His bickering interactions with Sheila, (“you’re squiffy!”, “Don’t be an ass”, “chump”) reflect a childish relationship that has not yet matured because the two of them have not been expected to grow up yet. Arthur Birling, throughout Act 1, tells Eric “[d]on’t interrupt” and “[y]ou’ve a lot to learn yet”, constantly deriding

Eric's own opinions, intellect and ability to articulate his points. His reprimanding tone is more appropriate towards a child than it is towards a young man in his twenties and it is likely for this reason that Eric tells his father in act 3, "you're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble". Arthur Birling treats his son like a child and then appears disappointed when he behaves like one. He treats Gerald with more affection and claims, "you're just the kind of son-in-law I've always wanted", emphasising his approval. Gaining Gerald as a son-in-law would also be the culmination of his business aspirations as with one stone he gains a business merger that will help the two companies monopolise the market even further and his daughter moves up the social scale, satisfying his social climbing dreams. Is it any surprise then, that Eric feels redundant and spends his time and money carousing? Despite being the male heir and the elder child, moves are being made to excise Eric from succeeding his father as head of "Birling and Company", he is being displaced even within his own home and family business.

Eric's alienation from the society he was born to could not be made more evident throughout this play and his "wild" behaviours are symptomatic of the deeper problems within the class system. Priestley presents us with a character whose parentage means that he does not entirely fit in with the class the Birlings aspire to be part of. Sheila's revelation that "he drinks too much" and Gerald's agreement that "he does drink pretty hard" both are caused by this sense of displacement. Eric does not have Gerald's advantages, he is not AS "well-bred" as Gerald and so he is not AS accepted into the elite circles of society. Perhaps he drinks in order to try and show off, gain access to those social circles by being the most rebellious, spending the most money, chasing the most women? Or perhaps he drinks to hide his lack of confidence, that "half-shy" nature which means he is never "quite at ease"? A lack of confidence caused by a father who constantly berates him and makes him believe he is fit for nothing, not even his natural inheritance.

Despite his shortcomings however, Eric is the only character in the play to attempt to make amends for his moral crime against Eva before the Inspector arrives and forces them to face the consequences of their actions. He tells us he "was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty", the implication here being that he forced his way into Eva's lodgings and the uglier implication is that he forced himself on Eva. Our impression of the character, despite the hints of his sensitive nature given by Priestley at the start, are worsened as not only do we now see him as immature and a drunk, he is also now a rapist and a thief.

Yet despite this new awareness, Priestley presents an unexpected side to Eric that raises him in our estimation. Eric claims that he "wasn't in love with her or anything", but he returns to her time and again. When he discovers that she is pregnant he does his best to support her. He tells the Inspector, "[s]he didn't want me to marry her", with the implicit implication being that he had actually posed the question. This sense of chivalry from a young upper class man is unexpected and unnecessary, as we see from Gerald's prior experience. He can pay Eva off in the same way Gerald did, a marriage offer is not expected and if he had gone to his father, it is likely Arthur Birling would have been horrified that Eric would have made such a mésalliance especially after all of his own attempts to climb the ladder.

Whilst his method to support Eva through the theft of the "fifty pounds" is misguided and criminal, Eric's superego is developed enough prior to the start of the play that he is aware that what he did was morally wrong. He contrasts with his father and Gerald in that he judges the rectification of the moral wrong of greater worth than the committing of a criminal wrong to help another more vulnerable person. He continues in his assertions after the Inspector leaves that the family is "beginning to pretend now that nothing's happened at all", and despite the mocking of his father, his shoulders accept the responsibility and guilt he has towards Eva revealing his character's growth and maturity.

Priestley presents us with a character of extremes, one who is both young yet old, innocent yet experienced, wild yet caring and positions us firmly on his side at the end despite the fact that his acts, both moral and criminal are the most heinous of all of his family. What redeems him are the smaller details, his attempts to make amends, his painful insecurity, his devastation when he tells his mother she is responsible for killing "my child- your own grandchild". And through his harrowing journey Priestley teaches us that accepting responsibility and consequences, the development of the conscience and superego and the propagating of socialist principles is the most important responsibility humans have.