

What is J.B. Priestley's vision of England in 1912



The civilization of the earth seems to revolve around its devices.

According to Revelation, if mankind continues to abuse our world, then power will be 'given' to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: to 'kill' with 'war', 'famine', 'disease' and 'pestilence', resulting in the destruction of the human race. On the other hand, Vershinin opens up a perspective: that is, that 'everything' in this world is 'gradually' changing. Vershinin believes that it is not a question of how 'long' it will take for the world to alter its ways; in a period of time, a 'new and happy life will dawn'. Given our modern age, Vershinin is guilty of exhibiting hubris; both younger and the older generations have kept their traditions and continued to mistreat other people; this is evident if we look at the civil rights, which many people have not received because other people in their communities continue to do harm in order to justify their mistakes.

J. B. Priestley conveys his own view of this matter in his play *An Inspector Calls*, by his presentation of the civilization of England in 1912. He has an apocalyptic vision: that is, that man, left to his own devices, will bring about his own destruction.

An Inspector Calls is set in an industrialized English city in 1912. It focuses on a wealthy upper middle family, the Birlings. The play was written in 1945, when World War Two was ending, but it is set in 1912, just before the World War One. The play begins with Mr.

Birling, his family and Gerald Croft having a conversation over dinner. They are celebrating the engagement of Mr Birling's daughter, Sheila Birling, to

the son of a well-known businessman, Gerald Croft. The play gives an insight into the society of that year. At the beginning of the play, Mr.

Birling offers Gerald a drink of port. He is pleased that a man of wealth, such as Gerald, is soon to become his daughter's husband: 'Gerald, I'm going to tell you frankly, without any pretences, that your engagement with Sheila means a lot to me. She'll make you happy and I'm sure you'll make her happy...

' This statement could have fooled his family into thinking that his daughter's engagement is of sentimental value to him; but after making further speeches about the engagement, the audience realizes that Mr. Birling does not care about Gerald's feelings towards Sheila; instead, he is more attentive to the idea that Crofts Limited and his own company will no longer be 'competing' but will be working 'together', since the Crofts Limited is more successful than his business. Mr. Birling prides himself on being a 'hard-headed business man' but in truth, he is insensitive. He is a querulous industrialist and exploits his work-force in order to make himself a large profit.

Mr. Birling seeks to impress Gerald by making confident statements about future events: 'the Germans don't want war'. There is also a proleptic irony in his further statement that 'there isn't a chance of war', for the audience of 1945 know that the Great War began in 1914, only two years later.

Perhaps the most memorable proleptic irony at Mr.

Birling's expense is his reference to the 'unsinkable' Titanic. Mr. Birling appears to be a fool by assuming the fate of Titanic; but to be rational, his

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opinion is shared by many in 1912, making him a good stereotype of upper-middle-class men of that time. By means of the character of Mr Birling, Priestley hopes to make the audience aware of how wrong it is to presume future events. When the ladies retire to the other room, Mr Birling expresses his understanding of life by sharing his beliefs with Gerald and Eric: ‘..

. a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own... ‘ He believes that people are not responsible for one another and that a man should care only for his business and his family.

This vision of life illustrates Mr. Birling's selfish and greedy attitude towards people around him. His speech is interrupted when Inspector Goole comes to investigate the death of a girl named Eva Smith. Birling's immediate reaction is to speak of his social status: ‘ I was an alderman for years- and Lord Mayor two years ago’.

He is name-dropping hoping that he would impress the Inspector: ‘ Gerald Croft, you know Croft's Limited’. Mr Birling refuses to accept any responsibility when he is confronted with his involvement in the death of his former employee, Eva Smith. He dismissed Eva, a few years back, for demanding a higher wage. He has adopted a tyrannical attitude towards strikers such as Eva; he is taking a hard line.

Being a business man, Mr Birling believes that it is his duty to ‘ keep labour cost down’; this shows us that he is more concerned with the profits he can make than with the welfare of his employees. Mr Birling is nakedly ambitious and is eager to be associated with titled people. He is a social climber and is envious of anyone who is socially superior. However, Mr Birling does not care

about his private morality; what he cares about is the 'public scandal' that would result from the Inspector's visit.

He is more worried about how this scandal will affect his chances of claiming a 'Knighthood Honour'. Birling seizes upon the differences between private and public and he points them out. This makes him a hypocrite because there should be no difference between private and public stances: it should not matter if the public knows about his family's involvement with Eva Smith's death. Mr Birling is willing to fool the public eye, but is not worried about preserving his self-respect. Vershinin assumes that, before a very long a happy 'new day will dawn' as long as they work for it, they will be fine.

Mr Birling is guilty of exhibiting the same hubris as Vershinin's. Like Mr Birling, Mrs Birling shares her husband's values. Throughout they play, she exhibits her social manner, reminding the Inspector and the audience that she is a member of upper-middle-class society. Sybil Birling is very strict and looks down on people below her in social status, which we will consider later. She is a highly opinionated woman and her policies affect her judgement of character.

Throughout the play, she reveals her ignorant and prejudiced nature. Mrs Birling, along with her family, is questioned by Inspector Goole in relation to the death of Eva Smith. Eva had faced a series of events which led her to seek for help. Unable to support herself and her unborn child, she approached Brumley Women's Charity Organisation for support. Mrs Birling was a member of this organisation.

When Eva was questioned about her presence in the establishment, she gave a false identification and claimed that her name was Mrs Birling; thinking that it would help her appeal for support. Mrs Birling was irritated to find that Eva was using her name to appeal for help from the institution; she describes Eva's desperate appeal as 'impertinence' and claims that it was 'one of the things' that prejudiced her from Eva's case. When Eva told her the truth about her visit, Mrs Birling did not compromise her story. With her power, Mrs Birling dismissed Eva's plea for help. The Inspector interrogates each member of the Birling family, hoping that he would get his message through to them: that they have all acted selfishly and used Eva for their own benefit.

Mrs Birling resists this idea. When she is questioned about her conduct, she fails to show sympathy towards Eva and claims that she had 'nothing' to do with her. Her lack of understanding is shown by her remarks about Eva: 'a girl of that sort'. She continues to criticize Eva even when she has discovered that she was an 'expectant' mother: 'she had only herself to blame'. Mrs Birling persists in blaming Eva for her own death, which shows us her temperamental attitude towards people who are less fortunate than herself. She maintains that she has done nothing she is 'ashamed of', even though the Inspector had warned her that she will spend the rest of her life 'regretting' what she has done.

She even confronts the Inspector: 'you have no power to change my mind'; this reaction indicates that Mrs Birling has not yet learnt the lesson of the whole situation. Mrs Birling attempts to blame the father of Eva's child: 'I blame the young man. He should be made an example of. If the girl's death

is due to anybody, it's due to him'. Her harsh stance rebounds on her when she discovers that Eric, her son, was responsible for getting Eva pregnant. She suffers shock ('No-Eric-please-I didn't know'), after inadvertently accusing him of being responsible for Eva's death.

When she has finally realised that she has condemned her own grandchild to death, Mrs Birling starts to show sympathy towards Eric. But as soon as the Inspector leaves, she reveals her sheer ignorance by blaming her son for ever getting acquainted with the victim: 'I'm absolutely ashamed of you'. Mrs Birling has denied her connection with Eva Smith's suicide because she believes that she has done 'nothing' to push Eva to her death and that it was her duty to dismiss her appeal for support. Her aspiration to remain undisturbed by the victim is probably due to her aim to remain 'respectable'. She does not accept the consequences of her actions.

Along with Vershinin and Mr Birling, Mrs Birling is also guilty of exhibiting hubris; that everything will be fine. Although Mr and Mrs Birling resist their consciences, their daughter and son, Sheila and Eric, understand the message of Inspector Goole's visit. It is they who are the mouth-pieces of this view of England in 1912. Significantly Priestley uses members of the younger generation to advocate his compassion for people who are less fortunate than us. Sheila's principles change the most in this play. Priestley brings forward to us a stereotype of young women living in 1912 by his presentation of Sheila's character.

At the beginning of the play, Sheila exhibits her contentment with life and her engagement with Gerald: 'pleased with life and rather excited'. Sheila is

inattentive to her father's speech about her engagement with Gerald and apologises when her father senses that she is not 'listening' to what he was saying: this tells us that she is uninterested in her father's opinions and will be counteracting her father's judgement later in the play. Eva Smith had faced destitution during the past year: soon after being dismissed from Mr Birling's company, she found a job as a sales assistant at Milwards. It was in this shop that Sheila contributed to Eva Smith's death.

Sheila was infuriated seeing Eva laughing at her when she tried on a dress. Considering herself as a regular and loyal customer of Milwards, she put forward a formal complaint which caused Eva to lose her job: (I told him that if they didn't get rid of that girl, I'd never go near the place again). What conceivably annoyed Sheila the most is that Eva Smith looked prettier than she did, and she used her class-status to dismiss Eva out of jealousy. Sheila's explanation of her actions when she was interviewed by the Inspector shows how undignified she was when she had Eva sacked.

However, unlike her father, Sheila takes full responsibility for her conduct, she blames herself ('it was my own fault'), and feels guilty and upset of her envious act towards Eva Smith. She was moved to 'tears' and 'guilt' when she saw the consequences of her actions. During Mrs Birling's interview with the Inspector, Sheila contradicts her mother's opinion; "Mother, don't please. For your own sake"; this intervention also shows that Sheila understands that the Inspector knows all the truth. She knows that the Inspector is trying to get the Birling family to admit to their mistakes which led Eva to end her life.

Priestley's clever usage of Sheila's character reminds the audience of Eva's horrific death; she is one of the very open characters, where she expresses her feelings clearly, for example: ('I felt rotten at the time but now I feel even worse'). Shortly after the Inspector leaves, Sheila desperately tries to make her parents understand the lesson that the Inspector had taught her. Her parents, acting as superiors, do not understand the purpose of the Inspector's message. Sheila despondently tells them 'You don't seem to have learnt anything'.

She is frightened by her parent's moral complacency, by their refusal to change and learn from their mistakes. At this point, we can tell that Sheila had a change of character, from an impolite and demeaning girl into a mature lady. Eric, on the other hand, is a good stereotype of young men at the upper end of the society in that period of time. In the course of the play, the audience never sees Eric sober until the play reaches its climax. In fact, from the very outset of the play, Eric's character is presented to us as defiant with his sister's reference to him as 'squiffy'.

Eric, along with each member of his family, is also involved in the death of Eva. He met Eva at the Palace Bar a few months before she died. When he was asked about his acquaintance with Eva, he described her as not 'the usual sort'. He admits to having followed her into her lodgings, insisting that she should let him in or else he will start a 'row': this is not a respectable thing for Eric to do, but the audience had to bear in mind that he was not sober. He continues to talk about the night he met Eva, and describes the time they spent together. At this point, he owns up to his responsibility of being the father of Eva's unborn child.

However, Eric was the only member of the Birling family who helped Eva survive in the time that she needed help. He even offered to marry her and stole money from his father's office to support her. Eva, on the other hand, realised that it would not be a good idea to marry him; Eric was not suitable to be her husband because he did not 'love' her. She thought that he was too immature for her as Eric recalls her reply: ('she treated me as if I were a kid'). As the situation becomes clearer to Eric, he begins to understand the message of the Inspector's visit. He recognises that the fact still remains that Eva is 'still dead'; he accepts the reality of the situation.

Eric, alongside Sheila, is not happy with his parents' attitude towards Eva's death. When he heard of his mother's comments on 'the father of the child' and of his father's remarks about him stealing money to keep the mother of his child alive, he begins to see his parents for what they are...

social snobs who lack consciences. Both Eric and Sheila are made aware that their actions placed a burden upon Eva's life. They are guilty of helping Eva's aspiration to end her life grow and are ashamed of their parents for trying to excuse themselves from their misdeeds. Eric and Sheila represent the younger generation who are 'quick to learn'. Priestley hopes to show us that some individuals take advantage of their power to abuse other people to their own liking; People who think they are respectful citizens often behave immorally and almost criminally. Eva was a girl trying to survive her harsh life, but instead found herself being used by people above her social status, until she was no longer of use.

Priestley's vision of England in 1912 is a very harsh one. Looking back at the Titanic, most of the people who had the worst treatment and died in its sinking were the people who belonged to the lower classes. They had the lowest chance of surviving compared to the richer ones. People's greed for power and wealth often results in them thinking and acting selfishly.

The Inspector summarizes the play's message: that is, 'We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other'. We are not alone in this world. Priestley hopes to show us that the younger generations are the ones who can change the world we live in. Along with Vershinin, Mr and Mrs.

Birling is guilty of exhibiting hubris: that is, that if they remain undisturbed about Eva's death, they would be fine. Like the Revelation, we have to be aware of what we are contributing to this world before it's too late.