

How does priestly
shape the audiences
expectations for the
rest



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Priestly shapes the audience's expectations for the rest of the play, initially making the setting a family dining room of an industrial businessman on a Spring evening in 1912. The family have all sat together to have dinner and celebrate the engagement of their daughter with Gerald, son of Lady Croft. The tensions between the characters, shown in their use of language, actions and social interaction typifies in just this one family, the political tensions of 1912. The audience, viewing it initially in Russia is looking at the play in the 1940s, with hindsight.

The audience has knowledge that the family does not have, that there will be social revolution and World War I will occur. The intrigue that an inspector will call gives the audience a sense that the family will be scrutinised and their faults found out. Priestley prepares the audience to see the characters, not just as individuals, but also as stereotypes standing for a particular attitude in English society in 1918 and the political tensions that existed at the time.

The stage is lit in a pink light, soft and rich. It is as if the family sitting in the dining table are almost bathed in it, seeing the world through rose-tinted spectacles. This means they are not living in the world of reality, but in a self-made paradise where everyone else is at odds and they have all convinced themselves they have the right way of viewing the world. All the family are gathered, celebrating Gerald becoming joined in their family. There is a maid, Edna and we hear of a cook.

Clearly this family is middle-class and employs servants to do their chores, no doubt paying them little. Edna is obedient and her job is all that she can

expect, since there was little education in those days for her to have any other choice than to serve the wealthy. When Mrs Birling, the mother and a woman of higher social class than Mr Birling hears her husband mention compliments to the cook for the lovely meal, she tells him off sharply. Clearly servants are supposed to do their job well and not be mentioned any further than receiving their wage.

This gives the audience the impression that the class system in England is layered from the landed country gentry down a stage to the industrialists and further down the ladder to the servants. However, Mrs Birling's reaction shows that it is the way it should be and that the boundaries between aristocracy and servants is one never to change. The industrialist father, Arthur Birling who is the breadwinner and prides himself on keeping his family prosperous so that the world can see how well they are doing is allowed to rise up the ladder.

His odd mistakes which are not quite aristocratic style are overlooked by Mrs Birling to some extent because he brings wealth and prosperity. Mrs. Birling's class, the aristocrats have no real power to change the economy and they seem only to set standards and keep the balance of power with them and far from the masses like Edna and the Cook. Since this play was first shown to a Russian audience who had seen a Revolution and the aristocracy overthrown to make way for Communism, this is an engaging theme. It gives the audience a position of knowledge greater than the characters.

The audience is entertained. They can both laugh mockingly and feel sorry for the characters in their cosy little world where everything seems in good order to them. Mrs Birling also represents the woman's position in those days. They were taught to value the traditional idea that a woman's place is in the home supporting their husband in everything. Even though she might have fresh, exciting ideas about the family itself or of relating to the community, she was powerless to have any say because she had to obey her husband.

The marriage vows said 'Love, honour and obey.' Sheila, the daughter is more outspoken, but she has not learned to channel her rebelliousness yet, as it only comes out in rude, silly remarks. She is also aware of that she has been given a duty to marry well as her parents would wish so that social standing and prosperity were achieved. Eric hints that he knows more about Sheila than he is telling us, and there is a hint of scandal with him too. It could be possible that Sheila is feeling the stirrings of change but keeping it a secret from her family.

A woman was also powerless to change her circumstances or those around her until the Suffragette Movement gave women the right to vote. Gerald is the son of Lady Croft, an aristocrat. The audience gets hints that he leads a secret life when Sheila teases him about leaving her alone for a long time. Sheila tries to be playful, but they are aware that Sheila is rather naive, turning a blind eye to this warning that perhaps he has other reasons for this marriage than love. The stage before the Inspector calls has only men in the dining room.

The ladies have left the men to talk about matters such as business and war, while the women are reported to be talking about clothes. Though this seems patronising at first, it is also seen as important to show social standing. So, Eric, Gerald and Mr. Birling are in the dining room smoking and drinking port and talking about the differences in society. Mr. Birling is very pleased with himself, telling the two younger men to take care to look after themselves and their families first. He urges them to ignore rumours about industrial unrest, strikes for better conditions and to ignore the idea that a war is about to break.

He is clearly enjoying his narrow, self-satisfied rose-coloured world when suddenly the doorbell rings sharply. It interrupts the long speech abruptly. The audience are no doubt relieved that at last it will stop and reality has broken in. The announcement that an Inspector is at the door makes the audience wonder if this is the scandal about to unfold that Mr. Birling joked would not like to happen to his family. The lighting is changed and becomes brighter. The rose-coloured lighting has gone and now some clarity is on the stage.