

How does Priestley  
show that tension is  
at the heart of the  
Birling family



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' How does Priestley show that tension is at the heart of the Birling Family? '

Tensions in the Birling household are shown from the beginning of the play.

The house is described as "not cosy and homelike" which represents the cold and unfriendly atmosphere; these characteristics very much reflect the family itself. There is a significant contrast between the older and younger generations throughout the play. An early hint of this is evident at the start of the play when Sheila says she would hate it if Gerald became "purple faced" which also indicates to the audience that Gerald will end up like the older generation.

The attitude of the Inspector towards each of the characters differs significantly which shows the audience contrast between them. The Inspector is representing the opinions of J. B. Priestley, so we can infer that these views on each character should influence the viewer's opinion on them also however, his judgemental nature suggests that he is not a real Inspector which emphasizes the moral message being portrayed. The Inspector deems Mr and Mrs Birling to be most at fault, he is more forceful and aggressive with Mrs Birling; this is shown in her responses with stage directions like "severely" and "sharply".

He also reserves a particular dislike for Mr Birling and is aggressive and impatient with him; stage directions of "savagely" and "sharply" are used. Sheila is dealt with more lightly as she understands and accepts, showing remorse. Similarly, Eric is not dealt with so harshly - this conveys the difference between the generations. The Inspector is also more sympathetic towards Gerald which is clear when he says "at least he made her happy for

some time". There is a difference in the language that is used by each of the characters.

Slang is used by Sheila and Eric with language like "squiffy" "ass" and the phrase "Steady the Buffs." Mr Birling uses different language also, often slipping into provincial speech with language like "fiddle sticks" and "cranks," he also compliments the cook's dinner. In contrast, Mrs Birling corrects them all saying "the things you pick up these days" which shows a move in society, and also correcting Mr Birling as he is "not supposed to say such things. This presents the tension between Mr and Mrs Birling's social background and upbringing and shows Mrs Birling's disapproval of Sheila and Eric's vocabulary. There is a significant tension between Mr Birling and Eric, which increases throughout the play. At the beginning of the play, Eric is excluded by the older men when he interrupts conversation of "in jokes." He also presents a sense that he cannot trust his father and is hiding something when he almost reveals something but stops; this presents an emerging tension in the lack of understanding and trust between them.

There is evidence of the growing division when Eric challenges his father's behaviour saying "It isn't if you can't go work somewhere else" and "I call it tough luck." The friction between them increases when Mr Birling realises he didn't know Eric as well as he thought as he learns about his drinking and involvement with Eva as well as stealing from him, he responds "harshly" and "angrily" to him. The cracks in their relationship are also shown when Eric says "you're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble. There are also tensions between Sheila and Gerald which are clear leading up to the enquiry into Gerald's involvement when he says "you've  
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been through it and now you want someone else to." The flaws in their relationship are brought to light with the revelation of their actions as it shows them they aren't the same people they thought they were and shows how they don't truly know each other. The tensions between Mrs Birling and Eric become clear towards the end of the play. At the beginning Mrs Birling sees him as a child, ignorant of the fact that he drinks too much alcohol.

Friction comes between them when Eric discovers she has condemned him to public scandal, but also that she condemned Eva and therefore his child to death. There is a strong sense of anger from Eric and Mrs Birling is frightened of his reaction. The family begin to turn against each other towards the end of Act 3; Sheila betrays Eric's confidence in telling Mrs Birling that he drinks excessively, Eric becomes angry with his mother, Mr Birling thinks Sheila is unloyal and he blames Eric for entire affair, Mrs Birling is angry with Sheila and devastated about Eric's involvement.

The sense of division between older and younger generations is further increased here; Mr and Mrs Birling aren't angry at each other and Eric and Sheila side together towards the end challenging their parents. There is a contrast between how the inspectors visit affects each of the characters. Sheila feels remorse and regret for her actions towards Eva Smith and is sorry. Mr Birling however has no regret and doesn't take responsibility for his actions at all, looking to blame others with his capitalist view.

Similarly, Mrs Birling refuses to acknowledge she did anything wrong and foolishly condemns her own family, blaming the father of the unborn child. Eric sees his mistakes towards the play, siding with Sheila. The older

generation show they are worried about public scandal whereas Sheila questions whether Goole is a real inspector and sees he may serve the purpose of making them understand their actions were wrong and leading them to change, she sees a moral message in the events.

Tensions are heightened at the end of play when Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald act like nothing has happened. Mr Birling's statement about Gerald's uncovering of the hoax, "This makes all the difference," contrasts greatly to that of Sheila who says "I suppose we're all nice people now." It is clear here that the younger generation have changed and begin to challenge their parents, though the only evidence Mr Birling seems to show of change is in one of his final speeches when he says "I'd give thousands;" however this still revolves around capitalist values and money.

Priestley demonstrates tension through what each of the characters represent. Mr Birling represents the capitalist values of the older generation with refusal to change, acting as a symbol of all negative aspects of society. Whereas Sheila and Eric represent what Priestley wants society to move towards; socialist beliefs and collective responsibility with a move away from capitalist values. Eric and Sheila are used as dramatic devices to question the capitalist values and prove them to be significantly wrong.