Analysis Act 2

The development of Sheila, one of the central characters of the second act, is very important to the play. She starts, in Act One, as “a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited,” and her excited reaction to Gerald’s engagement ring suggests she is comfortably settled in the economic and cultural traditions of her father. At the start of the play, she was suspicious of Gerald’s absence last summer, but showed no desire to investigate it further. Yet, by the end of the first act, she was openly mocking Gerald’s desire to keep his involvement in Eva’s life from the Inspector. We were prepared to see how her relationship with her fiancé was about to break down. Throughout the play, Sheila realizes faster than anyone else that it is better if the Inspector is directly told the truth. When she, much to her mother’s chagrin, reveals to the Inspector openly that Eric has been drinking heavily for two years, Priestley is showing us a girl becoming aware that integrity demands that she be honest and truthful. One owns up to one’s faults and takes responsibility.

Sheila clearly has begun to change. She is owning up to her responsibility for Eva’s death, maturing as she does so. Notably, she stands in stark contrast to her mother, who refuses to change at all and (so far) refuses to drop her mask of icy, upper-class politeness. Priestley is interested in the well-worn idea that the young have the capacity to change, accept new ideas and move forwards while their parents and the older generations often fail to do so.

Shortly before his exit, we see that Sheila similarly has the maturity to, without tears, accept that things are now different between her and Gerald, even unemotionally offering the symbolic gesture of the return of his ring. Maturely, she accepts her part of the responsibility for Eva’s death, noting that it is better that “at least [Gerald has] been honest.” Moreover, as she points out to him, “this has made a difference,” and the engagement will not be able to continue without serious reconsideration.

The moment when Sheila returns Gerald’s ring perhaps symbolizes the distance the play itself has come: its comfortable “engagement party” opening has been entirely turned on its head. In addition, the man who was assumed (by Birling) to be just a local, Brumley police inspector has turned out to be something quite different. Sheila has been the first to realize the strangeness of the Inspector. “I don’t understand about you,” she says to him, while Priestley’s double adverbs (in his stage direction) to direct the actor are “wonderingly and dubiously.” It is Sheila who first suggests, later in the play, that the Inspector might not have been an Inspector, and here she is already beginning to suspect that there is something unusual about him. Sheila, moreover, is aware of the fact that the Inspector is now going to control events until he leaves, regardless of what either of her parents tries to do to oppose him.

The Inspector himself is a fascinating character. As the title character, in many ways he is the most important character to any interpretation of the play. Priestley describes the Inspector on his first entrance as creating “at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness.” He is in his fifties and has “a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking.” The Inspector elliptically comments that he does not “see much of” the Chief Constable in Act One, which is unsurprising, given that he is not (as we find out in Act Three) actually a police officer. One of the key questions of the play is the precise nature of the Inspector’s identity.

It is possible, of course, that the Inspector is perfectly human and unremarkable, as Birling says: a clever hoaxer, making the most of some information from the girl’s diary. Yet, this would not explain the arrival of the police inspector at the end of the play! Moreover, the Inspector himself seems to run out of time as the play goes on, increasingly pressing the person he’s questioning to hurry up (note, particularly, that Eric’s interrogation is the shortest and the last).

Critics arguing for the supernatural power of the Inspector tend to focus on his name. “Goole,” of course, spelled another way, becomes “ghoul”: a haunting spirit closely associated with corpses and the dead. Is the Inspector some kind of ghostly incarnation of Eva Smith, determined to return to her killers to make them realize the error of their ways? Can the Inspector really be said to be a ghost who knows the future? At this point in the play, the Inspector’s role is hugely ambiguous, yet his power over the family is growing. He silences Birling on more than one occasion and even manages to break the composure of Mrs. Birling by allowing her to trap her own son. He seems to have known already that Gerald, Eric, and Mrs. Birling were also involved.

Some critics have argued that “Goole” is in fact a reference to a fishing village not far from Priestley’s native Bradford and that the Inspector is simply to be read as “fishing” for information and hooking in the Birlings. Whether a ghoul or simply Goole, the Inspector, by the end of the second act, has become a compellingly authoritative figure.

Priestley’s socialist message—that everyone must look out for each other—is extended further in the Inspector’s damning comment that the public people “have responsibilities as well as privileges.” Though the three younger characters, Gerald, Eric and Sheila, all are partly to blame in Eva’s death, it is with the two elder Birlings that the main point of blame rests. Birling, as a public man, had a responsibility to do the right thing, and (particularly as an ex-Lord Mayor) should have been aware of the plight of girls like Eva. Mrs. Birling, as the Inspector points out, even managed to avoid giving help and support to Eva while sitting as the chairperson of a committee expressly designed for that purpose. It is not simply a personal misdemeanor, but a public, professional one: both of them symbolize the usual indifference of social organizations toward people in Eva’s position.

**Analysis – Act 3**

The interrogation of Eric, which begins this act, is the last in a chain of interrogations which have structured the play since the Inspector’s arrival (in order: Birling, Sheila, Gerald, Mrs. Birling, Eric). Each of the Birlings has played a part in Eva Smith’s death, and each of them must take part of the responsibility for what happened to her and for her final, sad choice. This motif, as well as the structure of the play and of Eva Smith’s life (though, to get the order of events right, Mrs. Birling was the last, not the penultimate, character to affect Eva in reality), points to two of Priestley’s key themes: the interrelationship of cause and effect and, more generally, the nature of time.

The “chain of events” that the Inspector outlined as leading to Eva Smith’s death in Act One is a key idea in the play. The chain of personal and social events is not simply a metaphor for the way the class system holds people like “Eva Smiths and John Smiths” firmly in their subservient positions in society, but it is also a neat encapsulation of the Inspector’s key moral: that everyone, contrary to what Birling explains, is indeed bound up with everyone else “like bees in a hive.” As much as we like to think of ourselves as individuals, we are also social beings.

The Birlings and [Gerald Croft](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=25895) are chained together by Eva Smith’s death. Birling sets off the chain which makes possible Sheila’s bad deed against Eva, which in turn throws Eva into the path of Gerald and then Eric and, finally, in front of Mrs. Birling’s committee. Each deed is tied to the deed before it and the deed after it. The individual deeds, linked together, make Eva’s downfall so severe that she chooses suicide—effectively causing this choice. This is the “cause and effect” idea of succession that Priestley explores: the way in which time can indeed make us all responsible for each other.

Both of these themes are present elsewhere in Priestley’s work, particularly in *Time and the Conways* and [I Have Been Here Before]. *Time and the Conways*, in particular, is interested in the notion of time as a series of interlocking dimensions: a series of parallel universes. He famously quoted the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle: “if there were more heavens than one, the movement of any of them equally would be time, so that there would be many times at the same time.” Even if, therefore, the chain of events that led to Eva Smith’s death was not in fact a chain, but separate events all involving different girls, Priestley’s theory of time suggests that they might still be seen as part of the same whole.

Consider this passage from Priestley’s “Man and Time”: “We invent Time to explain change and succession. We try to account for it out there in the world we are observing, but soon run into trouble because it is not out there at all. It comes with the travelling searchlight, the moving slit.” Might we see the Inspector as just such a “moving slit,” a function of time who can send the searchlight through to each person’s experiences? Is his role, perhaps, to bring together a series of separate deeds so as to make the Birlings and Gerald Croft realize their collective and individual responsibilities? Perhaps: Priestley leaves the Inspector’s role open to such an interpretation. It is also fascinating to consider that (as is explored in the Stephen Daldry production) the Inspector might indeed come from the future. Is he the "Ghoul" of Eva Smith (or even of her dead baby, somehow) come back to haunt her murderers?

It is important to analyze the Inspector’s promise, later repeated by Sheila, of “fire and blood and anguish” if men will not learn that they are responsible for each other. It seems very likely that Priestley intends the resonance of not just the Second World War but also the First World War, a catastrophically major event in British history that significantly changed the social structure of the country—and led to horrors, particularly in trench warfare, the likes of which had never been seen in living memory. Moreover, to Priestley’s 1946 audience, it would have been an uncomfortably close reminder of the Second World War, which had just concluded.

Explaining Dunne’s theory of time, Priestley noted, “Each of us is a series of observers existing in a series of Times.” The Inspector, it seems, might be just such an observer, who can see beyond the play’s 1912 setting to its 1946 performance date—and who, perhaps, with the promised reappearance of a police inspector at the end of the play (we never learn whether this Inspector is indeed Goole again) can move through time. What are we to take from the play’s ending? The play is over after Birling announces his news, perhaps indicating that the play has gone back to the point at which the Inspector arrived, just to continue again once the curtain falls. Perhaps Eva Smith had not yet died and the Inspector was investigating an event which had not yet happened. However one chooses to interpret the play, one must face the play’s use of the concepts of time that so fascinated Priestley.

After the Inspector’s exit, the focus of the play shifts away from Eva Smith’s story, now complete, as the characters unpack and examine more closely what has just happened. What we see, for the first time, is how the Birlings (and Gerald) are going to, in the Inspector’s words, “adjust their family relationships.” Immediately, the key alliance is formed between Mr. and Mrs. Birling, who are keen to judge Eric as harshly as possible, while sweeping their own moral misdemeanors under the carpet. We also see, when Sheila steps in to defend Eric, that the two Birling siblings have formed another contrasting alliance in line with the Inspector’s message about responsibility and maturity.

Birling himself does not really seem to have changed at all since the first act. His offer of money (could “thousands” really make amends for a girl’s death?) is almost comically inappropriate. Almost as soon as the Inspector leaves, he is primarily considering the potential damage to his chances of getting a knighthood.

It is his wife, though, who seems to remain more ominously unchanged. She alone stands her ground in the face of the Inspector, icily dismissive of “girls of that class,” and though she is shocked by Eric’s behavior and the subsequent revelations, moments after the Inspector’s exit she “comes to life” to tell Eric how “absolutely ashamed” of him she is. Birling throughout is something of a comic buffoon, but it is [Sybil Birling](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=25899), perhaps, who genuinely embodies the disdain for the lower classes, the extreme self-centeredness which Priestley is primarily arguing against.

The other character who interestingly comes into focus in this final act is Gerald Croft. He is not a social equal of his fiancé, and we do not find out a great deal about him—other than, of course, his dealings with Eva. Eric’s naive comment about Eva in the Palace bar (which itself, Priestley makes quite clear, is a meeting place for prostitutes and their clients), about the “woman who wanted her to go there,” seems to suggest that Eva is so desperate that she is working as a prostitute and that this woman is the madam. Yet what is interesting is that Eric, despite his drinking problem, genuinely seems not to understand the implications of it. Gerald could easily have been at the Palace bar looking for a prostitute, and the fact he knows that it is a “favourite haunt of women of the town” proves that he is far more streetwise than [Eric Birling](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=25901). We know, too, from his encounter with Eva that he is quite happy to undertake a sexual relationship without being in love.

Yet we never suspect, when Gerald leaves, that part of his motivation for going might be some interrogation of his own; when he returns, that is precisely what he has been doing. Gerald is even absent from the Inspector’s final speech. We would not suspect, from his behavior at the beginning of the play, that he has been unfaithful to his fiancé. It is Gerald, moreover, who leads the way to unraveling the Inspector’s case and who, in the closing minutes of the play, directly phones the infirmary to find out whether a girl has committed suicide.

Birling, naturally, is delighted. He tells Gerald that the Inspector “didn’t keep you on the run as he did the rest of us.” Yet one can never quite trust Gerald Croft. Ominously, the way he casts aside his own responsibility in favor of trying to prove that the Inspector was a hoaxer actually suggests that he is another [Arthur Birling](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=25893) (or worse) in the making.

Priestley makes a fascinating psychological point regarding the ways people react to guilt and responsibility in this last act. The heady, breathless glee with which Mr. and Mrs. Birling react is incredibly well-observed. As more and more pieces of evidence fall into place, Birling, in particular, is so overjoyed and relieved that he even dares to imitate the Inspector’s final speech. The point, clearly, is that some people are always unwilling to accept responsibility, no matter how clearly it is explained to them. In their own heads, they will find ways out of it. Here, all it takes is to know that they are not going to be held legally responsible in order to stop worrying about their moral responsibility. It will, as the Inspector warns the Birlings at the end, take more than simply being told; they will need to be taught the moral lessons at issue here.

Priestley’s warning about responsibility has resonated through almost a century of constant international revival in the theatre. In any age it is performed, the apocalyptic, *Revelation*-style warning of “fire and blood and anguish” looks ominously forward to military conflict. The sociological point is this unusually portentous. If man will not learn to look out for his fellow man in small ways, Priestley seems to argue, then man will destroy man on battlefields, with bombs, with guns, with “fire and blood and anguish.”