

Play notes

Act One

► *Opening directions up to 'She and SHEILA and ERIC go out. BIRLING and GERALD sit down again' (p.7)*

The opening stage directions

The opening directions set the scene. The Birlings have money, but their 'good solid furniture' is 'heavily comfortable' and does not make the room 'cosy and homelike'. It sounds like a hotel. What does this suggest about what they value?

Arthur Birling is 'rather provincial in his speech' (he has a regional accent), and his wife is his 'social superior'. Some landowning families were prepared to link themselves through marriage to a 'socially inferior' business family in return for financial gain.

Activity 1

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Read the opening speeches of Birling, Gerald, Sheila, Mrs Birling and Eric. For Eric, include the stage direction 'ERIC suddenly guffaws'.

- Given the opening character descriptions, how do you think each speech should be spoken?
- What impressions of character do you get from these speeches?

A family celebration

► *Read to 'Arthur, what about this famous toast of yours?' (p.3)*

Birling passes the port to Gerald, which suggests that he accepts Gerald as part of the family. Birling notes that the families buy the same port. The *subtext* here (what he could be suggesting but not saying) could be 'Our families are equal: your father is higher class than me but I am just as wealthy.'

Activity 2

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

What do you think the subtext of the following lines on pages 2 and 3 could be?

- MRS B. (*reproachfully*) Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things—
- GERALD ...I insist upon being one of the family now. I've been trying long enough, haven't I?
- ERIC ...Suddenly I felt I just had to laugh.
- SHEILA Don't be an ass, Eric.

Business benefits

► *Read down to Sheila's line 'Now I really feel engaged' (p.5)*

Birling is pleased to be getting a son-in-law who is a good match for his daughter, and he looks forward to the family businesses 'working together – for lower costs and higher prices' (p.4). Even while celebrating, he is still thinking about business. One way in which the family alliance could produce 'lower costs' is if Croft and Birling keep wages down to the same level.

Activity 3

DRAMATIC IMPACT

Identify lines that:

- make the mood seem relaxed and happy;
- hint that things could go wrong.

Make a mind map or spidergram to show what could go wrong. For each possibility, write down a line or phrase that hints at it.

The state of the nation

► *Read to the exit of Mrs Birling, Sheila and Eric (p.7)*

Birling makes a long speech broken only by brief comments from Eric and Gerald. He wants to mark the occasion and put the coming marriage in context, giving the young couple a kind of 'send-off'. He also feels that it is up

to employers like him to safeguard the nation by ensuring that 'the interests of Capital' are protected.

Father and future son-in-law one to one

Mrs Birling has tactfully got Eric out of the room. Birling and Gerald chat confidentially, sharing a joke about the Birlings being 'a nice well-behaved family' (p.8). Birling offers Gerald a cigar – suggesting his acceptance of him almost as an equal. Compare this with the way Birling treats Eric.

Birling tries to reassure Gerald that the Birlings are almost the social equals of the Crofts. Birling thinks Gerald's aristocratic mother will regard him more highly when he becomes *Sir* Arthur.

Activity 4

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Read up to Eric's entry (p.9) aloud. Draw a figure to represent each man. Add a speech bubble for each containing a line that you think is important, and a thought bubble for each to suggest what might be going on in the back of each man's mind as they talk.

Activity 5

DRAMATIC IMPACT

Read from Eric's entry (p.9) to his defiant 'Nothing' (top of p.11). Much of the dramatic impact comes from things that are initially hinted at but not revealed until later. Our interest is engaged as we begin to suspect that Eric has something to be nervous about. Answer the following questions:

- What hints are there that Eric may have things to hide?
- What does Eric's attitude seem to be towards his father's advice?

Enter Inspector Goole

► *Read from where Edna opens the door and announces the Inspector, to his line 'No, she didn't exactly go on the streets' (p.16)*

The stage directions reveal that the Inspector has to give 'an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness', which gives him an air of authority (p.11). Birling is pleasant to him at first, but becomes impatient when



The 2009 Stephen Daldry production, with Inspector Goole in the foreground and Mr Birling and Gerald in the dining room.

the Inspector refuses to state his business immediately. The Inspector reveals that he has come about a girl who has committed suicide. Priestley uses a device to make the Inspector's knowledge of her believable – her diary.

The Inspector quickly establishes himself as a man who cannot be intimidated or sidetracked. He interrupts Birling and refuses to let Gerald and Eric see the photograph he shows Birling.

Birling's responsibility

Birling recognises Eva Smith as an employee whom he fired, but he is not unsettled by this connection, although he must realise that some people might blame him: 'I can't accept any responsibility' (p.14). In addition, he is uncomfortable when Eric quotes his earlier assertion that 'a man has to look after himself'.

Birling acknowledges that Eva was 'a good worker', but makes it clear that the pay claim in which she was involved never had any chance of success: 'I refused, of course' (p.14). He resents the Inspector asking why. Moreover, he justifies himself: 'it's my duty to keep labour costs down' (p.15). Eric questions this, signalling the beginnings of family tensions, while Gerald supports Birling. Birling calls the strike 'a pitiful affair' but claims that Eva Smith, as a ringleader, 'had to go' (p.15).

Birling tries to intimidate the Inspector by warning him that he knows the Chief Constable (p.16). He is angry that Eric sides with Eva, and feels that it is time for the Inspector to leave.

Key point

There is dramatic irony in Birling's 'state of the nation' speech: the audience knows that most of his predictions have been proved wrong. Do you know which ones?

Key point

The Inspector's use of the word 'exactly' in 'No, she didn't exactly go on the streets' implies that what happened to Eva was in some way like her resorting to prostitution (p.16).