BIRLING

A friend of mine went over this new liner last week - the *Titanic*- she sails next week - forty-six thousand eight hundred tons - forty-six thousand eight hundred tons - New York in five days - and every luxury - and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable.

Act One

Priestley's love of dramatic irony is biting here, and his irony is never more satirical than in these comments of Birling's, which, to his original audience in 1946, must have seemed more controversial than they do today because the sinking of the ship was within people's memory. Symbolically, just as the*Titanic* is destined to sink, so too is Birling's political ideology, under the Inspector's interrogation. The ship was a titan of the seas, and its imminent failure "next week" suggests the dangers of capitalistic hubris, illustrating the risk of the entrepreneur.

GERALD [laughs]: You seem to be a nice well-behaved family -

BIRLING: We think we are -

Act One

Coming early in the play, these lines also exemplify Priestley's love of dramatic irony: the last thing the Birlings have been is well-behaved. These lines also suggest the alliance between Gerald and Birling, two men who share the same values, whose bond will become stronger after the Inspector's exit.

BIRLING

But take my word for it, you youngsters - and I've learnt in the good hard school of experience - that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own - and -

*We hear the sharp ring of a front door bell.*

Act One

Birling is taking an individualist, capitalist point of view about personal responsibility, and his lines here provide the general attitude of his speeches since the play began. According to him, experience proves that his point of view is correct, in contrast to the possibly more idealistic "youngsters." Yet, the bell marks the moment at which the Inspector arrives, and it is no accident that the socialist-leaning Inspector arrives at precisely this moment.

INSPECTOR

... what happened to her then may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events.

Act One

In this fascinating excerpt, the Inspector outlines the nature of the moral crime the Birlings and Gerald have committed against Eva. Each of them is responsible in part for her death, and together they are entirely responsible. This construction is itself a metaphor for Priestley's insistence that we are all bound up together and responsible communally for everyone's survival. Note, too, that the repetition in the Inspector's lines reflect the "chain" he is talking about.

SHEILA

[laughs rather hysterically]

Why - you fool - *he knows*. Of course he knows. And I hate to think how much he knows that we don't know yet. You'll see. You'll see. *She looks at him almost in triumph*.

Act One

Sheila, shortly before the end of Act One, crucially understands the importance of the Inspector and the fact that he has more information than he is revealing. She is the first person in the play to really begin to understand the Inspector which, in turn, leads her to see her relationship with Gerald in a more realistic, more cynical way.

INSPECTOR

Yes, Mr. Croft - in the stalls bar at the Palace Variety Theatre...

GERALD

I happened to look in, one night, after a rather long dull day, and as the show wasn't very bright, I went down into the bar for a drink. It's a favorite haunt of women of the town -

MRS. BIRLING

Women of the town?

BIRLING

Yes, yes. But I see no point in mentioning the subject ....

Act Two

Eva Smith, by the time she encounters Eric in the Palace bar, seems to be working as a prostitute, and indeed, the fact that the Palace bar is a location known for prostitutes looking for business is here partly mentioned but partly suppressed. Moreover, this information points out the streetwise character of Gerald Croft, and it might even lead to questions about precisely what he *was* doing in that bar, at night, other than just happening to "look in" after a "dull day" and having "a drink."

INSPECTOR

She kept a rough sort of diary. And she said there that she had to go away and be quiet and remember "just to make it last longer." She felt there'd never be anything as good again for her - so she had to make it last longer.

Act Two

This is an unusually personal moment from the Inspector, who gives us one of the first insights into Eva Smith's feelings and personality. He claims, of course, that he has found a diary in Eva Smith's room, though many interpretations have argued that the Inspector in fact has a more personal connection to Eva Smith: perhaps he even is her ghost, or a ghoulish embodiment of her dead child? Priestley never tells us, but there is certainly opportunity for the actor in this part to suggest a more personal connection. Note, too, the interest in time on Eva's part, keeping a diary and making a point of remembering the past nostalgically.

BIRLING

You'll apologize at once ... I'm a public man -

INSPECTOR [massively]

Public men, Mr. Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges.

Act Two

Here the Inspector, who by this middle act of the play is gaining in power and control over the situation, "massively" silences Birling with a putdown. It is not the first or last time that Birling is cut off mid-thought. It is also important because Priestley points an extra finger of blame at Birling not just for his actions, but for his failure to see that his public position entails a duty of responsibility to other people. Interestingly, this attitude draws on the traditional notion of the upper classes taking responsibility for the welfare of the lower classes, but in the newer, more democratic life of Britain, the "public men" are not necessarily of higher social class even if they have more public privileges; at any rate, their position of power comes with responsibility.

INSPECTOR

We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night.

Act Three

The Inspector's final lines, from a longer speech he makes shortly before his exit, are a blistering delivery of Priestley's socialist message. Moreover, his promise of "fire and blood and anguish" also looks forward to the First and Second World Wars, a resonance, which, to Priestley's 1946 audience, must have been quite chilling.

BIRLING

... we've been had ... it makes *all* the difference.

GERALD

Of course!

SHEILA [bitterly]

I suppose we're all nice people now.

Act Three

These lines illustrate the mood of this last part of the play, as well as the split between the Birlings and their children. Sheila and Eric realize the importance of the Inspector's lesson, notably that they need to become more socially responsible whether or not the particular scenario was a valid example. In contrast, their parents absolutely fail to learn such a lesson, arguing that the failure of the example invalidates the Inspector's argument. Why still feel guilty and responsible? It also is significant that Gerald Croft takes Birling's side (uncritically) rather than Sheila's.