**Class**

Taking the play from a socialist perspective inevitably focuses on issues of social class. Class is a large factor, indirectly, in the events of the play and [Eva Smith](http://www.gradesaver.com/an-inspector-calls/study-guide/character-list#eva-smith)’s death. Mrs. Birling, Priestley notes, is her husband’s social superior, just as Gerald will be Sheila’s social superior if they do get married. Priestley also subtly notes that Gerald’s mother, Lady Croft, disapproves of Gerald’s marrying Sheila for precisely this reason. Finally, everyone’s treatment of Eva might be put down (either in part or altogether) to the fact that she is a girl, as Mrs. Birling puts it, “of that class.” Priestley clearly was interested in the class system and how it determines the decisions that people make.

**Youth and Age**

The play implicitly draws out a significant contrast between the older and younger generations of Birlings. While Arthur and Sybil refuse to accept responsibility for their actions toward Eva Smith (Arthur, in particular, is only concerned for his reputation and his potential knighthood), Eric and especially Sheila are shaken by the Inspector’s message and their role in Eva Smith’s suicide. The younger generation is taking more responsibility, perhaps because they are more emotional and idealistic, but perhaps because Priestley is suggesting a more communally responsible socialist future for Britain.

**Responsibility and Avoiding It**

Though responsibility itself is a central theme of the play, the last act of the play provides a fascinating portrait of the way that people can let themselves off the hook. If one message of the play is that we must all care more thoroughly about the general welfare, it is clear that the message is not shared by all. By contrasting the older Birlings and Gerald with Sheila and Eric, Priestley explicitly draws out the difference between those who have accepted their responsibility and those who have not.

**Cause and Effect**

The Inspector outlines a “chain of events” that may well have led to Eva Smith’s death. Her suicide, seen in this way, is likely the product not of one person acting alone, but of a group of people each acting alone; it resulted from several causes. If Birling had not sacked Eva in the first place, Sheila could not have had her dismissed from Milwards, and Eric and Gerald would not have met her in the Palace bar. Had she never known Eric, she would never have needed to go to the charity commission. This series of events is closely associated with Priestley’s fascination with time and how things in time cause or are caused by others.

**Time**

Time, which deeply fascinated Priestley, is a central theme in many of his works. He famously was interested in Dunne’s theory of time, which argued that the past was still present, and that time was not linear as many traditional accounts suggest. [*An Inspector Calls*](http://www.gradesaver.com/an-inspector-calls) explicitly deals with the nature of time in its final twist: has the play, we might wonder, simply gone back in time? Is it all about to happen again? How does the Inspector know of the “fire and blood and anguish,” usually interpreted as a foreshadowing of the First and Second World Wars?

**The Supernatural**

The Inspector’s name, though explicitly spelled “Goole” in the play, is often interpreted through an alternative spelling: “ghoul.” The Inspector, it seems, is not a “real” Brumley police inspector, and Priestley provides no answer as to whether we should believe his claim that he has nothing to do with Eva Smith. What are we to make of the police inspector who rings to announce his arrival at the end of the play? Is the original Inspector, perhaps, a ghost? What forces are at work in the play to make the Birlings really accept their responsibility and guilt?

**However, the most important thing about the inspector is what he stands for – truth, justice, honesty, equality and socialism. Whether he’s “real” or not doesn’t make any difference – the writer is trying to show that what the members of the Birling family did was wrong in any case.**

**Social Duty**

“We do not live alone,” the Inspector says in his final speech, “we are members of one body.” This perhaps is the most important and central theme of the play: that we have a duty to other people, regardless of social status, wealth, class, or anything else. There is, Priestley observes, such a thing as society, and he argues that it is important that people be aware of the effects of their actions on others. The Birlings, of course, initially do not think at all about how they might have affected Eva Smith, but they are forced to confront their likely responsibility over the course of the play.