**Essay Question: Each Birling and Gerald can be said to have abused their power. Who is most guilty and why?**

The Birlings and Gerald all possess significant amounts of power, and each have used this in a way that has been damaging to others, especially to Eva Smith. The guilt, however, cannot be measured easily, as it is subjective rather than objective. To assume who is the most guilty, the severity of the actions and the impact they had and the guilt and remorse felt by the individual must be assessed.

Mr. Birling used his power to sack Eva Smith from his factory after she asked for higher wages. He saw her as a threat to his quest for the single most important thing in his life - money. He believed Eva was a good worker yet sacked her regardless - he saw her not as a person, but as an expendable worker, a machine, and once she decided to voice her opinion she was quickly dismissed. He did not want her stepping out of line. He wanted “lower costs and higher prices”, irrespective of the consequences such action would have on the lives of his workers. Mr. Birling would not have given Eva a second thought after firing her, yet as an audience we get to learn what happened to Eva after losing her job at the factory. Mr. Birling does,, in turn, get to learn of her life afterwards through the Inspector, but by then, of course it is far too late. However, Mr. Birling learns none of the lessons the playwright is attempting to teach us. He fails to see how his capitalist attitudes are damaging both his relationship with his family and the lives of his workers. He does not change his views on the working class or women, and remains chauvinistic and patronising towards women. Perhaps worst of all, he feels not the slightest bit of remorse and denies any responsibility, and his guilt lies in his inability or rather his refusal to change.

Sheila was the next character to affect Eva’s life. After being forced to leave her job at the factory, Eva took a job at the clothing store Milwards, but was once again fired after doing nothing wrong. Sheila’s recklessness and impulsiveness fuelled by nothing more than petty jealousy led to Eva’s dismissal from the store. At this point in the play, Sheila is still a child, and a spoilt brat of one at that. However, as the play progresses, Sheila develops a more mature attitude towards life after seeing the consequences of her actions; her empathy for Eva brings on much remorse, and her sudden change from an immature child to a mature, respectful adult. We could say that the writer’s decision to have Sheila grow and mature throughout the play reflects the change and development of attitudes of many people at the time who were becoming more and more understanding of socialism. This therefore means Mr. Birling’s attempts to suppress Sheila’s newfound awareness of the world is a metaphor for those who were opposed to change at the time and wished to conserve the capitalist mentality. The author is effectively telling us that it is not too late to change our viewpoints - the past cannot be rewritten, but he is warning us that without change, humanity will suffer in “fire and blood and anguish”. There is a sad, almost twisted irony is that warning however; the play was set before the war, yet we know that indeed, humanity did not change, did not learn its lesson, and so the price was paid.

Gerald’s involvement in Eva’s life came after her dismissal from Milward’s. He knew her as Daisy Renton, a girl he picked up in the Palace Bar. He had an affair with her, but also provided her with money and a place to stay; it is unclear entirely what his intentions were, as he used her for his physical needs yet also cared for her on some level. However, he then simply broke off contact with her; he had been toying with her emotions and leading her on. However well he believed Eva took the news, she would have still been heartbroken. Gerald’s actions were potentially the most devastating to Eva at this point. He built her confidence up then dropped her, making her feel worthless. This would have led her to lower her expectations of herself and her life, and could have triggered the reckless and self-destructive behaviour that led to her demise. Gerald did feel remorseful for his actions, though, yet regardless of this at the end of the play he is looking for ways in which to undermine the Inspector’s credibility, and seems to have remained largely unchanged. He, like Mr. Birling, did not grow or become better in any way during the play. The playwright’s lessons of overcoming selfishness, lust and want are lost on Gerald, yet we as an audience can learn from his mistakes.

Eric made Eva pregnant when he was drunk; his way of escaping problems led to him causing one. He offered her money he stole from his father, yet she refused it - this shows Eva still held onto her dignity and morals, and Eric was not cruel or selfish, he wanted to help and support her, albeit in a childish way. However, after he is confronted about what happened with Eva, he matures greatly, and decides to face his problems. His development is similar to Sheila’s in that they both feel great remorse for their actions, see the error of their ways and although they realise they cannot rectify their actions, they change their views on life and their attitudes for the better. The playwright’s lesson for Eric was not to run away from problems, and it is something everyone should learn. Perhaps the world would be a better place if so many did not try to escape their troubles and instead tried to resolve them.

When Eva came to Mrs. Birling’s charity for help in her time of need, Mrs. Birling, with utmost pretentiousness, turned her away, and saw to it that Eva would receive no help at all. The actions of Mrs. Birling were arguably the most devastating, and were potentially the ones that sent Eva into the downwards spiral that culminated in her suicide. Personally, I find Mrs. Birling to be the most guilty out of all of the characters. Not only did she act in a very prejudicial manner towards Eva simply because she deemed her to be of a lower and less worthy class, but when Eva sought the help of her charity, Mrs. Birling went out of her way to prevent Eva from having any form of support, despite the fact that it would have much easier for Mrs. Birling to allow Eva to be helped. This, her hatred towards those less privileged and fortunate than her, is what makes Mrs. Birling the most guilty and therefore the most responsible for Eva’s suicide.