

Analysis of an inspector calls act one

The appearance and quality of the Birlings' dining-room suggests that they are a family of wealth and class. The presence of a maid and of good quality port reinforces the image of the Birlings as a well-off family. They are all dressed for a special occasion. Mr. and Mrs. Birling are described in terms of their status markers—their speech, their social positions—which indicates, from the start, the play's concern with class and status. Also, note the different ages of the characters: the established older parents comfortable and proud of their position; the successful thirty-year old; the two twenty-somethings who seem less set in their places, making one more excited by life and the other uncomfortable. The fact that Mr. Birling knows the port to be the same port that Mr. Croft purchases suggests that the Birlings and the Crofts belong to a similar social and economic circle, but also that Mr. Birling may aspire to be like Mr. Croft. In chastising her husband for a rather harmless remark, Mrs. Birling betrays her concern for the family's conduct and social manners; she clearly wants to make a good impression on Gerald Croft.

Sheila is resistant to the gender roles typical of the period—the man busy with work, and the woman left alone in the house—and is uncomfortable with her mother's suggestion that marriage will create this role division. Sheila's resistance suggests that she is more socially progressive than her mother, not surprising given her younger age. Eric is acting strangely, for reasons that we do not yet know but will become clearer as the play progresses. The dynamic of the nuclear family is standard: Eric and Sheila tease each other in typical sibling manner, and their mother attempts to put an end to their bickering. It becomes clear that Mr. Birling is excited about his daughter's marriage not only for her own happiness but also for his own more self-interested business and social prospects. He is always looking to move further up in the world, and an "alliance" with the even more well-off Crofts will help him do that. Again, Mrs. Birling monitors her husband's contributions to the conversation, to keep him in line with the tone of the evening. Sheila's pleasure with the engagement ring because it's the one Gerald wants her to have suggests she's not as progressive as she thinks. She likes it because he likes it.

Mr. Birling briefly indicates the political atmosphere of the time—the frightening prospect of war, and heightened political conflict between those who care most for the prosperity of their own businesses and those who care more for the rights and fair wages of the businesses' laborers. Birling believes in the current status quo, which places him on top, and dismisses any change to that order as ridiculous. Mr. Birling demonstrates his preoccupation with his social status and class position, and assumes that others—such as the Crofts—are likewise preoccupied. He considers his prospective knighthood to be very important for his advancement, both in his eyes and in the eyes of the Crofts. Birling reinforces a traditional gender stereotype that women care more about their appearance and clothing than men. Birling speaks out for the "Capital" side of the conflict that he laid out earlier, by arguing for the priority of business and self-interest over communal interest.

Eric's uneasiness at Gerald and Arthur's suggestion that he has gotten into trouble foretells guilt that will be confirmed later in the play. Birling demonstrates his familiarity with the local police officers as a sign of power. This is the sort of "soft" power—of connection and influence—that the rich display almost without knowing it. Birling's unfamiliarity with Inspector Goole will also prove significant as the play progresses. The Inspector's introduction of the girl's suicide establishes the main premise of the play and sends a sudden shock through the comfortable world of the Birlings. Birling's claim not to know the girl even though she worked for him is an attempt to insulate himself from her suicide, to assert to no connection to her or her death, almost to deny that he knew her as a human being. She was just a name on his payroll, he seems to be saying.

The Inspector's strict procedural protocol of only showing the picture to one person at a time will become very significant later in the play. Birling is forced to admit that he does know and remember