📖 **The Plot**

As the play progresses, the audience learn that **each character is partly responsible** for the death of Eva Smith. Their individual actions have profound consequences. The Inspector’s metaphor of‘**a chain of events**’ is important to fully understand this premise: Birling’s treatment of Eva Smith resulted in her encountering Sheila, which resulted in her then meeting Gerald and Eric, and so on. The plot clearly shows that the lives of members in a community are **interconnected**, just like links in a chain.

🏭 **Birling**

Birling is described as a ‘**prosperous manufacturer**’ in the opening stage directions and it becomes clear that prides himself on being a ‘**hard-headed**’ businessman. He is greedy and selfish, and sees nothing wrong in exploiting his workers for his own financial gain. In this sense, **he represents the very worst aspects of capitalism**. As well as being a large employer in Brumley (i.e. Bradford), he is also a ‘**public man**’ in the sense that he is a former mayor and serving magistrate. However, as the Inspector highlights, he ignores his ‘public responsibilities’.

🙅‍♀️ **Mrs Birling**

Mrs Birling is described as ‘**a rather cold woman**’ in the opening stage directions and this is shown to be the case very early on when she reproaches Birling for wanting to compliment the cook. As the play progresses, this characteristic is also evident when she refuses to help Eva Smith. Mrs Birling is a character who **represents the hypocrisy and indifference** of the upper-classes. Unlike her children, she stubbornly refuses to accept responsibility and change for the better. She is very much part of the ‘older’ generation and Priestley is fiercely critical of her.

💍 **Sheila**

Sheila is described as being ‘**very pleased with life**’ in the opening stage directions. This is largely because she’s excited about her engagement to Gerald and everything that she hopes will follow. However, her mood changes as soon as the Inspector arrives. Unlike her parents, Sheila develops a **strong sense of social awareness and responsibility**, and she becomes increasingly outspoken. In this sense, she represents the significant **potential for change** possessed by the ‘younger’ generation.

🥂 **Eric**

Eric is described as ‘**half shy**’ in the opening stage directions. Despite being in his early twenties, he clearly lacks the confidence possessed by Gerald. However, there are occasions in the play when he speaks with genuine insight. An example of this is when he challenges Birling about his hypocrisy in choosing to punish Eva Smith for campaigning for higher wages. There is **a duality to Eric’s character**: he is undoubtedly **reckless** and his behaviour is inexcusable, but his reactions throughout the investigation offer **hope** for a more socially responsible future.

🎩 **Gerald**

Gerald is described as a handsome ‘**man about town**’ in the opening stage directions, which is important because it helps convey his natural charm and sociability. However, there is also a different side to Gerald because he has the capacity to be **deceitful and manipulative**. Although there are moments in the play where Gerald appears to express remorse for his actions, he ultimately chooses to align himself with the ‘**older**’ Birlings. In doing so, he priorities his wealth and reputation over social change.

👩 **Eva Smith**

Eva Smith never appears on stage, yet her presence in the play is vital because she represents the struggles of ‘**millions**’ of other vulnerable working-class women. Her death provides clear warnings about the consequences of **selfishness** and the **failure to take responsibility** for the welfare of others. From very early on, the Inspector makes it clear that her circumstances were wretched and that she felt completely bereft of any sort of meaningful care. Ultimately, Eva Smith is a character who is essential to Priestley’s criticism of exploitative modes of capitalism.

🔍 **Inspector Goole**

Inspector Goole creates an immediate sense of ‘**massiveness, solidity and purposefulness**’ when he arrives on stage. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the stage lighting changes accordingly and becomes ‘brighter and harder’. The Inspector is meant to look and behave very differently from the other characters and, crucially, he exposes each of their roles in the death of Eva Smith. Whilst the identity of the Inspector remains ambiguous, it is clear that he serves as a ‘**mouthpiece**’ for the socialist ideals of Priestley himself.