
An analysis of the theme of generational gap in An inspector's calls

There are drastic differences that are seen in people who are born in different generations. One may argue that the younger generations are more impressionable and naive while the older generations are very hardheaded and assertive. By creating characters like Sheila and Eric with a large age gap between Mr. and Mrs. Birling in the play An Inspector Calls, tension is created through their differences clashing. J.B. Priestley's use of contrasting characterization within the Birling family in the play An Inspector Calls creates tension and communicates his theme that one must take into consideration the consequences of their actions and take responsibility for them.

The Birling's children, Eric and Sheila, are presumed to be very naive and still listening and agreeing with their parent's words due to their ages. Yet, through the play both Eric and Sheila prove to be mentally mature and responsible while directly reflecting the inspector's message. Eric Birling was caught up in the complicated situation relating to the death of Eva Smith through his role in impregnating her. Although he is ashamed, he steps up to the plate and confesses his actions and even admits to the fact that "I wasn't in love with her or anything", yet he understands that his actions did produce consequences and he takes responsibility for them. He insists on giving her enough money to keep her going, even though it included stealing money from his father (Priestley 50). This action was done unjustly, yet it shows how determined Eric was in order to fix his mistake and take responsibility for his actions- exactly what the Inspector teaches. Sheila Birling, the sister of Eric, also starts out by admitting to her role in the death of Eva. She expresses her sorrow and regret for her actions stating how "It was my own fault... and if I could help her now, I would" right away (24-25). Even though she did not take action like Eric did, she still takes responsibility for her actions and shows that she really does care about the consequences she was unable to attend to. As the play continues and everyone finds out that Inspector Goole was a fake, the parents of Sheila and Eric both start to downplay the events of that evening. Suddenly the tension starts to rise as soon as the children speak directly against their parents stating "if you must know it's you two who are being childish" (55). Sheila is so disgusted by the actions of her parents, that her character takes an unpredictable turn and she evolves into a brave young woman annoyed enough to scold her own parents. Even Eric states directly to his parents that "well, I don't blame you. But don't forget I'm ashamed of you as well. Yes- both of you" (54). The characters Sheila and Eric create tension in the play through their differences regarding their view on taking responsibility that contrasts greatly with their parents. The fact that the younger generation is standing up to the older generation and doing unconventional actions like scolding them, the main theme of the

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novel is clearly represented.

The older generation in the Berling family consists of strong characters: unlikely to sway in their ideas easily, hard headed, and arrogant. Arthur too is confronted about his dealings with Eva Smith, but immediately states that “the girl has been causing trouble in the works. I was quite justified (19). Here, he is seemingly ok knowing that she was forced to kill herself all because of something that started out with him originally and a sign of regret is not to be found. The younger generation, prominently Sheila is verbally pointing out her contrasting viewpoint directly saying (to Mr. Berling) “I think it was a mean thing to do” (21). Tension is created as a result of her comment, but in a way she forces her father to re-examine at his actions by him hearing an opposite viewpoint and internally contemplate her and the Inspector’s message. Another situation that increases the tension overall is when Sheila hears her father describe Eva as cheap labor, and automatically she jumps in stating “but these girls aren’t cheap labour – they’re people” clearly showcasing the differences in the mindset of the two generations (19). Lastly, Mrs. Birling gets confronted with her mistake and does admit to her actions. Her arrogance shows through when she plainly lays out her thoughts to the inspector that “if you think you can bring any pressure to bear upon me, Inspector, you’re quite mistaken. Unlike the other three, I did nothing I’m ashamed of or that won’t bear investigation... You have no power to change my mind” and like Mr. Birling does not have a hint of regret in her (44). Sybil Birling is blinded to the problems within her household and herself, and therefore tension is created when she directly contradicts the viewpoints of her children. The theme of the play is brought out because of this, when the children start to argue their point about accepting responsibility for their actions’ consequences.

Through tension between the characters, the main theme that we don’t live alone, are members of one body, and are responsible for each other is revealed. Sadly for this to be revealed, tension is built greatly dividing the Birling family- the younger vs the older generation. The children desperately try to get their parents to accept what they believe is the inspector’s lesson and purpose for visiting, yet Arthur and Sybil are set on the idea that they are just “the famous younger generation who know it all. And they can’t even take a joke” (72). Although it may be true that the inspector is not real and the older generation will never learn, the main theme is being communicated successfully to the audience. By looking at Mr. and Mrs. Berling and the way they instigate an attack on themselves by their children, the audience feels disgusted by them and the theme reaches the audience.

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