The main idea

Birling’s confidence protects profit and reputation. His response after Goole leaves tests whether discovering facts has produced ethical learning.

Character development

Act 1: confidence undermined: The dinner speech displays business pride and social ambition. Dramatic irony about the Titanic and war encourages the audience to question him before the investigation begins.

Act 2: reputation defended: He objects to the questioning and worries about public consequences. His impulse to protect family respectability competes with the need to understand the harm each person caused.

Act 3: relief without reform: The theft angers him; the possible hoax brings relief. He mistakes an apparent escape from publicity for an answer to the moral problem. The final call interrupts that confidence.

“unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable”

Arthur Birling, Act 1 dinner speech about the Titanic

Repetition intensifies a certainty that the audience knows is mistaken.

“public scandal”

Arthur Birling, Act 3 after the Inspector leaves

The later concern with publicity exposes the continuing priority of reputation.

“hard-headed”

Birling, Act 1, dinner speech

His self-description makes inflexibility sound like practical expertise. Priestley lets confident assertions expose the limits of his judgement.

“lower costs”

Birling, Act 1, celebrating the engagement

Commercial vocabulary intrudes into a family celebration. The marriage also promises a business alliance; profit shapes his idea of a successful future.

Connections

Capitalism: workers appear as business costs. Responsibility: he resists Goole’s collective model. Sheila and Eric: their continuing shame exposes the limits of his learning. Gerald: the engagement joins class and commercial interests.

Develop the interpretation

He is concerned about real consequences, but concern for reputation is different from accepting harm done to Eva. Explain that distinction through his late response.

Recall question

How does the possible hoax reveal what Birling has actually learned?