The Generation Gap

A key aspect of An Inspector Calls is age. This theme is where Priestley can demonstrate his belief in the upcoming generations and their ability to change the future. Priestley displays his opinions on the older generation through Mr Birling – a man who refuses to take responsibility for his actions – and Mrs Birling – a mother oblivious to the truth about her life and the lives of her children. This juxtaposes how he presents the younger generation – impressionable and willing to accept their mistakes.

The Older Generation

- Old-fashioned – holding traditional views.
- Think that they know best.
- Believe that children should be seen and not heard.
- Try to control the younger generation.
- Don’t change as a result of the Inspector’s visit.
- They represent the ruling class.
- Stubborn and have a fixed mind-set

The Younger Generation

- Ambitious, determined, courageous and motivated.
- Willing to challenge authority.
- Use colloquial language.
- Refuse to be controlled by their parents at the end of the play.
- Accept responsibility for their actions.

“The famous generation who know it all.”

1. Who said this?
2. What tone of voice is used?
3. What effect does this have?
4. What does Priestley want the audience to understand from this?
With age and generation separating the Birling family (and Gerald lying somewhere in the middle until the end of the play where he is sides with the Birling parents. Complete the following table to understand and demonstrate the generational difference as shown by Priestley.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Younger Generation</th>
<th>Technique / Key Word</th>
<th>Older Generation</th>
<th>Technique / Key Word</th>
<th>Priestley’s Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheila: <em>But these girls are not cheap labour, they’re people!</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mr Birling: <em>Nonsense! You’ll have a good laugh over it yet.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheila: <em>(tensely)</em> I want to get out of this. It frightens me the way you talk.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mr Birling: <em>(triumphantly)</em> There you are! The whole story’s just a lot of moonshine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheila: <em>(passionately)</em> You’re pretending everything’s just as it was before.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mr Birling: All mixed up together like bees in a hive.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>