

The Impact of Culture on Adolescents: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The study of adolescence has long been shaped by the attempts to understand the development of adolescents through biological, psychological, and socio-cultural factors. Early theoretical perspectives influenced by G. Stanley Hall conceptualized adolescence as a universal period of 'storm and stress,' characterized by emotional turbulence and behavioural instability. The recent studies examined adolescent development across the cultural contexts. However, these studies predominantly focus on isolated perspectives such as relational aggression, emotional intelligence, and parental influence. Cross-cultural comparisons undertaken by the existing research often lack depth in explaining the underlying cultural factors that shape adolescent behaviour and identity. Although recent studies acknowledge the influence of social change and globalization, it remains inadequate. This study therefore, drawing on cultural materialism and adolescent psychology, explores how class ideology, generational conflict, and moral frameworks, shape the behavioural and ethical development of Sheila Birling and Eric Birling. Inspector Goole, in the play, functions as a disruptive moral agent, challenging entrenched ideologies and facilitating ethical awakening. By contrasting the adaptability of the younger generation with the rigidity of the older characters, the paper argues that adolescence represents a crucial site for ideologies resistance and moral reorientation. The paper examines the impact of culture on the development of adolescent attitude. This study undertakes a qualitative textual analysis to examine how the cultural forces shape the attitude of adolescents in the play *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley. It reveals that the adolescent attitudes are influenced by the cultural and social structures, where moral consciousness influences the young individuals' responsibility, attitude, and social relations. These findings underscore the significant role of cultural frameworks in shaping adolescent attitudes, underlining how social class, moral expectations, and collective values impact individual development.

Keywords: Adolescent Character; Phase of Transition; Emotional Intelligence; Moral Values; Cultural Influences.

INTRODUCTION

The phase of adolescence in the development of human life is characterized by significant psychological, emotional, and social transformations. Early theoretical perspectives often portrayed adolescence as a critical phase, which is the decisive period of instability and conflict. However, contemporary research emphasizes the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping adolescent identity. Among these factors, culture plays a vital role in influencing attitudes, behaviours, and identity formation. Existing studies on adolescence tend to focus on isolated variables such as emotional intelligence and parental influence. Such approaches, while valuable, often fail to capture the complex and interconnected nature of cultural forces that shape adolescent attitudes. Furthermore, there is limited critical engagement with how these cultural influences are represented and constructed within the literary texts. This gap is particularly evident in studies that overlook the role of social class and moral values as cultural determinants of adolescent behaviour. It underlines the need for more integrated and critical analysis that examines how multiple cultural forces interact to influence adolescent attitudes. The present study, in view of the gap, aims to explore how the cultural forces shape the adolescent attitudes through a qualitative textual analysis of a literary text, *An Inspector Calls*, by J. B. Priestley. This study, focusing on the socio-cultural context of the play, seeks to provide deeper understanding of how class structures and moral expectations influence adolescent attitudes and behaviour. This study contributes to

existing scholarship by offering a critical perspective on the cultural construction of adolescence, thereby extending current discussions beyond fragmented and variable-specific approaches.

Objectives:

Evaluate existing theoretical perspectives on adolescence across cultural contexts.

Explore the impact of contemporary cultural transformations such as globalisation and social change on the formation of adolescence.

Examine the role of culture in shaping adolescent identity, behaviour, and development.

Analyse the interaction between the cultural factors such as family, community and social structures in the process of influencing adolescence.

Provide a more integrated framework for understanding adolescence.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative textual approach to analyse how cultural forces shape adolescent attitudes. This method of study is appropriate for literary research as it enables an in-depth exploration of the socio-cultural representations embedded within the literary text. It emphasises interpretation rather than quantification, allowing for a nuanced understanding to how cultural values and social structures influence the attitudes of the characters. This research focuses on close reading and critical examination of the selected literary text, i.e., *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley. It is designed to explore the relationship between cultural context and adolescent behaviour by analysing how the cultural elements such as morality and values are represented and internalised by the characters. The study is non-empirical in nature and relies on textual evidence and theoretical interpretation. The primary data for this study is *An Inspector Calls*, a play by J. B. Priestley. It serves as the sole source of analysis, the characters interactions, and specified scenes of which involve adolescent character are selected as units of analysis. The textual elements are examining to understand how cultural forces operate within the narrative to shape attitudes and behaviours. The study employs a thematic analytical framework rooted in the cultural interpretation. Key cultural facets such as moral responsibility and societal influence are used as analytical categories. These themes lead to the interpretation of how adolescent attitudes are constructed within the socio-cultural context of the play. The framework also draws upon broader cultural and developmental perspectives to understand how identity and behaviour are shaped through interaction with social norms and values. This study is limited to a single literary text, *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley, and focus particularly on the representation of adolescent attitudes within its socio-cultural context. The findings are interpretative and context-based, as it is a qualitative textual analysis. Still, the study provides valuable insights into the cultural construction of adolescence within the literary discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of adolescence has long been shaped by attempts to understand the complex interplay between psychological, and socio-cultural factors. Early theoretical perspectives, most notably those influenced by G. Stanley Hall, conceptualised adolescence as a universal period of “storm and stress,” characterised by emotional turbulence and behavioural instability (Hall, 1904, as cited in Maspu et al., 2023). While such frameworks have historically dominated the discourse, contemporary research increasingly challenges the universality of this perspective by emphasising the role of cultural context in shaping adolescent experiences (Arnett, 1999; Jensen, 2015).

A significant part of literature has focused on specific behavioural and psychological variables within cross-cultural settings. For instance, studies on relational aggression have examined how peer interactions and social dynamics vary across cultures, often highlighting gender-based differences (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Similarly, research on emotional intelligence has explored how demographic variables such as age, gender, and socio-cultural environment influence adolescents’ emotional competencies (Salovey & Mayer, 1990;

Zeidner et al., 2009). While these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to adopt a fragmented approach by isolating individual variables rather than situating adolescent behaviour within a broader cultural framework. In addition to behavioural studies, several researchers have examined the role of family and community in shaping adolescent development. Qualitative investigations into career choice processes among rural youth reveal that cultural and social contexts, particularly familial expectations and community norms, play a crucial role in influencing adolescents' aspirations and decision-making (Gottfredson, 2002). Likewise, cross-cultural studies on parenting styles have demonstrated that parental support, behavioural control, and psychological control significantly affect adolescents' self-esteem and academic achievement (Barber, 1996). However, these studies often treat cultural factors as background variables rather than actively interrogating how cultural systems operate as dynamic forces in shaping adolescent identity.

Cross-cultural perspectives on adolescence have also highlighted the influence of broader socio-cultural processes, including globalization and rapid social change. Contemporary research acknowledges that adolescents today navigate increasingly complex cultural environments characterised by the coexistence of traditional values and modern influences. Despite this recognition, there remains a tendency to describe these transformations rather than critically analyse their implications. The processes through which adolescents negotiate cultural tensions and construct hybrid identities remain insufficiently explored (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Moreover, studies examining cultural stereotypes of adolescents have revealed how societal perceptions of adolescence vary across cultural contexts and, in turn, influence developmental outcomes (Bucholtz, 2002). Negative stereotypes, such as viewing adolescents as inherently rebellious or emotionally unstable, continue to persist in many societies, particularly within Western contexts. While such studies contribute to understanding the cultural construction of adolescence, they often stop short of critically examining the power structures and social mechanisms that sustain these stereotypes. Another important dimension of cultural influence is religion and its role in shaping adolescents' family orientation and value systems. Multilevel analyses across different cultural groups indicate that both cultural and individual religious factors significantly influence adolescents' attitudes towards family and social relationships (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Similarly, studies on ecological resocialization in diverse cultural contexts highlight the ways in which adolescents adapt to changing environments. However, these studies are often limited in scope and do not fully capture the interconnected nature of cultural influences.

The existing literature demonstrates that culture plays a significant role in shaping various aspects of adolescent development. However, the research remains largely descriptive and segmented, with limited efforts to integrate findings across different domains. There is a clear need for a more comprehensive and critical approach that moves beyond variable-specific analysis to examine how multiple cultural forces interact to shape adolescent experiences. Such an approach would not only deepen our understanding of adolescence but also challenge dominant theoretical assumptions and provide a more nuanced and context-sensitive perspective.

Sheila Birling, at the very outset, appears as a typical product of upper-class Edwardian culture, displaying a degree of naivety shaped by privilege. Her early comment, "But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people," (Priestley, 25), signals the beginning of her moral awakening. Raised within a capitalist framework articulated by her father, Arthur Birling—"A man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own" (Priestley, 16),—Sheila initially internalises class hierarchies that reduce working-class individuals to economic units. However, her growing awareness reflects a shift from passive cultural acceptance to active ethical questioning. This transition underscores the idea that adolescents, though shaped by culture, are not irrevocably bound by it. Sheila's transformation becomes more pronounced as she accepts responsibility for her actions: "I know I'm to blame – and I'm desperately sorry." (Priestley, 33). This willingness to acknowledge guilt contrasts sharply with the defensive attitudes of her parents, revealing a generational divide in moral reasoning. Her critique, "You don't seem to have learnt anything," (Priestley, 58), directed at her elders, highlights the rigidity of established cultural norms and the openness of youth to change. Furthermore, Sheila rejects the class-based segregation—a key cultural value of her upbringing. In this sense, Priestley portrays adolescence as a period in which individuals can transcend inherited prejudices through empathy and introspection. Similarly, the character of Eric Birling illustrates the damaging effects of cultural expectations on adolescent behaviour. His admission, "You're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in

trouble,” (Priestley, 55), reveals the emotional distance fostered by patriarchal authority. Within a culture that prioritises reputation and social status over emotional openness, Eric is left without guidance, leading to destructive actions. His confession, “I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty,” (Priestley, 53), reflects the consequences of suppressed vulnerability and unchecked privilege. These moments demonstrate how cultural norms surrounding masculinity and class can negatively influence adolescent decision-making.

However, like Sheila, Eric undergoes a process of moral realisation. His statement, “The fact remains that I did what I did,” (Priestley, 63), signifies a departure from denial towards accountability. Moreover, his critique of economic inequality—“Why shouldn’t they try for higher wages?” (Priestley, 21), —indicates an emerging awareness of social injustice. Eric’s acknowledgement, “We did her in all right,” (Priestley, 66), extends responsibility beyond the individual to the collective, challenging the individualistic ethos promoted by his father. Through Eric, Priestley illustrates that adolescents can evolve from being passive recipients of cultural values to active critics of those values.

The influence of parental culture is central to understanding this transformation. Characters like Sybil Birling reinforce rigid class distinctions. Her assertion, “As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!” (Priestley, 49), reflects a deeply ingrained prejudice that dehumanises the working class. For adolescents like Sheila and Eric, this cultural environment initially shapes their worldview, normalising inequality and discouraging empathy. Yet, the play demonstrates that exposure to alternative perspectives can disrupt these internalised beliefs.

This disruption is primarily facilitated by Inspector Goole, who functions as a moral catalyst. His declaration, “We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other,” (Priestley, 57), introduces a collectivist ethic that directly opposes the individualism of Mr Birling. The Inspector’s warning emphasises the urgency of adopting a more compassionate social framework. For Sheila and Eric, this intervention serves as a turning point, enabling them to reassess their actions and the cultural values that informed them.

Importantly, the adolescents’ responses to the Inspector highlight their capacity for change. Sheila’s perceptive observation demonstrates her growing critical awareness, while her warning, reflects an understanding of moral accountability beyond mere appearances. In contrast, the older generation remains largely unchanged, clinging to their established beliefs even after the Inspector’s departure. This generational contrast reinforces Priestley’s message that cultural transformation is more likely to occur among the young, who are less entrenched in societal norms.

Furthermore, the play suggests that adolescence is not merely a stage of vulnerability but also one of potential resistance. While cultural forces such as class privilege and patriarchal authority initially constrain Sheila and Eric, their eventual rejection of these influences illustrates the possibility of ethical growth. Sheila’s ironic remark, “I suppose we’re all nice people now,” (Priestley, 62), exposes the superficiality of social respectability, challenging the very foundation of her upbringing. Similarly, Eric’s confrontation—“You killed her – and the child she’d have had too” (Priestley, 56), —forces a recognition of the real human consequences behind abstract social attitudes.

An Inspector Calls, in conclusion, presents a nuanced depiction of the impact of culture on adolescents, emphasising both its formative power and its limitations. Through the characters of Sheila and Eric, Priestley demonstrates that while young individuals are shaped by their social environment, they also possess the capacity for critical reflection and moral transformation. The play ultimately advocates for a re-evaluation of cultural values, suggesting that the younger generation holds the potential to create a more just and empathetic society. By positioning adolescence as a site of both cultural influence and resistance, Priestley underscores the importance of ethical education in challenging entrenched social norms.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how cultural forces shape adolescent attitudes through a qualitative textual analysis of *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley. The analysis reveals that adolescent attitudes are not formed in isolation but are deeply embedded within socio-cultural structures, particularly those related to moral

responsibility, and values. The findings highlight that culture operates as a powerful determinant in shaping identity, responsibility, and social relations among the adolescents.

The study has demonstrated that the play *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley demonstrated how culture operates as a formative yet contestable force in adolescent development. Through the trajectories of Sheila Birling and Eric Birling, J. B. Priestley constructs adolescence as a dynamic site where dominant ideologies are not merely absorbed but actively interrogated and, in some cases, transformed. The play exposes the ideological apparatus of Edwardian capitalism, embodied in the assertions of Arthur Birling and Sybil Birling, as mechanisms that reproduce class inequality and moral detachment. These structures shape the initial consciousness of the younger generation, normalising exploitation and reinforcing hierarchical distinctions. However, the Inspector's intervention disrupts this ideological continuity, creating a space for critical reflection. Sheila's progression from complicity to ethical awareness and Eric's movement from repression to accountability reflect key processes of identity formation, moral reasoning, and emotional maturation. Their capacity to acknowledge guilt—contrasted with the defensive rigidity of the older generation—suggests that adolescence is marked by a heightened receptivity to alternative value systems. Priestley thus positions youth not as passive recipients of culture but as agents capable of ethical self-revision. The Birlings' emphasis on respectability, class boundaries, and individualism creates an environment in which empathy is initially suppressed. Yet, the same environment becomes the ground against which these values are later contested. The Inspector's collectivist ethic—centred on shared responsibility—functions as a counter-cultural discourse that catalyses this shift, enabling the younger characters to re-evaluate the moral assumptions embedded in their upbringing. While the older characters remain entrenched in their beliefs, prioritising reputation over responsibility, Sheila and Eric embody the possibility of ideological transformation. Their refusal to dismiss the Inspector's message, even after its authority is questioned, indicates a deeper internalisation of ethical principles that transcend social convention. This divergence suggests that meaningful cultural reform is more likely to emerge from those who are less invested in maintaining existing power structures.

Thus, the play, *An Inspector Calls* not only illustrates the profound impact of culture on adolescent identity but also affirms the capacity of young individuals to challenge and redefine that culture. By situating adolescence at the intersection of social conditioning and moral agency, Priestley advances a vision of ethical progress grounded in self-awareness and collective responsibility. The play ultimately argues that while culture shapes the individual, it is through the critical engagement of the younger generation that culture itself can be transformed, pointing towards the possibility of a more equitable and humane social order.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a more integrated and critical perspective on the role of culture in adolescent development, moving beyond fragmented approaches that focus on isolated variables. It also underscores the importance of literary texts as valuable sites for understanding socio-cultural dynamics and their influence on human behaviour. However, the study is limited by its reliance on a single literary work and its interpretative methodological approach. Future research may extend this analysis by incorporating multiple texts, comparative cultural frameworks, or interdisciplinary perspectives to provide a broader understanding of the cultural construction of adolescence. Thereby, this study, reaffirms the significance of culture as a central force in shaping adolescent attitudes.

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