

AQA GCSE in English Literature – ‘An Inspector Calls’ – J. B. Priestley



Context:

- The play was written in 1945 but set in 1912, this leads to lots of dramatic irony.
- The play is set before WW1 which shows that Birling's optimistic claims about war being unlikely are completely wrong. It was written at a time when many people would be recovering from the traumatic impact of WW2.
- Set at a time of great divisions between the upper and lower classes.
- Women were seen as subservient and inferior to men – rich women had to marry well and poor women were seen as cheap labour. After WW2, women had a much more valued place in society.
- In 1945 there was a great desire for change in society and J. B. Priestley wanted to make the most of this.

Setting:

- The play is set in the fictional town of ‘Brumley’, an industrial town in the north of England.
- All of the action takes place in the dining room of the Birling household. They are a well off family and live in a comfortable house suited to their wealth and status.
- The lighting should be ‘pink and intimate’ at the start of the play but when the Inspector arrives it should become ‘brighter and harder’ which reflects the changing mood in the play.

Plot Summary – Act One	Plot Summary – Act Two	Plot Summary – Act Three
<p>The Birling family are celebrating Sheila and Gerald's engagement. Mr Arthur Birling, Sheila's father, is particularly pleased since the marriage means closer links with Crofts Limited. When the women leave the room, Mr Birling lectures his son, Eric and Gerald about the importance of every man looking out for himself if he wants to get on in life. The doorbell rings unexpectedly during Mr Birling's speech to Eric and Gerald and Inspector Goole arrives. Inspector Goole says that he is investigating the death of a young woman who committed suicide, Eva Smith. Mr Birling is shown a photograph of Eva, after initially denying recognising the woman in the photo, he remembers firing her in 1910 for organising a strike over workers pay. Birling feels justified for his actions and does not believe he committed any wrongdoing. The investigation moves to Sheila. Sheila recalls also having Eva sacked about her manner when served by her in an upmarket department store. Sheila regrets her actions and feels hugely guilty and responsible for Eva's death.</p> <p>The Inspector reveals that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald acts guilty and Sheila notices his worry, she confronts Gerald when the Inspector leaves the room. Gerald reveals to Sheila he had an affair with Daisy Renton.</p>	<p>Gerald explains to The Inspector that he had an affair with Eva, but hasn't seen her since he ended their relationship back in Autumn 1911.</p> <p>Sheila gives her engagement ring back to Gerald.</p> <p>The Inspector turns his attention to Mrs Sybil Birling, she confesses that she also had contact with Eva, but Eva gave herself a different name to Mrs Birling.</p> <p>Eva approached a charity chaired by Mrs Birling to ask for help. Eva was desperate and pregnant but help was refused by Mrs Birling because she was offended by the girl calling herself 'Mrs Birling'. She tells Eva that the baby's father should be made entirely responsible.</p> <p>She also tells Inspector Goole that the father should be held entirely responsible and should be made an example of.</p>	<p>Eric is revealed as the father. He stole money from Mr Birling's office to provide money to Eva. Eric is angry at his mother when he learns that she has refused to help Eva.</p> <p>The Inspector tells them that they are all partly to blame for Eva's death and warns them of the consequences of people not being responsible for each other, <i>"If men will not learn that lesson, when they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish"</i>.</p> <p>After Inspector Goole leaves, the family begin to suspect that he was not a genuine police inspector. A phone call to the Chief Constable confirms this. Next, they phone the infirmary to be informed that no suicide case has been brought in.</p> <p>Mr Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald congratulate themselves that it was all a hoax and they continue as before. This attitude upsets Sheila and Eric.</p> <p>The phone rings. Mr Birling announces to the family that a girl has just died on her way to the infirmary, a police inspector is coming to question them.</p>

Mr Birling	Mrs Birling	Sheila	Eric	Gerald	The Inspector
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked his way up in the world and is proud of his achievements.. • Aware of people who are his social superiors. • He is optimistic for the future and confident that there will not be a war. As the audience knows there <i>will</i> be a war, we begin to doubt Mr Birling's judgement. • He is extremely selfish. • At the end of the play, he knows he has lost the chance of his knighthood and his reputation but he is unable to admit his responsibility for his part in Eva's death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She is a snob, very aware of the differences between social classes. • She has the least respect for the Inspector of all the characters. • She sees Sheila and Eric still as "children" and speaks patronisingly to them. • She tries to deny things that she doesn't want to believe. • At the end of the play, like her husband, she refuses to believe that she did anything wrong and doesn't accept responsibility for her part in Eva's death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even though she seems very playful at the opening, we know that she has had suspicions about Gerald which maybe suggests she is not as naïve as she seems. • She feels full of guilt for her jealous actions and blames herself. • She is very perceptive: she realises that Gerald knew Daisy Renton from his reaction. • She is curious. • She is angry with her parents in Act 3 for trying to "pretend that nothing much has happened." • At the end of the play, Sheila is much wiser. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eric seems embarrassed and awkward right from the start. • It soon becomes clear that he is a hardened drinker. • He feels guilt and frustration with himself over his relationship with the girl. • He had some sense of responsibility, though, because although he got a woman pregnant, he was concerned enough to give her money. • He is appalled by his parents' inability to admit their own responsibility. • At the end of the play, like Sheila, he is fully aware of his social responsibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is an aristocrat. • He is not as willing as Sheila to admit his part in the girl's death to the Inspector and initially pretends that he never knew her. • He did have some genuine feeling for Daisy Renton. • Despite this, in Act 3 he tries to prove that the Inspector is a fake - because that would get him off the hook. • At the end of the play, he has not changed. He has not gained a new sense of social responsibility, which is why Sheila (who has) is unsure whether to take back the engagement ring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He works very systematically. • He is a figure of authority. He deals with each member of the family very firmly. • He seems to know and understand an extraordinary amount. • All this mystery suggests that the Inspector is not a 'real' person. So, what is he? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is he a ghost? Goole reminds us of 'ghoul'. • Is he the voice of Priestley? • Is he the voice of God? • Is he the voice of our consciences?

Dramatic Techniques

- **Lighting** – a metaphor for truth and signals the uneasy atmosphere the Inspector creates when it changes to become “brighter and harder” after his arrival. The Inspector also brings people into the ‘light’ to show them the photo of Eva Smith.
- **Sound effects** – the ‘sharp’ ring of the doorbell cuts off Mr Birling as he making a very selfish speech at the start of the play. It indicates that the Inspector will be a ‘sharp’ intrusion into their way of life. At the end of the play, there is the ‘sharp’ ring of the telephone which cuts off Mr Birling as he celebrating getting away with it.
- **Exits and entrances** – a feature of the ‘Well Made Play’. Exits and entrances are timed perfectly to increase dramatic tension e.g. Sheila arrives just as the focus of the investigation shifts to her, Sheila and Gerald are left alone on stage as Sheila realises that Gerald has been unfaithful to her.
- **Cliff-hanger** – at the end of each Act there is a cliff-hanger to create dramatic tension and suspense which is another feature of the ‘Well Made Play’.
- **Dramatic irony** – where the audience know more than the characters. This is used with Mr Birling in Act 1 when he makes a series of incorrect predictions. It shows him to be a pompous and arrogant character who is not to be trusted.
- **Retrospective irony** – when events take on a greater significance at the end of the play e.g. Eric’s outburst in Act 1 is an early sign of him drinking too much and Eric’s reference to Sheila’s ‘nasty temper’ becomes more significant when we realise her role in Eva Smith’s death.

Example Analytical Paragraphs:

Mr Birling makes several wrong predictions in the opening of act one. He lists the merits of the “unsinkable” Titanic as well as claiming that talk of war is “nonsense.” Because the play is set in the past, Priestley is able to make use of dramatic irony as an effective technique, which gives us insight into characterisation. Birling is initially presented as a man with very strong opinions, which he seems to have great faith in; however, the mistakes he makes in his early dialogue suggest that he is an unreliable source of information and that his ideas cannot always be taken seriously. These mistakes are recognised by the audience and prepare us for the bad decisions he made in relation to Eva Smith’s position at the factory. By questioning his reliability almost immediately, we are prepared for the significant part he played in Eva’s demise.

The Inspector makes a dramatic entrance in act one, signalled by the “sharp ring of the front door bell”. He literally interrupts Mr Birling’s monologue, which shuns collective responsibility, and advocates an individualistic approach to society. Birling is mid utterance, selfishly claiming that “community” is merely “nonsense” and that “a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own” when the audience hears the door bell. The interruption is heightened by the fact that the ring is a “sharp” one. Perhaps the person calling is going to sharply disagree with Birling’s attitude; perhaps he is going to shed a new light on society’s obsession with individual success as opposed to collective responsibility. Priestley uses the dramatic device of the carefully timed door bell as an indicator that we should not take Birling’s advice seriously; that a challenge is going to be made to his morally questionable attitude.

Priestley uses metaphor to create dramatic tension on stage. The Inspector states Sheila ‘isn’t living on the moon’ in response to Mr Birling’s attempt to protect her. Sheila has clearly been sheltered by her affluent upbringing, prestigious social class and arrogant self righteous parents. Priestley, through the Inspector, creates a sense of detachment between the capitalist Birling family and the socialist ideals of others. Priestley warns an audience to be part of a realistic world where the difficulties of life are shared with all people in all classes and at all times. Like the Inspector, Sheila searches for the truth and displays signs of a true and genuine change. The juxtaposition between herself and her parents is obvious as she strives to be part of the real and natural world of ‘Brumley’, the town itself, a symbol of reality.

Responsibility and Social Duty

- The words **responsible** and **responsibility** are used by most *characters* in the play at some point.
- Each member of the family has a different attitude to responsibility.
- The Inspector wanted each member of the family to share the responsibility of Eva’s death: he tells them, “each of you helped to kill her.”
- In his final speech, the Inspector is talking about a collective responsibility, everyone is society is linked, in the same way that the characters are linked to Eva Smith.
- “We do not live alone,” the Inspector says in his final speech, “we are members of one body.” This perhaps is the most important and central theme of the play: that we have a duty to other people, regardless of social status, wealth, class, or anything else.
- There is, Priestley observes, such a thing as society, and he argues that it is important that people be aware of the effects of their actions on others. The Birlings initially do not think at all about how they might have affected Eva Smith, but they are forced to confront their likely responsibility over the course of the play.

Class

- Taking the play from a socialist perspective inevitably focuses on issues of social class.
- Class is a large factor, indirectly, in the events of the play and Eva Smith’s death. Mrs. Birling, Priestley notes, is her husband’s social superior, just as Gerald will be Sheila’s social superior if they do get married. Priestley also subtly notes that Gerald’s mother, Lady Croft, disapproves of Gerald’s marrying Sheila for precisely this reason.
- Finally, everyone’s treatment of Eva might be put down (either in part or altogether) to the fact that she is a girl, as Mrs. Birling puts it, “of that class.” Priestley clearly was interested in the class system and how it determines the decisions that people make. In the play he is trying to show that the upper classes are unaware and perhaps don’t care that their easy lives rest upon the hard work of the lower classes.

Sex

- As a working class woman, Eva Smith was really the ‘bottom of the pile’ in society.
- Women had very little rights or opportunities in society. They were not allowed to vote and even the best an upper class woman could hope for would be to marry well.
- A job was crucial to lower class women like Eva. If they lost their job there was very little support out there and many were forced into prostitution.

Older vs Younger Generation

- The play implicitly draws out a significant contrast between the older and younger generations of Birlings.
- While Arthur and Sybil refuse to accept responsibility for their actions toward Eva Smith (Arthur, in particular, is only concerned for his reputation and his potential knighthood), Eric and especially Sheila are shaken by the Inspector’s message and their role in Eva Smith’s suicide.
- The younger generation is taking more responsibility, perhaps because they are more emotional and idealistic, but perhaps because Priestley is suggesting a more communally responsible socialist future for Britain.
- Gerald Croft is caught in the middle, being neither very young nor old. In the end he sides with the older generation, perhaps because his aristocratic roots influence him to want to keep the status quo and protect his own interests.