

An Inspector Calls by JB Priestley

Act One	The Birling family are celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling to Gerald Croft . A police inspector arrives and announces that a girl has died . The audience discovers that Arthur Birling sacked a girl called Eva Smith , from her job in his factory because she was striking for better pay and working conditions. Sheila Birling then got her sacked from her next job because she believed that the girl was laughing at her when she tried on clothes in the shop. The audience then learns that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton . It becomes clear that Gerald Croft knew her and was seeing her romantically at the same time as Sheila.
Act Two	The audience discovers that Daisy was Gerald's mistress for a time but broke off the love affair when she fell in love with him. Sheila breaks off her engagement to Gerald. Sybil Birling realises that she knew the girl , because she had come to Sybil's charity asking for help after falling pregnant, but Sybil had refused to help her because Daisy used the Birling name. Mrs Birling refuses to take any responsibility for what happened to the girl. She says it is the fault of the man Daisy was seeing. Sheila realises that this man is likely to be Eric, her brother.
Act Three	Eric is revealed as the father. He stole money from Mr Birling's office to provide money to Eva. The Inspector delivers his final speech. After he 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. Mr Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald congratulate themselves that it was all a hoax, and they continue can continue as before. This attitude upsets Sheila and Eric. 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.

Context:

Priestley – A writer with a social conscience, a keen supporter of social reform. Priestley wanted to see change.

1912 – Priestley set the play at this time (just before WW1 and the sinking of the Titanic) to remind audiences in 1946 of the problems in society at this time before the wars (such as a class system, Capitalism, inequality) and to act as a warning for us not to return to a system like that. At this time, there was a clear patriarchal system in place. Women were paid less than men for the same work. There was no benefit system or help with housing or unemployment.

1945 – The play was written in 1945 and performed in Russia in 1946. This is because there wasn't any space in London theatres to begin. After WW2, Priestley believed society had changed for the better. The benefit system started to be introduced (based on the Beveridge Report 1942) and the Labour Party introduced the concept of care from the 'cradle to the grave'. Due to the wars, society had experienced the merging of classes and women working. Priestley supported these changes and wanted to make sure he promoted them in his play by making Capitalists like the older Birlings appear ignorant and selfish.

Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells - (George) Bernard Shaw was a playwright and H.G. Wells was a science-fiction writer. They were both well-known and outspoken socialists.

The Titanic - The Titanic sailed from Southampton and sank in the early hours of 15th April 1912. The initial ignorance by Birling would make the audience mistrust him and his views. The use of the Titanic is also symbolic in that it was an arrogant symbol of grandeur that no-one thought would sink. This is just like Birling- he sees himself as indestructible but is challenged in the play.

Socialism - The concept that as a society we are all responsible for each other. Its focus is upon public rather than private ownership. Benefit for the majority not the individual.

Capitalism - The key objective of business it to make money and profit. Responsibility and reward lies with the individual.



The Morality Play:

Morality plays were popular during the 15th and 16th-centuries. Historically **they sought to teach the audience lessons** that focused on the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. Whilst characters who committed these sins were punished, morality plays showed that if a character repented then they could redeem themselves.

The Birlings and Gerald Croft commit crimes which are similar to the seven deadly sins, however not all characters manage to redeem themselves.

Remember!

- An Inspector Calls is a play, it was meant to be seen as a performance – staging, stage directions and setting are just as important as the words!
- There would have been an audience rather than a reader.



Key Characters:

- Inspector Goole – Priestley's mouthpiece, who serves as the Birlings' conscience. Presence in the play to encourage change and reflection.
- Mr. Arthur Birling – A wealthy businessman and capitalist. He is very concerned with how others perceive him.
- Mrs. Sybil Birling – Social superior to her husband, Sybil believes in personal responsibility and is unwilling to take responsibility.
- Sheila Birling – Young and at times naïve, comes to pity Eva and feels regret. Transforms as the play progresses to be a more likeable character.
- Eric Birling – Drinks too much and is implicated in the death of Eva Smith. Eric does begin to show remorse for his actions and pity the life that Eva lived.
- Gerald Croft – Wealthy, privileged businessman, superior to the Birlings.
- Eva Smith – Unseen in play, but a significant character. Stands for the victims of social injustice.

Themes:

Responsibility – Responsibility is arguably the most important theme in the play. The words 'responsible' and 'responsibility' appear a considerable number of times. At the beginning of the play, Mr. Birling gives his interpretation of 'responsibility' in his speech. Towards the end of the play, the Inspector gives his alternative interpretation.

Class – The Inspector doesn't appear to fit into the class system, he wants everyone to be treated equally. There is a clear divide between the lower and upper classes, Eva faces many hardships in life due to her social situation and those that are in a position to help, refuse to socialise or support those beneath them.

Generations – The younger generation (Eric and Sheila) show that they are capable of change. The express sympathy for the strikers in Act 1 and they also show greater sympathy for Eva Smith. Through the play, they are honest about their actions and refuse to go back on what they have learnt. The older generation (Mr. & Mrs. Birling) seem incapable of real change. They are set in their ways and see Sheila and Eric as "foolish" "children". They have little sympathy for Eva Smith and are only sorry that she has died because it could impact on their lives.

Priestley uses Mr. & Mrs. Birling to represent old-fashioned ideas. He discredits them, and what they represent, by making them look foolish and by catching them out at the end.

Gender - In the play, all the women are portrayed as delicate characters- particularly Sheila who the men protect from many things including that Eva Smith committed suicide. Set in 1912, the women in the play were seen as possessions to their husband and did not work or have careers due to the patriarchal society. There are clear expectations for characters due to their genders.

Techniques:

Adjective, verb, adverb, pronoun, imperative, declarative, interrogative, alliteration, repetition, contrast, juxtaposition, superlatives, foreshadowing, symbolism.

Quotes:

Act One-

- 'I'm talking as a hard headed practical man of business'
- 'Community and all that nonsense'
- 'A chain of events'
- 'I can't accept any responsibility'
- 'There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence in every city and big town in this country.'
- 'These girls aren't cheap labour, they're people.'

Act Two –

- 'A girl died tonight. A pretty, lively sort of girl, who never did anybody any harm.'
- 'Girls of that class'
- 'And probably between us we killed her'
- 'I became at once the most important person in her life'
- 'Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges'
- 'Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility'
- 'She was here alone, friendless, almost penniless, desperate'

Act Three –

- 'I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty'
- 'There are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths'
- 'We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.'
- 'They will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish'

Dramatic Devices and Stagecraft:

Stage Directions – Instructions for the actors which are significant. They explain where or how something is done.

The Fourth Wall - The Inspector's final speech is directed to the audience.

Dramatic Irony – Birling's speeches show his ignorance to society.

Key

Vocabulary:

- Capitalism
- Socialism
- Injustice
- Responsibility
- Hypocrisy
- Equality
- Welfare
- Generation
- Class
- Truth
- Deceit
- Morality
- Society
- Anguish
- Condemnation
- Judgement
- Divide
- Stereotypes
- Expectations
- Prejudice
- Suffering
- Guilt
- Remorse
- Accountability
- Superiority
- Conscience
- Investigation
- Reflection

Priestley's Purpose:

- Priestley asks the audience to examine their individual and collective responsibility.
- The hypocrisy of the middle-class is uncovered.
- Criticism of the selfishness of capitalism.
- Awareness of the older generations being stuck in their ways and the younger being open to change.

