

AN INSPECTOR CALLS

By

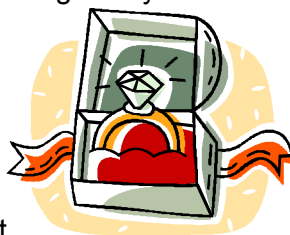
J B PRIESTLEY

REVISION GUIDE

Plot Summary

Act 1: April 1912

Brumley, a Midlands town. The Birling family and Gerald Croft are enjoying a dinner



to celebrate Sheila's engagement to Gerald.

Arthur Birling, Sheila's father, is particularly pleased, since the marriage should mean close links with a rival company run by Gerald's father. He is optimistic about life in England – he sees **p**peace, **p**rosperity and **p**rogress.

When the ladies leave the room, Birling lectures both his son Eric and Gerald about the **importance of every man looking out for himself if he wants to get on in life.**

At this moment the doorbell rings. They are not expecting a visitor. The maid announces that an Inspector has arrived.

Inspector Goole says that he is investigating the death of young woman, Eva Smith.

Birling is shown a photograph of *Eva*. He then remembers that he *sacked* her in 1910 for leading a pay strike. He feels justified in this action.

The investigation moves on to Sheila. **Sheila also had Eva sacked** by complaining about her manner when served by her in a department store. Sheila regrets this.

The Inspector says that Eva changed her name to Daisy Renton. **Gerald acts guiltily.**

Act 2: Gerald explains that he had an affair with Eva, but has not seen her since he ended it in Autumn 1911.

Sheila gives the engagement ring → back to Gerald.

The Inspector turns his attention to Mrs Sybil Birling, who confesses that she also had contact with Eva, but **not under that name.**

Eva, desperate and pregnant, approached a charity chaired by Mrs Birling to ask for help. Help was refused because Sybil was offended by the girl calling herself 'Mrs Birling'. She says that the baby's father should be made entirely responsible.

Act 3: Eric is revealed as the father. He has stolen money from Birling's office to help Eva. Eric turns on his mother when he learns that she has refused to help.

The Inspector tells them they are all partly to blame for Eva's death and warns them of the consequences of people not being responsible for each other.

After he leaves, the family begin to suspect that the **Inspector was not a genuine police officer**. A phone call to the Chief Constable confirms this. They phone the infirmary to discover that no suicide case has been brought in that day.

Arthur, Sybil and Gerald congratulate themselves that it was all a **hoax** and that they can carry on as before. This attitude upsets Sheila and Eric.

The phone rings. A girl has just died on her way to the infirmary. A police officer is coming to question them!

GENERAL SUMMARY

Act 1

Mr Birling, his wife and their grown-up children, Eric and Sheila, have been enjoying a family dinner celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling to Gerald Croft. In an expansive mood, Mr Birling makes pompous speeches outlining his views on technology and industrial relations. He says that a man only needs to care for himself and his family and that they should ignore the 'cranks' (p.10) who claim that everybody has a responsibility to care for everybody else in the community. The evening is interrupted by the arrival of a police inspector named Goole making enquiries about the suicide of a young woman, Eva Smith.

Shown a photograph of the girl, Mr Birling admits he employed her in his factory some two years previously but sacked her for being one of the leaders of a strike for higher wages. Gerald Croft supports Birling's claim that he acted reasonably, while Sheila and Eric both feel that their father acted harshly in sacking her. When Sheila is also shown the photograph she realises that, driven by jealousy and ill temper, she later had the same the same girl sacked from her job as a shop assistant.

The Inspector appears to have an uncanny knowledge of the family's dealings with Eva Smith. When he announces that the girl had changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald's reaction makes it clear that he too has known the girl. By the end of the Act the Inspector has begun to suggest that many people share a joint responsibility for the misery which prompted Eva Smith/Daisy Renton to end her sad young life. Sheila warns Gerald not to try to conceal anything from the Inspector.

Act II

The strain of the earlier part of the evening is evident in the tension between Sheila and Gerald. Gerald admits that in the spring of the previous year he met Daisy Renton and she became his mistress. He ended the affair some six months later. Sheila is hurt and angry at Gerald's involvement with the girl, yet she feels a certain respect for the openness of his admission.

Despite Mrs Birling's attempts to intimidate the Inspector and to control events, Sheila's Feeling that it is foolish to try to hinder his enquiries appears increasingly well founded. Sheila is concerned that her mother will also be implicated in the girl's suffering. While Eric is out of the room, despite her blustering, Mrs Birling is forced to admit that just two weeks earlier the girl tried to get help from Mrs Birling and was refused. It is revealed that the girl was pregnant and there is now a strong suspicion that Eric might was the father of that unborn child.

Act III

Eric confessed that he got the girl pregnant. He also stole money from his father's firm to try and support her. Eric is horrified to learn that his mother refused to help the girl and he blames his mother for the death of the girl and of the unborn child. Any pretence at family unity starts to dissolve. The Inspector has done his job and shown that each of them had a part in ruining the girl's life. He makes a dramatic speech about the consequences of the sort of social irresponsibility that Mr Birling was preaching at the end of the dinner, and he leaves.

Between them Gerald and Mr Birling are gradually able to prove that the man was not a real police inspector. This raises a doubt about whether they have really all been talking about the same girl – and about whether any girl has actually killed herself. A telephone call to the Infirmary confirms that there is no record of any girl dying there that afternoon. There is a general feeling of relief at this information. Sheila and Eric still feel guilty for their actions and they seem to have been changed for the better by what has happened. The others feel a greater sense of relief; their confidence and belief in the rightness of their actions is restored. At this point the telephone rings. Mr Birling answers it to find that it is the police calling. He is told that a young woman has just died on her way to the Infirmary and an inspector is on his way to make enquiries into her death.

SETTING AND BACKGROUND

A Pre-First World War Setting

The setting of *An Inspector Calls* is important in a number of ways. J B Priestley sets the play in the fictional industrial city of Brumley. Brumley is probably typical of many towns where the factors owners, who provided much-needed employment, were able to run things pretty much as they wanted. Although it is a fictional place, J B Priestley gives us quite a lot of information about it.

The importance of the town is indicated by its having a Lord Mayor and a police force with its own Chief Constable. Arthur Birling clearly feels that his activities in local politics have made him enough of a figure to justify his being given a knighthood. The number of women who are poor and in need of help is suggested by the existence of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation with which Mrs Birling is involved. It is interesting to notice that whether someone got help or not could depend on whether the organisers, like Mrs Birling, thought that person deserved to be helped or whether they thought that the person deserved to suffer.

By mentioning men like Alderman Meggarty, J B Priestley was making a general point about a time when the underprivileged and powerless are made the victims of the privileged and powerful. By setting the play before the First World War, J B Priestley could make the most of these social divisions.

STAGING

All action of the play takes place in the Birling's dining room, which is described as '*substantial and heavily comfortable, but not cosy and homelike*' (Act I, p.), which reflects the family's outward comfort and inner tensions. The realistic stage set has another function. J B Priestley liked to begin his plays by convincing his audiences that they were safely within the boundaries of what was real and normal – and then he would find a way to destroy that feeling of reality and move them into an unreal or mysterious situation. By using the solid and naturalistic stage setting Priestley gives his audience a sense of reality while the mysterious role of the Inspector and the time-switch at the end of the play introduce contrasting, unreal elements.

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The social and historical context of the play are equally important. Social position was far more important than it is today. Following the dramatic expansion of industry throughout the nineteenth century, many men who had invested in such industries as coal, iron and steel, pottery and textiles had made considerable fortunes. Men such as Arthur Birling may have come from humble origins but their wealth allowed them to rise up the social ladder. Marriages between these newly rich families and aristocratic, but often impoverished land-owning families, helped to secure new social positions. Many of these industrialists were granted titles, and this too helped to improve their social standing.

The Labour Party, founded by James Keir Hardie in 1893, was only just beginning to make an impact on the political life of the country. The rights of workers, like Eva Smith, were not taken too seriously by many employers, but at the same time many working people had benefited from the generosity of those industrialists who genuinely cared for the welfare of their workers, even to the extent of building idealistic new towns for them to live in.

Men like Arthur Birling could be seen as a throwback to harsh early Victorian times, but sadly he may have been all too typical of the greedy employers of that time. Life might have been good for him, but it was not good for his workers. Although King Edward VII died in 1910, the time from his accession to the throne in 1901 and the start of the First World War in 1914 is usually referred to as the Edwardian Era. To many people, and J B Priestley may have been such a person, the end of the Edwardian era and the onset of the war marked an end to a time of peace and stability, and harking back nostalgically to it can be a sort of escape from an unpleasant and uncertain future.

Who's who in An Inspector Calls

Arthur Birling

Mr Birling is upper middle class, a successful **factory owner**, **ex-Lord Mayor** of Brumley and a **local magistrate**. He **regards himself** as **reasonable** and pays his employees no more and no less than the going rate. He feels that it is his **duty** to keep costs low and prices high.

Birling has little or no imagination, and seems blind both to the consequences of his own actions, and to events in the larger world. He makes predictions about the future – the unsinkability of *The Titanic*; the impossibility of war; the promise of technology – which would have been believed by many in 1912, but which would have seemed laughably optimistic and shortsighted to audiences in 1945, who knew that really happened. Birling is a stereotype for his time in many ways, and this is also true of other characters in the play. He is a caricature of the callous heartlessness of a capitalistic businessman.

Birling is self-centred and proud of his status. He sets great store by his public offices and privileges and tried, initially, to put the Inspector in his place by emphasising his own position in society. So sensitive is he about such matters that he even feels a little uneasy about Gerald Croft marrying his daughter, sensing that Gerald's titled parents may feel that their son is marrying 'beneath himself'. At the end of the play, the possibility that he may be deprived of his promised knighthood upsets him far more than anything else.

Birling has been an indulgent parent, but he has not prepared Eric to face the realities of life. As Eric says, 'you're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble. Birling has paid for Eric's expensive education, largely, one suspects, because that displays his wealth and enhances his own social status. In Act 3 it is plain that Birling's motives are not to save Eric from being found out, but to protect himself from social scandal. To do this he is prepared to distort or ignore the truth. He is blind to this **hypocrisy**, and indifferent when it is pointed out. Just before the end of the play he happily argues that '*the whole thing's different now*', and congratulates himself on having avoided a scandal. Provided his public reputation is safe, Birling will never change.

Mr Birling

**Wealthy business man
Involved in local politics
Pompous
Unsophisticated
Bully**

Mr Birling is a successful businessman who has been active in local politics and has had the honour of being Lord Mayor. He is a magistrate and has hopes of being given a knighthood which will make him socially closer to Sir George and Lady Croft. He is described as a **'heavy-looking rather portentous man'** (Act I, p.1). His size perhaps helps to give him the threatening appearance suggested by that description. He is self-confident, but his upbringing makes him less socially aware and gracious than either his wife or Gerald Croft. He sees the engagement of Gerald and Sheila as being good for business and later it is business interests which most affect his attitude to Eric's theft of money from the firm.

His view of his own importance leads him:

- ❖ To try to use his social status to intimidate the Inspector
- ❖ To try to impose his will and authority on Eric and Sheila
- ❖ To be concerned about the effect of a scandal on his chances of a knighthood

It is central to the play that his attitude that 'a man has to mind his own business and look after his own' (Act I, p10) is discredited by the confessions that the Inspector draws out. Yet he does not change his views or attitudes over the course of the play. Though he reveals more of his contempt for weakness and his anger at the foolish behaviour of others, he cannot see that his actions towards the girl were wrong, and we feel that if the events were repeated, he would still feel justified in sacking the girl. He feels this was, and still is, the right attitude for a man of business. He sees nothing strange in wanting to protect Sheila from the unpleasantness of the girl's life and death, yet he feels no guilt at not having protected the girl herself.

After the Inspector has gone he simply wants things to return to the way they were. He cannot understand Sheila's and Eric's insistence that there is something to be learnt, and he is relieved and triumphant when he feels that scandal has been avoided and everything is all right. Despite his self-centred and unrepentant attitude it is possible to feel some sympathy for him at the end of the play when his relief that the incident is over and done with is shattered by the telephone call. Perhaps we can feel this because J B Priestley lets us see someone who is so blindly wrong and never as in control of events as he would like himself, and others, to think.

Sybil Birling



Mrs Birling is even more hard-faced and *arrogant* than her husband. She is introduced as his social superior and her manner indicates that she is very *conscious of social position*, especially her own. She is extremely snobbish, and expects others to show her respect and defer to her opinions. She resents being contradicted, even when caught by the Inspector telling outright lies.

Mrs Birling seems, genuinely shocked to hear about her son's drink problem, although the information does not surprise Sheila or Gerald. Her concern that Sheila should not be exposed to 'unpleasant' things suggests that she regards her daughter as a child. Is Mrs Birling genuinely unaware of what is going on around her, or is she deliberately blind to anything she does not wish to see?

When exposed to criticism, Mrs Birling retreats behind words like '**respectable**', '**duty**' and '**deserving**'. If she feels her own status has been suitably acknowledged, she will be condescendingly generous, but if not, she will take offence at what she sees as 'impertinence'. She thinks that people from the '**lower classes**' are almost a **different species**. Eva Smith's pleas for help offend Mrs Birling, because the girl was 'giving herself ridiculous airs' and 'claiming elaborate fine feelings'. Her **vindictive** attitude towards the father of the girl's child changes dramatically when she learns that he is her own son, clearly illustrating her extreme **hypocrisy**.

Mrs Birling tries to use her husband's social position to intimidate the Inspector, and is confused when this tactic fails. She argues that if she had been present when the Inspector first arrived, she would have stood up to him.

At the end of the play Mrs Birling has not allowed herself to learn anything that will make her behave in a compassionate or caring way in the future. Perhaps the Inspector's call has only served to harden her attitudes.

Mrs Birling is described as a '*rather cold woman and her husband's social superior*' (Act I, p.1). Her coldness and lack of conscience make her unsympathetic, while her keen awareness of the rules of polite behaviour (shown, for example, in the way she rebukes her husband for his comment about the quality of the meal) makes her seem out of touch with who really matters. Her lack of understanding of how other people live is shown in her snobbish comments about 'a girl of that sort' (Act II, p.47) and in her unwillingness to believe the girl's reasons for refusing to take the stolen money or marry the foolish young man responsible for her pregnancy. Her

lack of understanding even extends to her family as she has been quite unaware of her own son's heavy drinking.

She remains untouched by the Inspector's questioning, and refuses to see how her actions could have been responsible for the girl's death. We can clearly see that her refusal to help the girl could easily have been what finally led to her suicide, yet it is only when she realises that Eric was the child's father and so her actions have resulted in the death of her own grandchild that she begins to show any signs of weakening. The speed with which she recovers after the Inspector's departure emphasises how cold and unsympathetic a character she is.

She can be seen as hypocritical because:

- She **claims** to be shocked by Eric's drinking and the talk of immoral relationships with the girl, yet she cannot bear not to hear Eric's confession.
- She is quite content to lay all the blame on the father of the child. When it becomes clear that the young man is her son, she is not prepared to own up to her comments until Sheila brings them into the open.
- Early on she condemns Gerald's 'disgusting affair' (Act II p,38) but seem quite willing to *forget* about it once the threat of shared blame seems to have been withdrawn.

There is no sense of relief that her selfish actions have not been the cause of tragedy. The glowing thanks and praise that she lavishes on Gerald for the clever way he appears to have settled things reflect her desire to remain untouched by outside events and to maintain the appearance of respectability.

Examiner's Secret - There is no need to always provide lengthy quotations. Key words like 'excited' taken from the text can be more effective.

Sheila Birling



Sheila, the Birling's daughter, is impressionable, and is deeply affected by the Inspector's revelations. She and her brother Eric are the only characters who give any cause for optimism in the play. Sheila has an attractive and essentially honest character, and lacks the cold-blooded attitude of her parents.

Sheila seems at times almost to be an accomplice of the Inspector in that she tends to take up his criticism of the other characters, becoming his mouthpiece when he has left the stage. Her parents see this as disloyalty. Gerald sees vindictiveness, but Sheila realises that there is no point in concealing the truth – it is time to abandon all pretences. She objects to her parents' attempts to protect her from unpleasant truths. Until the arrival of the Inspector, Sheila has been content with the socially acceptable hypocrisy about such things, but Inspector Goole's revelations about her family are a learning experience for her.

Because she is more sensitive than the others, Sheila is the first to realise what the Inspector is driving at in his interviews with herself and the others. She sees through the other characters' attempts to cover the truth. She is aware that the Inspector knows all about them and is the first to wonder who the Inspector really is.

Although Sheila identifies with the dead girl, her spiteful complaint against Eva is probably the most indefensible action of all, as it is based merely on her own wounded vanity. However, she felt bad about it at the time, regretted it deeply later, and is honest enough to admit her share of the responsibility for Eva's suicide.

Sheila and her brother Eric represent the younger generation that Priestley hopes is still open-minded enough to learn to accept responsibility for others.

Sheila is described as '*a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited*' (Act I pp 1 -2). Early on in the play she is playful and rather self-centred, enjoying the attention and importance that her engagement is bringing her. Her curiosity when she finds her father, Eric and Gerald with the Inspector is at first superficial, but she soon shows a sensitive side to her nature and is moved by the news of the girl's death. Her own happiness seems almost unfair to her and, even before she has any idea of her own part in the dead girl's story, she seems truly interested. Unlike her father, she responds to the girl as a person, not as cheap labour. She is prepared to criticise her father and shows that though she is foolish and selfish, she has the potential to change.

Commentary

When Sheila realises that her own jealousy and bad temper have led to the girl losing her job at the shop, she is genuinely sorry. Yet we also see that her sorrow is linked to her feeling of regret that she will not be able to go back to a favourite shop, and so her streak of selfishness is still there. By the end of Act I, Sheila is already aware of the influence of the Inspector and is beginning to question how deep his knowledge goes. She warns Gerald 'Of course he knows. And I hate to think how much he knows that we don't know yet' (Act I, p.26).

Sheila grows stronger and more sympathetic as the play goes on. She is obviously upset by Gerald's confession, but is strong enough to cope with it and even to acknowledge that she is impressed by Gerald's honesty. Her realisation that **honesty and truth** really matter shows that she is capable of **learning and changing**. She has begun to have some understanding of what the Inspector is doing so that she is able to see the world, and her responsibility, according to his values instead of those of her family. This is why she can see the trap her mother's arrogance is creating, and why she tries to stop her mother from exposing and condemning the child's father. It is only Sheila and Eric, the two youngest and 'more impressionable' (Act II, p.30) characters who feel everyone needs to learn something from what has happened. **Sheila** does seem to have **learnt something** and to have changed, and we feel that her future attitude to others will be **more caring, self-controlled and responsible**.

Gerald Croft

Gerald is the upper class fiancé of Sheila Birling, and the son of Arthur Birling's business rival, Sir George Croft. Although he is only aged about 30, Gerald's outlook on life is similar to that of Mr Birling. He agrees with the way Mr Birling handled Eva Smith's dismissal. Like Mr and Mrs Birling, Gerald's first impulse is to conceal his involvement with Eva; but unlike them, he shows genuine remorse when the news of her death finally sinks in. Moreover, it becomes clear that Gerald helped Eva out of genuine sympathy for her situation and did not take advantage of her in the violent and drunken way in which Eric did. Gerald did make Eva genuinely happy for a time, and in many ways is the least to blame for her death. He makes it clear that both he and Eva understood that the relationship was to be a short-term affair. Nevertheless, **he** was the one in control of the timing of events.

At the end of the play, Gerald shows the clearest head in thinking about the identity of the Inspector, is the first to begin devising a way out, and shows initiative in telephoning the infirmary to check if a dead girl has actually been admitted. He also suggests the possibility of there being more than one girl involved.

Gerald seems to have **abandoned his genuine remorse** by the end of the play. He expects Sheila to accept the engagement ring again and asserts that all is now well.

Gerald is the son of Birling's rival industrialist Sir George Croft. He has the self-confidence of someone who is at ease wherever he is or whoever he is with. He is polite and tactful with Mr and Mrs Birling. Being about thirty, he is older than Sheila and Eric, whose parents treat Gerald as something of an equal. He is trusted with the secret of Arthur Birling's possible knighthood. Gerald's views on the way a business should be run, how workers should be treated and the importance of profit are all in line with those of Mr Birling, and he supports the reasoning with which Mr Birling justifies Eva Smith's sacking from the firm.

When he first met Daisy Renton he saved her from the awkward situation with Alderman Meggarty and set out to help her. His good intentions, however, went astray. He found Daisy attractive from the start, and he allowed his feelings to develop. He felt affection for her but admits that her feelings for him were stronger than his feelings for her. He felt guilty about only being able to offer her temporary help and when he left her he gave her money to help her start a new life. The fact that he 'made her happy for a time' (Act III, p.56) allows us to feel some sympathy for him. His regret for the way he used her is genuine, but he does not have the same deep response as Sheila to the Inspector's message. He acts on his suspicions, and as a result he is the one who begins the chain of events leading to the feeling of certainty that Goole was an impostor.

Eric Birling

Eric, the Birling's son, is, like Sheila, in his early twenties, but is probably the younger of the two, judging by his less mature attitude. During the play, he is exposed as a **drunkard**, the father of an illegitimate unborn child, a **liar** and a **thief**. During the first two Acts, Eric functions mainly as an *irritant* to Mr Birling's complacency, continually asking questions that his father regards as silly. Mr Birling clearly thinks that his son has not benefited from his expensive education.

Eric arouses curiosity with his sudden guffaw in Act 1. This is possibly an indication that he knows something about Gerald's neglect of Sheila. Curiosity about him turns to suspicion when he breaks off in mid-comment. We begin to think that Eric has something to conceal.

Eric seems **hostile** towards his parents, especially his father, whom he finds unapproachable and unloving. This may be why Eva treated Eric as if he were a 'kid' and why he responded to her pity. She may have recognised in him a **need for affection** which she herself shared.

Eric may be a weak and lonely figure, but he is capable of real feeling for others. He is more demonstrative than the others, and at the end he is on the verge of physically attacking his mother in fury at her lack of charity. In his eyes, his mother 'murdered' his child and its mother, but remember also that Eric's share of responsibility for Eva's suicide is very great. Eric has definitely learned something from the evening's revelations and may now be more than a '**silly boy**'.

Unlike his sister, Sheila, Eric is awkward: '*not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive*' (Act I, p.2). He does not seem to have his father's affection or approval. He is kept out of the information about his father's possible knighthood, and when he really needed help he felt his father was 'not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble' (Act iii, p.54). He drinks too much, has forced his way into the girl's home, has made the girl pregnant and stolen money.

Like Sheila, he feels sympathy for Eva Smith as soon as he hears how Mr Birling sacked her. When he has to admit how he behaved towards her he has a stronger sense of guilt than the others because the consequences of what he did are so much worse. It is not surprising that he turns violently on his mother when he learns how she refused to help the girl. He curses his mother and accuses her of killing both the girl and the child. He has been rude to his father earlier and his rudeness to his parents increases the more he drinks. One can imagine how frightening he might have seemed to the girl when he was drunk – 'in that state when a chap easily turns nasty' (Act III, p.52). His immaturity shows in his casual attitude towards his relationship with the girl whom he regarded as a 'good sport'. (Act iii, p.52) although she treated him like a child. He appears to have learnt very little from his privileged education.

Yet he is one of the young ones who has been impressed by the Inspector. He wants his parents to admit their mistakes as freely as he has admitted his. Though he is not a particularly pleasant character, we may feel that he has learnt a lesson, that he is sincerely ashamed of his behaviour and that he is capable of changing for the better.

Inspector Goole

The Inspector is an **enigmatic** figure. He neither changes nor develops, but frequently repeats: 'I haven't much time', as if he is working to a pre-arranged schedule.

Inspector Goole's name is an obvious pun on 'ghoul', a malevolent spirit or ghost. He could be seen as some kind of *spirit*, sent on behalf of the dead girl to torment the consciences of the characters in the play, or as a sort of *cosmic policeman* conducting an inquiry as a preliminary to the Day of Judgement, or simply as a forewarning of things to come. Certainly it seems that Priestly did not want to promote a single interpretation of who the Inspector 'really' is. The character's dramatic power lies in this. To have revealed his identity as a hoaxer or as some kind of 'spirit' would have spoilt the unresolved tension that is so effective at the end of the play.

The stage directions for the Inspector stress his purposefulness and deliberate manner of addressing people. There is an air of menace about him and, unlike all the other characters, he does not deviate from his moral position. He is *single-minded* in pursuing his chosen line of investigation. He alone is certain of his facts. These facts are questioned by the other characters only after he has left.

Goole makes judgements about characters which they feel are unusual and inappropriate in a police inspector. He undermines their complacent assumption that they are respectable citizens. Each of them finds this a shattering experience. Those characters who resist telling the Inspector the truth suffer more than those who are more open. The Inspector says to Gerald, '**if you're easy with me, I'm easy with you**'. Notice that he makes no judgement upon Gerald, and deliberately tries to stop Sheila from blaming herself too much. However, he begins to lose patience with Mr Birling. Mrs Birling resists the truth the most, and the Inspector is accordingly harshest with her.

The inspector persuades characters to reveal things which they would rather were not known. Sheila points out that there is something about the Inspector which makes them tell him things because they feel that **he already knows**.

Inspector Goole has several functions in the play. He acts as the *storyteller*, linking the separate incidents into one coherent life-story. He often supplies dates or fills in background information. He also behaves like a **father confessor** to each character, encouraging them to acknowledge their guilt for Eva's suicide and to repent. Significantly, the Inspector himself neither forgives nor punishes. Each character is made to face up to the fact that they must find the courage to judge themselves; only then will they have learned enough to be able to change.

Sometimes the Inspector behaves as the voice of social conscience. He points out that social responsibilities become greater as privileges increase. He also plays the traditional role of a policeman in a 'whodunnit' story, slowly uncovering the truth through careful questioning, piercing together evidence with shrewd insight, though in this case not one character has done anything to Eva Smith which a court of law would describe as a crime.

Is the Inspector's investigation successful? Eric and Sheila may have learned enough to change their ways, but the others, even at the end, strongly oppose such changes. Post-war audiences of 1945 would have appreciated the Inspector's prophecy of a lesson that 'will be taught In fire and blood and anguish'.

The word 'inspector' suggests someone who looks closely at things, and this is his role in the events of the play. The name 'Goole' is the same as the seaport town of Goole at the mouth of the River Humber, and perhaps suggests that the Inspector is going to fish for information, to trawl through the lives and deeply hidden secrets of the other characters. The name also sounds like ghoul – someone with a morbid interest in death, a spirit which is said to take fresh life from corpses, and it is certainly arguable that the Inspector's existence is a result of the girl's death.

Described as creating '**an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness**' (Act I, p.11), the Inspector grows as the stores of each character are revealed. He remains solid and intact as each of them breaks down, and nothing the others can do or say distracts him from his purpose.

He arrives just after Mr Birling has been setting out his view of life: that every man must only look out for himself. The Inspector's role is to show that this is not the case. Throughout the play he demonstrates how people are responsible for how they affect the lives of others and his views are summed up in his visionary and dramatic final speech. It is the Inspector who makes things happen. Without him none of the secrets would ever have come into the open. He seems to know what each character has done, and his probing questions leave them to confess in their own way. From the moment of his arrival he seems different. His sombre appearance and the news he brings are a contrast with the happy and elegant air of celebration. Despite the importance in the local community of people like Gerald and the Birlings, he controls the development of events: who will speak and when; who may or may not leave; who will or will not see the photograph. He even seems to control what people say. Sheila, who has commented on his mysterious character, tells Gerald 'Somehow he makes you' (Act ii, p.37). The Inspector has Eva Smith's diary and a letter. From these he has built up a picture of her life and character. He uses this information, with constant reminders of the horrific death she has suffered, to force them to face up to what they have done. He links the series of wrongs done to the girl so that they are seen to build up to pressure which forces her to her last desperate act.

Eva Smith

Eva Smith dominates the action invisibly. By the end of the play she is as familiar as the other characters. She is presented in an **idealised** way: she was very pretty, with large dark eyes and soft, brown hair. She was lively, intelligent and warm-hearted.

Eva is depicted as the innocent victim of selfishness. She was a good worker, but was sacked because of victimisation. She was abandoned by Gerald when she became inconvenient. She was a *compliant* outlet for Eric's sexual needs and loneliness, but was also made an accomplice to theft and made pregnant by him. She was discarded as unworthy of help when she did not pander to Mrs Birling's self-importance.

I

Each incident illustrates that Eva is easy prey for 'respectable' society. In spite of the way society treats her, she shows kindness and sensitivity beyond the reach of the others, as demonstrated particularly in her dealings with Eric. Although the victim of exploitation, she refuses to treat others as they have treated her, even though she is in a position to create scandal for them all. As Eva Smith's fortunes sink she is revealed as increasingly **noble**, the complete opposite to most of the other characters. There is an **AFFINITY BETWEEN EVA AND SHEILA**: they are the same age, and Sheila might have suffered the same fate as Eva had not luck given her a more privileged position in society. Eva Smith and 'John Smith' represent ordinary people who can be destroyed by indifference when society fails to grant them the right of basic human dignity.

Even if there was no single Eva Smith, as Gerald suggest, we can still see how complacency, selfishness and thoughtlessness can damage others.

Eva Smith/Daisy Renton

The girl remains a mystery. She never appears on stage and we do not know her real name, but the play revolves round the last two years of her life. We know she was pretty enough to make Sheila jealous and to have attracted the attention of both Gerald and Eric. What we learn about her, her drab life and unpleasant death, contrasts sharply with what we see and learn of the Birling family and Gerald Croft. She worked hard, supported her fellow workers and was kind and gentle. Although she was reduced to earning her living by picking up men in the Place Theatre bar, she did not seem well suited to that way of life. Her sense of right and wrong prevented her from considering marriage to Eric and protected him from his folly in stealing money from his father's firm. Despite five separate stories, she remains more of a symbol than a real person. She stands for all the people we meet in our everyday lives. J B Priestley uses her tragedy to jolt us into thinking about our responsibility towards others. She is the weapon the Inspector uses to try to change the attitudes of the others. His final speech reminds us that 'One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do' (Act III, p.56).

THEMES

SOCIAL MESSAGE

In this play, J B Priestley presents us with a sincerely felt and powerfully expressed social message:

- We are shown the comfortable home and rich way of life of the Birling family.
- By contrast we have the accounts of the desperate attempts of the workers to increase their poor wages and the drab and sordid life that the girl is forced to live as a result of the actions of people such as the Birlings.
- The Inspector champions the cause of the poor.
- He tries to get the others to accept that all people share a common humanity and so are all part of an interdependent community.

This message does seem to get through to Sheila and Eric. Sheila is ready to accept and demonstrate this feeling of compassion, but her father simply dismisses the idea of a community, in which responsibility and guilt are shared, as the foolish mutterings of a socialist crank.

MORALITY

As the play progresses, the Inspector's point is put across more and more forcefully:

- Each character's involvement with the Eva Smith/Daisy Renton adds to the Inspector's argument.
- He becomes not only a spokesman for the disadvantaged but as voice for the conscience which the Birlings and Gerald seem to lack!
- The characters, especially the older ones, are increasingly shown to be hiding behind an appearance of respectability which has no foundation in any true sense of morality.

The Inspector points out what would happen if injustice and inequality were allowed to continue unchecked. His increasingly missionary tone reaches its peak when J B Priestley's political message is thundered out in the Inspector's final speech. This exaggerated oratorical style (hyperbole) might not be acceptable if J B Priestley had not gradually built up the mysterious and prophetic aspects of the Inspector's character.

POLITICAL VIEW

We are never given a clear set of political policies but J B Priestley does make the general point that all of us have a share in the responsibility for what happens in our society, that we have a duty of care to others:

- We see that the sense of respectability with which the characters surround themselves does not stand up to close examination.
- The way that the older characters remain unmoved and immovable, uncaring for anyone but themselves, is one of the horrors of the play.
- Each of the revelations deepens the lesson they should be learning but they refuse to take any notice.

We are left wondering whether our society today is any more likely to survive a similarly close examination. Are we any better in our everyday dealings with other people than the Birlings?

Check the Net - There is some useful general information on J B Priestley to be found on www.miskatonic.org

RESPONSIBILITY

Most of the characters have a narrow view of what it means to be responsible, but the Inspector provides us with a much broader one.

Mr Birling is a businessman and as such as he feels his responsibility is to make a success of his business. This means making as much profit as possible, even if that means being harsh in his dealings with those who work for him.

As a family man he sees that he has a responsibility to provide for the material needs of his family, yet it is clear that Eric does not see him as the kind of father to whom he could turn when in trouble.

Mrs Birling accepts her responsibility as chairwoman of the Women's Charity Organisation, but only sees a responsibility to help those that she feels are deserving of help.

Sheila belatedly recognises that as a powerful customer she has an obligation not to let her personal feelings and ill-temper lead to misery for people who have no power.

Eric has little sense of responsibility. He drinks far more than is good for him and he forced the girl into a relationship which had disastrous consequences. He attempted to help her stealing from his father.

Gerald showed some sense of responsibility when he rescued the girl from the unwelcome attentions of another man, fed her and found her somewhere to live. Yet he gave in to his own desire for personal pleasure and eventually abandoned the girl without knowing, over very much caring, what happened to her.

The Inspector's role is to shake these people up and to make them aware of that broader view of responsibility which J B Priestley felt was essential if the world was ever going to learn from its mistakes and become a place where everyone has the right to be treated fairly.

Examiner's Secret

Try producing a single revision sheet for each of the key characters and themes. Set it out in the form of a diagram with essential quotations and some phrases of your own.

Social Responsibility

The word 'responsibility', or variations on it, occurs frequently in the play. The play points out the need for a sense of personal responsibility in every member of society; responsibility not only for individual actions, but also for the way actions affect others. The Inspector voices these views most strongly, but is joined by Sheila and, to a lesser degree, Eric. In a sense, these characters act as the communal conscience of the other characters. The opposite view is expressed by Arthur Birling, whose driving concern is self-interest.

Themes and Images

Status

Some characters in the play attach great importance to social status. For them, it is so precious that nothing must threaten it. Social class defines the value of human beings. A high social class insulates these characters from the unpleasantness of reality. Birling panics at the prospect of having his son's or his wife's actions made public. He is clearly terrified by a scandal which would irretrievably damage the Birlings' status. Eva Smith, who is working class, is seen by some characters, particularly upper middle class Mrs Birling, as having little value as a human being.

Lies

Lies abound in *An Inspector Calls*. Characters lie to each other, to the Inspector and to themselves. These lies are not confined to simple misrepresentations of the truth (as when Mrs Birling denies ever having met Eva Smith), some characters begin to see their whole lives as lies. The lies have formed the basis for their relationships with others – as in the case of Gerald and Sheila – and with themselves, and they see that they need to begin again, from a standpoint of truth. Other lies in the play concern the way people define things like 'respectability' or 'truth'. This kind of lie is what we normally refer to as 'hypocrisy'. A word often used in the play is 'pretence', which also draws attention to the theme of lying.

Guilt

The structure of *An Inspector Calls* is in many ways that of a 'whodunnit', and in such a crime story there must always be one – or more than one – guilty party. In this case (as in Agatha Christie's 1934 detective novel *Murder on the Orient Express*) all the 'suspects' are guilty, but of a social crime. They all, metaphorically, stab Eva Smith in the back. Different characters react to their guilt in different ways when it is revealed to them. Not all show remorse or shame, and some are so hardened that they refuse even to accept that remorse is appropriate. By the end of the play the characters have fallen into two groups: those who admit their wrongdoing and are likely to learn and change as a result of it, and those who are entrenched in their attitudes and appear to have learned no lasting lesson.

The characters must realise, accept and be responsible for the true results of what they have done if they are to recover their humanity. All the characters have something to lose by accepting their guilt and acting on it, and for some this is too high a price to pay.

Pride

The play also shows how true it is that pride comes before a fall – especially the false pride shown by some of the characters. Only by abandoning this pride can characters arrive at an honest relationship with themselves and each other. However some, notably Arthur and Sybil Birling, are unwilling to do this.

Love

The play presents a variety of thoughts about love, the nature of love and different people's interpretation of love.

- ❖ Sheila and Gerald appear to be in love, they have just announced their engagement and seem happy enough contemplating a future dedicated to each other.
- ❖ After each of them has confessed to their shameful behaviour towards Eva Smith/Daisy Renton, Sheila realises that they do not really know each other well and that trust is an essential ingredient in a loving relationship.
- ❖ Mr Birling's remark about the engagement of his daughter bringing the two family firms into a close working relationship, gives us an indication of his attitude towards love and marriage. He sees marriage as a convenient way of progressing up the social and economic ladder. This makes us wonder whether love played any real part in his marriage to the socially superior Sybil Birling and whether her coldness to others, including her own children, does not have its roots in a loveless marriage.
- ❖ Both Gerald and Eric have been involved with the girl, yet each of them denies that they loved her – their relationships were prompted by physical attraction.
- ❖ The girl took up with Eric out of necessity, but she does, however, seem to have felt a genuine love for Gerald. Gerald's ending of the affair may be seen as being callous in view of her love for him.

The Inspector preaches a form of love, not too dissimilar to that preached by Christ when he instructed his followers to love one another as much as they love themselves. This form of love is the true 'charity', and is something which appears quite alien to women such as Mrs Birling who bask in the glory of volunteering their time to 'charity' while being devoid of any true charity in their hearts.

Time

J B Priestley wrote the play for an audience just coming out of the horrors of the Second World War, yet he set his play in 1912, two years before the start of the First World War and this brings us to a consideration of J B Priestley's use of time as an element of his plays. At the end of the play we are left with a sense that the events are going to start all over again. We wonder whether things will be different and how the characters will behave.

