**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

**Supported Self Study Guide:**

**‘An Inspector Calls’**

**by J. B. Priestley.**

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**Background and Context**

*An Inspector Calls* was first performed in London in 1946, just after World War II. Priestley uses his knowledge of the reality of two world conflicts to cast shadows over the genteel house of the social-climbing Birlings in 1912, when the play is set. Other real historical events and ideas, such as the sinking of the Titanic, the General Strike of 1926, the rise of Fascism, technological advances and the debate over individual and social responsibility are referred to through the play and add an element of realism. On the other hand, the enigmatic character of Inspector Goole introduces a non-naturalistic quality to the play, and yet another context is provided in the way Priestley has drawn on the detective genre for added dramatic interest.

John Boynton Priestley was born Yorkshire in 1894 and initially rejected academia to work in the local wool industry. After serving in World War I, gaining direct experience of the ‘fire and blood and anguish’ about which Inspector Goole warns the Birlings in the play, he studied at Cambridge University and gained fame first as a novelist (*The Good Companions,* 1929) and then as a dramatist. In both his fiction and plays he draws attention to human weakness and social injustice.

Through the 1930s his political and social concerns influenced him more and more; as a socialist he was concerned that after the First World War, Britain had seen economic chaos, political unrest and social deprivation and in 1942 he helped to set up a new political party with many socialist ideas at its heart. During the Second World War, he was the presenter of *Postscripts*, a weekly BBC radio programme listened to by up to 40% of the population, but eventually taken off air because it was considered critical of the government. Later, Priestley contributed to the development of the Welfare State and was active in the early years of the United Nations. He helped to set up the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958. In terms of his strong moral and political views, one could argue that Priestley used Inspector Goole as a mouthpiece: in one of his broadcasts he said that we ‘must stop thinking in terms of property and power and begin thinking in terms of community and creation’ (*Postscripts*, July 1940).

***TASK ONE***

***Using the information above, in your exercise book, bullet point around 10 key facts under the heading***

***J. B. Priestley that are relevant to his composition of ‘An Inspector Calls’.***

**England in 1912**

Priestley wrote the play in 1945, following a time which had seen great activity both politically and socially. He set the play, however, at a time when the need to improve working conditions for the poor was receiving a lot of attention. In the five or six years before 1914 (outbreak of World War One), there had been mass unrest among the working classes in Britain. The number of people receiving charitable aid from the Church or other charitable organisations had increased. Of the 33 million people in the country, 10 million were living in destitution. In 1906 jobless people marched from the Midlands to London to protest and in the same year the Liberal Party gained a landslide victory against the Conservatives, signalling the unhappiness of the population and a change in people’s attitudes.

In 1908, there was a cotton workers’ strike and a suffragettes’ demonstration, as votes for women became more prominent. In 1909 the new government introduced a ‘People’s Budget’ – raising taxes to pay for reform. In 1910 there was a miners’ strike and 700 mills in Lancashire locked out workers who were demanding higher wages. In 1912 nationwide riots occurred and 300,000 mill workers protested against low wages, once again being locked out by the owners. Low pay and rising prices meant that the working classes could barely survive. By 1912, when the play is set, 2% of Londoners were dying each week from the cold. This was the year when plans to extend National Insurance to include medical aid for the poor were introduced and so Mrs. Birling’s refusal to help Eva Smith is set against this backdrop. In 1912, the Titanic – the unsinkable ship – sank.

At the time the play is set, Britain had just come out of a reign under King Edward V11, a monarch who enjoyed good food, sport and pretty women. The fashionable and highest classes followed his example and many of the upper classes enjoyed a life of leisure and socialising. Even after Edward’s death in 1910, the culture of the upper classes continued to be one of opulence. Outside appearances were crucial – husbands and wives could have affairs as long as family life was maintained and the upper classes’ strict codes of behaviour were adhered to, then one was accepted in the Edwardian period.

Most people were not party to this privileged lifestyle; the upper middles classes (such as the Birlings) were more concerned with respectability than displays of flamboyant wealth. This class of people tended to be conservatives and would have resented socialist ideas being put forward as they owned the factories that were being threatened with strikes. Industrialists of the time may have come from unprivileged backgrounds but their newly acquired wealth enabled them to move in higher circles; marriages between the upper middle classes and the aristocratic, but often relatively poor upper classes, became more common and enabled them to climb the social ladder, as did the fact that many industrialists were granted titles.

The lower classes comprised low wage earners such as maids and factory workers. Often they had come to cities from the country to find work; they faced long working days and poor living conditions. They were seen by many in the middle and upper classes as worthy of very little consideration: knowing your place in society was very important – and poor people’s rights were often ignored by those whose interests resided in making money and leading a comfortable life.

By 1945, when Priestley wrote the play, he and others had seen two world wars greatly reduce distinctions between the classes. In setting his play in 1912, at a time when class distinctions were clearer, Priestley created a powerful message of the need for equality for his post war audience.

***TASK TWO***

***Using the information above, in your exercise book, bullet point around 10 key facts under the heading Society in 1912 that are relevant to the play.***

***TASK THREE***

***Complete the following table showing the timescale of the play and those involved in the fate of Eva/Daisy:***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Time** | **What happens** | **Those involved in Eva/Daisy’s fate** |
| September 1910 | Eva is sacked from Birling and Co. |  |
| December 1910 | Eva is employed by |  |
| Late January 1911 | Eva is sacked by |  |
| March 1911 | Eva becomes involved with |  |
| Early September 1911 | Gerald  Eva leaves Brumley for two months. |  |
| November 1911 | Eva meets |  |
| December 1911 / January 1912 | Eva discovers |  |
| Late March 1912 | Mrs. Birling refuses to |  |
| Early April 1912 | The Birlings are celebrating their daughter’s engagement and an Inspector calls, investigating Eva’s suicide. |  |

***TASK FOUR***

***Read the following information about the genres that Priestley has drawn upon when writing his play. Write each heading in your exercise book and in a short paragraph, explain how the conventions of that particular genre are reflected in ‘An Inspector Calls’.***

**Greek Drama**

In classical Greek drama, plays conformed to the structure of the three unities:

* Action (plot focuses on one storyline)
* Time (stage time and real time are identical and action on stage takes place over no more than 24 hours)
* Place (only one setting is used).

It also involved a chorus or group of actors who served as a narrator, offering a summary of what had happened so far in the play, a commentary on the characters as the play progressed and an explanation about the lessons learned.

In Greek tragedy, the audience also experienced catharsis or release of feelings which helped to cleanse them and in both tragedy and comedy the hero or heroine experienced a significant change in fortune and a discovery or recognition of something previously not known: there was a movement from ignorance to knowledge.

**A Well-Made Play**

The well-made play is a form of a play invented by Eugene Scribe. It involves a tightly structured plot and a climax that takes place very close to the end of the story. Most of the story occurs before the action of the play and the action flows smoothly with all parts of the plot fitting together well. Such plays usually feature:

* An exposition where we are introduced to characters, background and context as well as themes
* Carefully timed entrances and exits which to build suspense
* A secret which is revealed
* Carefully timed climactic curtains to end acts
* Mistaken identity
* A logical or plausible ending/denouement.

**Detective / Mystery Genre**

A detective story is one that involves a mystery that is slowly unravelled and eventually solved. It includes a detective, suspects, clues and eventually a solution /resolution. In a traditional detective story, there will be ‘red-herrings’ before the clever detective reveals the criminal who then receives some sort of punishment.

**Morality Play**

Such plays were performed in the Middle Ages; they sought to instruct their audiences on how to live, behave and treat others. They were based on opposing the seven deadly sins of pride, sloth, gluttony, envy, covetousness, lust and anger.

***TASK FIVE***

***For each of the following characters find a quotation from near to the beginning of the play and near the end of the play to show how far (or not) they have been changed by their experiences. Write the heading ‘Characters and Change’ in your exercise book; make a note of the Act and page number for each of your quotations; comment on the extent (or lack of) of the change in the character’s attitudes or behaviour:***

* ***Mr. Birling***
* ***Mrs. Birling***
* ***Gerald Croft***
* ***Sheila Birling***
* ***Eric Birling.***

***TASK SIX***

***Study the tension graph on the following page. Beneath it are a series of statements that relate to the rise or fall in tension; however they are not placed in their correct order. Number each of the statements so that they correspond to the numbers on the graph. The first and last statements have been numbered for you.***

TENSION GRAPH

1. The family is enjoying a celebration but there are hints of what is to come: ‘except for all last summer when you never came near me’; ‘she’s got a nasty temper sometimes’.

* Gerald suggests the Inspector is not a policeman.
* Interrogation of Sheila.
* The act ends with Eric entering to a knowing crowd.
* The Inspector enters.
* Interrogation of Mrs. Birling and her insistence that the Inspector should do his duty.
* The ‘sharp ring’ of the doorbell sounds just as Mr. Birling talks about his views on community.
* The act ends as the Inspector re-enters saying ‘Well?’
* There was no suicide at the infirmary.
* Interrogation of Eric.
* Interrogation of Mr. Birling.
* Sheila questions Gerald.
* Interrogation of Gerald.
* Gerald puts forward the idea that they weren’t involved with the same girl.
* The Inspector gives his final speech.
* Everything returns to how it was at the start.
* The Inspector leaves.

1. The’ telephone rings sharply’; it is a phone call from the police. The play ends with the news that a police inspector is on his way to ask some questions about the death of a girl who has swallowed some disinfectant.

***TASK SEVEN***

***As you read the play, annotate in your text or make a mental note of Priestley’s use of stage instructions, including entrances and exits of characters. Also look out for what is referred to as ‘the chain of events’, and keep in mind how the following themes are developed:***

* ***Remorse and guilt***
* ***Responsibility***
* ***The law and morality***
* ***Public image and hypocrisy/lies***
* ***Class, gender, status and power***
* ***Money***
* ***Differences between generations***
* ***Time.***