



# An Inspector Calls: Revision notes

These notes are to help kick-start your revision of the play for the GCSE English Literature examination.

**Good Luck**

# Introduction

There are a number of **references to external events** within the play and these could provide the areas which could be developed further. Among these are:

- The Titanic
- The emergence of Russia as a world power
- The outbreak of World War One
- The importance of the Women's Rights movement
- The rise of Socialism
- The writings of H G Wells

## Key Notes:

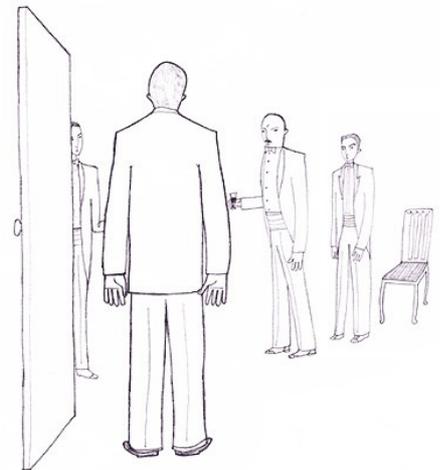
- very **compact structure** to the play, nothing is allowed to distract the audience from the central theme. There is no sub-plot.
- the play takes place in just **one location**, the action is continuous
- Act One begins by **introducing the characters and establishing the idea of a happy and united family** looking forward to the future with a degree of confidence. In retrospect, there are a number of hints that all is not as it seems but these are not particularly obvious until later in the play. There is nothing to warn us of the shock of the Inspector's visit
- events soon gather speed and it is not long before we are being informed of Birling and Sheila's involvement with Eva Smith
- **tensions increase**, firstly as Gerald's affair is unveiled (and the scandal it would cause) and Sheila begins to realise that they are all implicated in some way 'he is giving us rope - so that we'll hang ourselves'.
- Mrs Birling's attempts to shift the blame for the girl's suicide leads her to blame the father of the unborn child. The **tension is heightened** at this point by the **dramatic entrance** of Eric.
- with the **departure of the Inspector** it would appear that what follows will be something of **an anti-climax** as **the Inspector's identity is put into doubt** by a series of observations made by the Birling family and Gerald. Even the existence of Eva is called into question.
- however, **the tension remains** to some extent as the two generations confirm the differences as suggested by the Inspector - **the moral divide** is very great indeed

- the **final denouement**, the phone call announcing that a police inspector is on his way to ask some questions about a girl who has just died in the infirmary is **as shocking as it is surprising** and ensures that the audience will leave the auditorium in a state of real shock

# Quick Summary

## Act I

Sheila Birling has become engaged to Gerald Croft and as a result the Birling family have enjoyed a family dinner together. Mr Birling makes grand speeches giving his views on technology and industrial relations, emphasising his opinion that a man should only care about himself and his family and no-one else. Their evening is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a police inspector by the name of Goole who is making enquiries into the suicide of a young woman called Eva Smith.



The inspector has a photograph of the woman and from it Mr Birling admits that he once employed her in his factory but had sacked her over an industrial dispute over wages. Gerald Croft backs Mr Birling's belief that he acted within reason. Sheila and her brother Eric react differently, feeling that their father was harsh in sacking her. However, upon seeing the photograph herself, Sheila realises that she also sacked the same woman from her job as a shop assistant.

During the course of Act I it becomes clear that the inspector has an uncanny knowledge about the family's dealing with the girl. He then announces that the girl has in fact changed her name from Eva Smith to Daisy Renton. The reaction that this causes in Gerald makes it obvious that he knows the girl also. By the time we reach the end of the act the inspector is already suggesting that many people share the responsibility for the miserable existence of the young girl which prompted her to take her own life.

## Important questions & points about this act:

Why is Mr Birling happy about Sheila's engagement to Gerald?  
Because Gerald's father had always been his rival.

Birling's outlook of life -> the author thinks B. is wrong and will prove him wrong later in the play.

Why might the Inspector investigate a suicide?

Because there seems to be a lot of reasons, which have driven the victim into suicide. He might think there's a crime behind and also because he wants to make the Birling family realise that they're responsible for others. A further aspect is the author intention to show, that the whole story isn't real.

Eric's attitude to the strike?

He would have given the employees the money; to him strikes are something good.

Relationship Sheila - Eric: typically brother-sister relationship, behave rude & unfriendly to each other but in principle like each other very much.

What have Sheila and the Inspector in common?

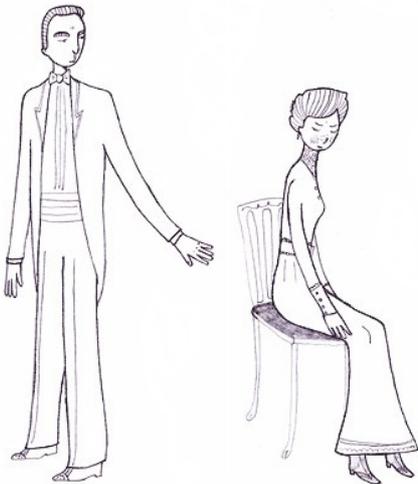
Both of them want to know the truth, both think in a social way and also that Eva's death had been unnecessary.

Relationship Sheila- Gerald: Sheila loves him; to her he's a 'good catch'.

On the other hand Gerald; sees mostly the business aspect of the connection-> no deep feelings!

Why did Eva Smith change her name into Daisy Renton?

She might have had to hide something or might have wanted to start a new, better life.



## Act II

There is by now an evident tension between Sheila and Gerald which becomes heightened when he admits that he had had an affair with Daisy Renton in the spring of the previous year. Whilst feeling angry with Gerald for his involvement with the girl she does have a certain respect for his openness and honesty with his admission.

Mrs Birling makes attempts to intimidate the inspector and control the situation. Despite this, Sheila feels that it is foolish to try and hinder the inspector's enquiries and this appears to be well founded. At the point when Eric is out of the room Mrs Birling is forced to admit that she also has an involvement with the girl. Two weeks earlier she had refused the girl who had come to her seeking help. It is then revealed that the girl was pregnant and the suspicion now points at Eric as being the father of the unborn child.

## Important questions & points

The state of the engagement after Gerald confessed his affair: Sheila solved the engagement, she broke up, but actually she isn't very angry anymore but she needs some time to think.

The inspector's behaviour, Sheila stares at him 'wonderingly and dubiously': because he seems to know all answers in advance.

## Act III

Eric confesses that he was he who had got the girl pregnant. He also admits to having stolen money from his father's firm in an attempt to support her. When he hears that his mother refused to help the girl he is horrified and blames her for both the death of the girl and of the unborn child. At this point it becomes clear that nay family unity has now dissolved. The inspector has therefore done his job by showing each of them that they had a part to play in ruining the girl's life.

He then goes on to make a speech about the consequence of social irresponsibility which is in direct contrast to the speeches made by Mr Birling at the start of the play. The inspector then leaves.

Gerald and Mr Birling begin to have doubts about the inspector's identity and are gradually able to prove that the man was not a real police inspector. This then raises further doubts between them all about whether they have been talking about the same girl or indeed whether any girl had actually killed herself at all. Gerald telephones the infirmary who confirm that they have no record of any girl dying there that afternoon. Naturally there is a general feeling of relief upon hearing this.



Sheila and Eric still feel guilty about their action although they seem to have been changed by the recent events. The others, however, feel a greater sense of relief and their confidence in the rightness of their own actions is restored. At that point the telephone rings and Mr Birling answers it. It is the police calling to say that a young woman has just died on her way to the infirmary and that an inspector is on his way to make enquiries about her death.

## Important questions and points:

Mood in the dining-room: feeling of guilt, wish to learn something.

The growing feeling effect of the evening's events on the Birling family as a whole: they start to feel involved, start arguing amongst themselves, and feel bitter. They make each other responsible for what has happened.

For Sheila it doesn't matter whether the inspector is real or not because what's important to her is that she now knows the truth. But to her parents it's seems to make a big difference because the confession to a real police man would have meant a public scandal.

Sheila & Eric: they learnt form their mistakes, they become more mature and 'real grown-ups'.

Mr. & Mrs. Birling as well as Gerald gets on the point of accepting some responsibility not for very long, all in one they haven't learn anything! They want to forget everything, pretend nothing had happened. They become self-confident again and that's why the second phone call takes place: the author wants to prove them wrong!

The 2nd call: shows the audience clearly the moral of the play, should make think about the play in general.



# Characters

## Mr Birling

A successful business man, a magistrate and someone who is active in local politics, Mr Birling has also had the honour of being Lord Mayor of Brumley. He hopes that all this will lead to him being given a knighthood and therefore becoming more socially acceptable to Sir George and Lady Croft, particularly considering his humble beginnings. His description is of a 'heavy-looking and portentous man'. This description helps to give an impression of him being of a threatening appearance. He is pleased about the engagement of Sheila to Gerald Croft, as he believes it will be good for his business. It is central to the play that his attitude to business and the fact that a man should 'look after his own' is discredited by the confessions that the inspector brings about.

- prosperous factory owner, not the social equal of his wife. He is 'a self made man'
- first priority is to make money 'It's my duty to keep labour cost down'
- welcomes Croft into his family as he represents a business link between his firm and that of Gerald Croft's father (a rival)
- has an honest approach to life, he tells the Inspector that he wouldn't listen to Eva Smith's demand for a wage rise 'I refused, of course' and is surprised why anyone should question why.
- strongly believes that 'a man has to make his own way'. He does not consider the harm he may cause to other people because of his attitude. He is a 'hard headed business man'
- he is a magistrate and former mayor who is looking forward to receiving a knighthood
- he is very aware that Gerald's mother is rather against her son's marriage because she believes him to be marrying beneath him socially
- he is optimistic about the future, yet we know that what he predicts will not become true (NB dramatic irony)
- he refuses to accept any responsibility for Eva 's death. He becomes increasingly annoyed by the Inspector's questioning and Eric's unsympathetic attitude
- he tries to threaten the Inspector by talking about his friendship with the Chief Constable
- the most disturbing part of the play for Birling is the scene in which he learns that his own son is shown to be a thief, a drunkard and is responsible for fathering a child. When he learns of all this he exclaims 'You damned fool - why didn't you come to me when you found yourself in this mess?'



- Eric's reply indicates that Mr Birling was never close to his son 'Because you're not the kind of chap a man could turn to when he's in trouble'. Such a response indicates that things aren't going to improve much after the play ends
- he represents a very unattractive sort of person. At the end of the play he grudgingly wishes things were better but even here he still thinks in terms of money 'Look, Inspector - I'd give thousands'
- he continues to ignore the shameful things that his family has done. When it appears that the Inspector might be a hoaxer he is happy to believe that everything is as it was a few hours ago. He copies the Inspector and laughs when he remembers the faces of Eric and Sheila and accuses them of being 'the famous younger generation who know it all'. This is an example of pride coming before a fall, a moment later of course he is panicking as the phone rings again
- Mr Birling represents Priestley's hatred of businessmen who are only interested in making money. He will never alter his ways and it is left to the younger generation to learn from their mistakes

## Sheila

The Birling's daughter. Engaged to be married to Gerald Croft. She is in her early twenties and is described as 'pretty'. The attention surrounding her important engagement gives her great pleasure, showing her to be somewhat self-centred. She thus starts the play as someone whom the audience would regard as superficial however, this changes once she hears of the girl's death and her potential part in it and becomes more caring and sensitive. She shows genuine remorse about the fact that it was her who caused the girl to lose her job at the shop.

- at the start of the play she is 'very pleased with life'. She is young, attractive and has just become engaged
- her happiness is soon to be destroyed as is her faith in her family
- her response to the tragedy is one of the few encouraging things to come out of the play. She is genuinely upset when she hears of Eva's death and learns from her own behaviour
- she is very distressed by the girl's suicide and thinks that her father's behaviour was unacceptable. She readily agrees that she behaved very badly and insists that she never meant the girl any harm.
- the Inspector says that she is only partly responsible and later on, when he is about to question Gerald, he encourages her to stay and listen to what he has to say so that she doesn't feel entirely responsible
- not only is she prepared to admit her faults, she also appears keen and anxious to change her behaviour in the future, 'I'll never, never do it again'
- she is aware of the mystery surrounding the Inspector, yet realises that there is no point in trying to hide the facts from him

- she is mature about the breaking up of her engagement and remains calm. She won't be rushed into accepting the ring back once the Inspector has left
- she is unable to accept her parents attitude and is both amazed and concerned that they haven't learned anything from the episode. Although the Inspector might be a hoax, the family have still behaved in an entirely unsuitable manner
- she learns of her responsibilities to others less fortunate than herself (the idea of the community) and is sensitive. Her readiness to learn from experience is in great contrast to her parents

## The Inspector

The Inspector, named 'Goole', is described as creating 'an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness'. His role grows as the play unfolds and the story of each character is revealed. Whilst they are broken down he remains solid and despite attempts from the others to distract him from his purpose he stays this way throughout. He is the one who makes things happen in the play. Were it not for him none of the secrets that the others have would be revealed and it is he who demonstrates how people are responsible for the affect they have on the lives of others. His sombre appearance in the play is in direct contrast to the Birling family. There is an air of celebration in the room until he enters bringing with him the news of the dead girl. From then on it is he who controls everything.

## Mrs Birling

Owing to her coldness and lack of conscience, Mrs Birling is seen as being unsympathetic and out of touch with reality. It is this lack of understanding that leads to her making several snobbish comments and even to be unaware of her own son's heavy drinking. She is described as a 'rather cold woman and her husband's social superior'. However, she shows signs of weakening when she realises that her actions had resulted in the death of her own grandchild. Once the inspector leaves though, she quickly recovers her old self, emphasising her harsh and uncaring nature.



## Eric Birling

Eric is an opposite of his sister and 'not quite at ease'. His father does not approve of him and his mother cannot see his faults one of which is a drink problem. He has made the dead girl pregnant and he has also stolen money from his father to support her. Like his sister, however, he feels both a strong sense of guilt and real sympathy towards Eva Smith.

## Gerald Croft

Sheila's fiancé and the son of her father's industrial rival. He is respected by Mr Birling with whom he shares an opinion on the way to conduct business. Self confident and at ease with anyone he comes into contact with are the his main traits. He is courteous and tactful towards the Birlings. It comes to light that he has had an affair with the dead girl who had changed her name to Daisy Renton at the time.



## Eva Smith/Daisy Renton

We never see her but the play revolves around her. She is linked to all the other characters, except for the inspector and Edna, who all seemed to have played a part in her downfall. Her existence and death are in direct contrast with the wealthy lives of the Birlings and Gerald Croft.

Who is to blame?

Who is to blame for Eva's death? Consider how each of the Birlings and Gerald Croft influences what happens to Eva - what part does each play in the chain of events leading to her death?

Give an account of this chain of events in the order in which each event occurs.

Say how far each character is at fault for what he or she has done to Eva.

Then judge how far each is right or wrong in his or her attitude now to what was done - admitting or denying guilt.

In conclusion, try to assess how responsible, and how ready to admit responsibility, each of the five is.

Is there any connection between the age of each character and his or her readiness to accept blame?

The Inspector tells Mr. Birling that Eva Smith/Daisy Renton "left a letter...and a sort of diary".

Year and month	What happens
September 1910	Eva sacked by Birling & Co.
December 1910	Eva employed by Milwards.
Late January 1911	Eva sacked by Milwards.
March 1911	Eva becomes Gerald's mistress.
Early September 1911	Gerald breaks off the affair. Eva leaves Brumley for two months.
November 1911	Eric meets Eva.
December 1911/January 1912	Eva finds she is pregnant.
Late March 1912	Mrs. Birling turns down Eva's application for help.
Early April 1912	Eva's suicide/the Inspector calls

# Setting

## Why 1912?

There are no recorded interviews with J.B. Priestley which give a direct answer to why Priestley wrote the play in 1946 but set it in 1912. Judging by what we know of J.B. Priestley it is possible to guess. J.B. Priestley fought in WWI, and was a radio newscaster during WWII. He witnessed both of these wars that were being fought in order to save society. In *An Inspector Calls* written just after WWII, J.B. Priestley seems to be asking the question, "Just that kind of society are we fighting to save?" The social issues that were so prevalent in the labour strikes of 1912 were still important in 1946, because the very definition of society means that human beings don't live alone and that each one is responsible for their actions towards the other. By setting his characters in a time of innocence and hope, Priestley can speak even more strongly to his audiences who have lived through a time of despair. The pride and complacency of the Birlings seems all the more foolish to an audience who knows what is about to happen to the English people. The lessons that Eric and Sheila learn are even more poignant when one realizes that very soon all classes in England, upper, middle and lower, will be involved in the same tragic war.

When studying *An Inspector Calls* it is necessary and also highly important to look closely at the **setting** of it. The play is set **in a fictitious industrial city** called Brumley. Priestley grew up in the industrial northern city of Bradford and this may have been highly influential to him because in the play, Brumley, although not a real place, has a lot of background information given about it.

Brumley is a town of **some importance**. It has a Lord Mayor and a police force that boasts its own Chief Constable. In the play it is mentioned that there is to be a forthcoming visit by a member of the Royal Family and one of the main characters, Arthur Birling, is hoping for a knighthood through his activity in local politics and having once been Lord Mayor of Brumley.

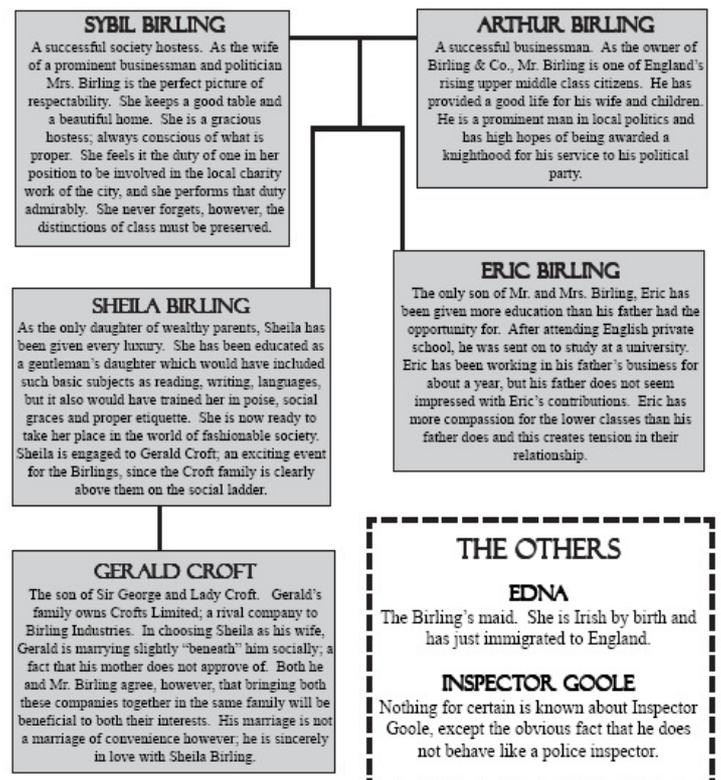
There are clearly a **large number of poor and needy women** living in Brumley as there is mentioned in the play a place called the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation. Another of the characters, Mrs Birling, is involved with this organisation and this gives us an insight into some historical context. In the time when the play was set a good many of these organisations were in existence and relied mainly upon financial support from wealthy people, such as Mrs Birling, and help was given to individuals at the discretion and decision of those benefactors. Priestley makes other references, apart from the Birlings, towards social injustice.

As for **the action of the play** - it all happens in the Birlings' dining room. The room is described as being **'substantial and heavily comfortable, but not cosy and homelike'**. This description of the room **mirrors the lives of the Birlings**. They are **outwardly respectable** and enjoy a comfortable and well off way of life and yet **their relationships with one and other are not at all cosy and there are a great number of tensions between them**.

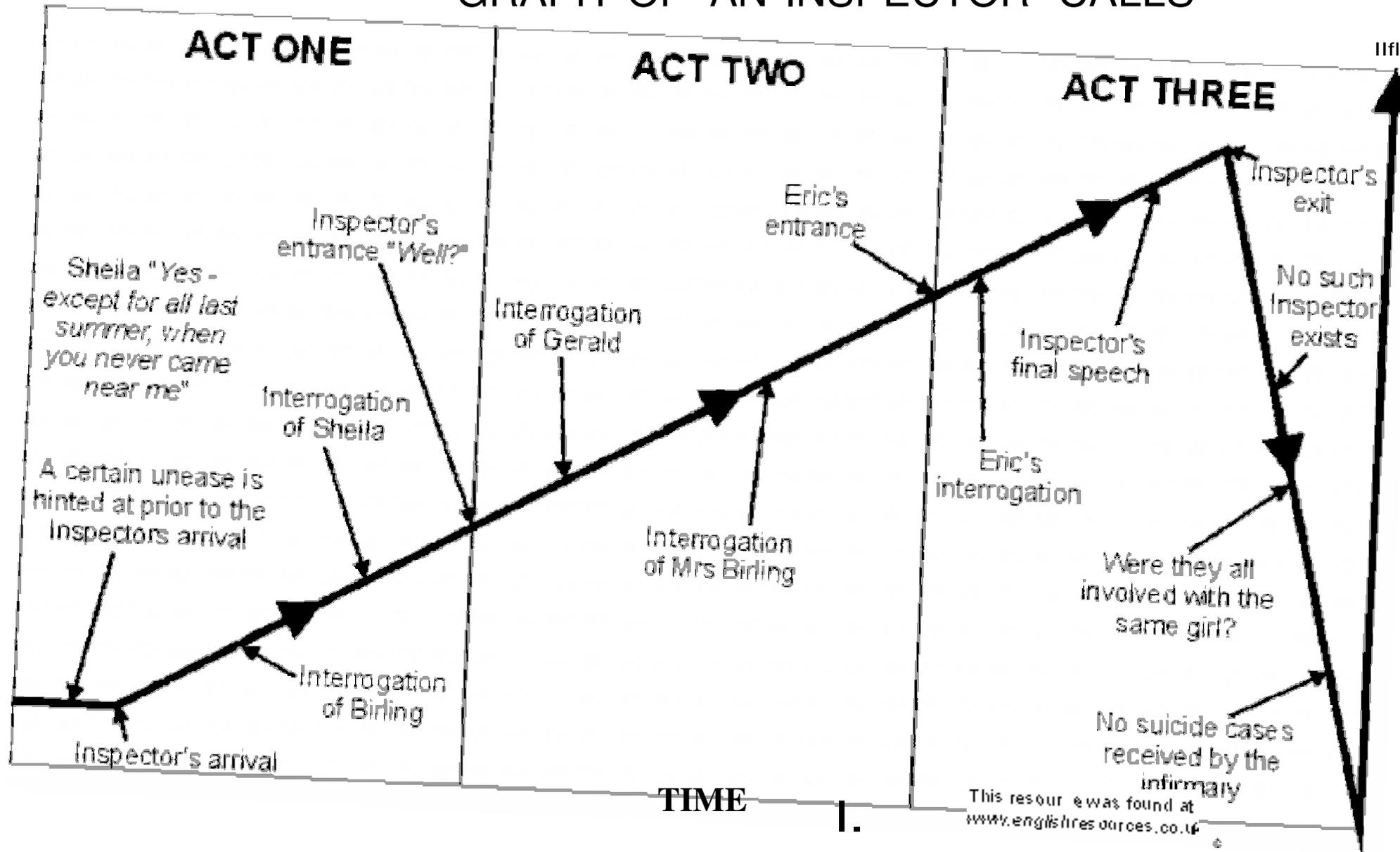
The **realism** of the stage set is **important** as it gives the audience a sense that they are in the safe confines of **normality**. This is something that Priestley often liked to begin his plays with. However, the mysterious role of the inspector and the telephone call at the end of the play suddenly introduce the audience to **an element of the unreal**.

## THE CHARACTERS

### FAMILY TREE



# TENSION GRAPH OF AN INSPECTOR CALLS <sup>the telephone</sup>



# Staging



## COSTUME DESIGN Sarah Jane Burch



**SYBIL  
BIRLING**



**SHEILA  
BIRLING**



**EDNA**



**ERIC BIRLING**

# Practice

## Responsibility

The most important theme of the play, it could be argued, is responsibility.

See how often the words "responsible" and "responsibility" appear, and in what senses.

At the beginning of the play Mr. Birling gives his (limited) view of responsibility in a long speech.

Mr. Birling's definition of responsibility is immediately followed by the arrival of the Inspector.

The Inspector gives his (very wide) explanation of responsibility immediately before he leaves.

Comment on these speeches and compare them.

Consider how Mr. Birling's comments reveal his views:

How do Mr. Birling's earlier comments on the unlikelihood of war, the probable success of capitalists in eliminating strikes and on the unsinkability of the Titanic affect our view of what he says on responsibility? (The play's audience, in 1946, would be aware of two world wars, the General Strike and the sinking of the Titanic).

Is Mr. Birling a "hard-headed" businessman, as he claims, or a "hard-hearted" character?

In 1912 there was no welfare state in Britain. Poor people often depended on charity. But wealthy people, such as Mrs. Birling, in the play, usually controlled the charity.

Does Mrs. Birling, in her work for the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation act out of a sense of responsibility or a desire to be seen to be charitable?

Where does she claim the responsibility for Eva Smith and her unborn child lies?

How is she shown to be wrong?

Show how the Inspector demonstrates by bringing out Eva's dealings with the Birlings and Gerald, that his view, not Birling's is right.

What are the "fire and blood and anguish" he refers to in his final speech?

What point is Priestley making by placing this line in a play published in 1946?

The Inspector's identity may affect how we view his comments.

How is our view of the Inspector's statements affected by his apparently supernatural character?

Comment on his claim that "we are members of one body".

After he leaves, says the Inspector, the Birlings and Gerald can divide responsibility among themselves.

How do they apportion blame when he leaves?

Is Birling concerned about the same things that worry Sheila and Eric?

Sheila is worried earlier in the play by her mother's self-righteous denial of blame. After the Inspector goes she is worried by the attempt to dismiss his visit as a mere practical joke.

Consider the idea that the Inspector, by his visit, gives the family a second chance which is lost by the failure of the majority to learn their lesson.

How significant in determining the play's conclusion is Gerald's eventually siding with the view of the parents (The Inspector has foreseen a suicide about to happen. They may, by a change of heart, prevent it - but the chance is missed and the suicide occurs).

**Who is the Inspector?**

**Who or what is the Inspector?** In the text there are many clues. Examine each of these and try to interpret it. Write an essay, discussing how these clues and the Inspector's general behaviour contribute to the audience's idea of who he is and how correct his statements are.

The clues are:

The timing of his entry (noted by Eric);

His method of working: "one person and one line of enquiry at a time" (A policeman would not insist on this. A real policeman would interview people alone. This Inspector already knows; he wants the others to see what they have done.)

His asking Birling why he refused Eva's request for a pay rise.

His statement that it is his duty "to ask questions".

His saying that he never takes offence.

His statement that he does not see much of the chief constable.

His failure to be alarmed by Birling's threats.

His reply to Birling's question: "You sure of your facts?" - "Some of them - yes". Not all, because not all have happened yet: Eva Smith has not yet killed herself, it would seem.

His concern for moral law not for criminal law.

His statement: "some things are left to me. Inquiries of this sort, for instance".

Sheila's recognition of his authority and supernatural knowledge - as shown in her warnings to Gerald and to her mother .

His statement about the impression he has made on Sheila: "We often do on the young ones".

His impatience to "get on" with his questioning followed by his statement that he hasn't "much time". A police officer would take as much time as was needed. It is as if he needs to finish before the moment at which Eva will decide whether or not to end her life.

His saying, "I don't need to know any more", once he has shown the Birlings and Gerald what each has done.

His final speech, which has nothing to do with criminal law, but which is a lecture on social responsibility and the perils of ignoring it.

The Birlings' discovery that no such officer is on the local police force.

The Inspector's telling Sheila there is "no reason why" she should "understand about" him Eric's saying "He was our police inspector all right" followed by Sheila's comment "Well, he inspected us all right"

His foreknowledge of Eva's death.

His intimate knowledge of Eva's life and despite the fact that he never spoke to her

His prediction of a massive social catastrophe ("fire and blood and anguish") which clearly refers (for the Birlings) to the First World War and (for the audience) to both World Wars.

Do you think that Mrs Birling is more to blame for the death of Eva Smith than the other characters?

Give reasons for your answer.

### Para 1: Introduction - Mrs Birling

Explain Mrs Birling's role in Eva's death and discuss whether she is to blame.  
Firstly, Mrs Birling. . .

### Para 2 - Mr Birling

Look at Mr Birling's part in the tragedy and comment on the extent of his responsibility.  
Moreover, Mr Birling. . .

### Para 3 - Sheila

Explore Sheila's part and, as before, comment on the extent of her responsibility.  
In comparison, Sheila. . .

### Para 4 - Gerald

In contrast, Gerald. . .

### Para 5 - Eric

Furthermore, Eric. . .

### Para 6 - Conclusion

Weigh up each character's responsibility and decide whether Mrs Birling is more to blame than anyone else.

