



An Inspector Calls

Knowledge Organiser

Key events

Associated quotes

J B Priestley's An Inspector Calls centres on the suicide of a young woman known as Eva Smith. During the play, the wealthy and comfortable Birling family are celebrating Sheila Birling's engagement to Gerald Croft when their meal is interrupted by the visit of Inspector Goole, who is investigating Eva's death.

Act 1

The Birlings are celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling (the Birlings' daughter) to Gerald Croft, whose family own a rival business to that of Arthur Birling – Sheila's father. The family are celebrating with champagne, cigars and many other luxuries that only a wealthy middle or upper class family of the time could afford.

"We employers at last are coming together to see that our interests – and the interests of capital – are properly protected. And we're in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity."
Arthur Birling



Mr Birling seems very keen to impress Gerald and even speaks to him in private away from the rest of his family; Sheila mentions about Gerald having not come near her the previous summer; and Eric appears very nervous and anxious around his family. Although the atmosphere is mostly positive, there are hints that there are problems hidden under the surface.

Mrs Birling and Sheila leave the dining room to allow the men to speak on their own. Mr Birling gives Eric and Gerald advice about looking after yourself and not concerning yourself with others. As he is giving this speech, there is a ring at the door.

Edna, the maid, brings in a man who is known as Inspector Goole. A detailed description is provided of Goole and he is said to be serious but also demanding respect. He tells the family that he is investigating the suicide of Eva Smith, who had died after drinking a large quantity of disinfectant.



The Inspector shows Mr Birling a photo of Eva Smith (although makes sure no one else sees it) and Birling admits that Eva used to work at his factory. However, she was later fired for being one of the ring-leaders of uprising and strike action after Birling refused to give any of his workers even a small pay rise. Birling argues that he pays usual rates to his workers and he is not responsible for what happened to Eva after she left his employment.



Sheila comes into the room and the Inspector wants to ask her some questions. It is revealed that Eva found work at a clothes shop after being fired by Birling. However, Eva was fired once more when the Inspector explains a customer complained about her. Sheila admits she was that customer and the reason she got Eva fired was because a dress that Sheila tried on did not suit her and when Eva tried it on, it did. Sheila also believes she caught Eva laughing at her.

"What happened to her then may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events." **The Inspector**

When Sheila finds out what happened to Eva, she immediately feels responsible for her death – in complete contrast to her father. The Inspector then reveals Eva, unemployed once more, changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald Croft, Sheila's fiancé, gives away that he knew Daisy by his reaction. Sheila sees this. The act ends and the audience are waiting to find out how Gerald is connected to Daisy.

Act 2

Sheila and Gerald are alone on stage and Gerald admits he did know Daisy, but Sheila explains to Gerald that the Inspector has already worked this out.

BIRLING
"You'll apologize at once ... I'm a public man –"
INSPECTOR [massively]
"Public men, Mr. Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges."

Gerald reveals to Mrs Birling that her son Eric drinks a lot – she initially refuses to believe him – and he admits that he once had a relationship with Daisy. Sheila works out that this was during the one summer when he wouldn't go near her.

Gerald explains that he met Daisy at the Variety Theatre (which was known for prostitutes), and that he stopped Alderman Meggarty – an important man or 'dignitary' – getting involved with her.

Gerald helped Daisy by letting her stay in a friend's flat but she eventually became his mistress, which meant he was having an affair with her behind Sheila's back. Gerald decided to later break off their relationship and gave her money to help her in the future.





Mrs Birling says she believes this relationship was 'disgusting', although Gerald does argue back. However, Sheila appreciates Gerald's honesty and says she respects him more now than she did.







Gerald asks to leave the room to get some fresh air after now realising Daisy has died. The Inspector allows him to do this, and during the time he is away the Inspector begins to interrogate Mrs Birling. Mrs Birling eventually admits that she saw Eva/Daisy before she died. Mrs Birling was the chair of a local charity: the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation and Daisy, calling herself Mrs Birling, asked for financial help. It is revealed that Daisy was pregnant at the time, and Mrs Birling used her power as chairwoman of the charity to deny her access to financial assistance.



Mrs Birling found it impudent or insulting that Daisy took on the name 'Mrs Birling' and she also felt the money and responsibility should come from the baby's father. Mrs Birling seems to take pride from her decision, although Sheila quickly realises the missing link here: Eric is the father. This happens after Mrs Birling has said the father of the child should be made an example of. Mrs Birling realises, just as Eric enters at the end of the scene, that her son is the father and she has effectively killed her own grandchild.

Act 3	
Eric asks for a drink and his parents refuse, but the Inspector explains it would help Eric through and so they agree. Eric explains how he met Daisy at the same theatre bar as Gerald; they both got drunk and Eric accompanied Daisy back to her flat. There, Eric became very violent and Daisy reluctantly agreed to let him in where they slept together. They met again two weeks later and slept together once more.	Eric: (bursting out) What's the use of talking about behaving sensibly. You're beginning to pretend now that nothing's really happened at all. And I can't see it like that. This girl's still dead, isn't she? Nobody's brought her to life, have they?
Daisy revealed to Eric that she was pregnant with his baby, and he proposed to her. However, she refused stating he did not love her. Instead, she received gifts of money from him, but turned these down when she found out Eric was stealing the money from his father's business. Mr and Mrs Birling are incensed that Eric has stolen £50 from them (a lot of money in 1912, it would be thousands of pounds now).	
All of the family have been involved in her death, but a divide forms between the younger characters and the older family members. The Inspector then gives his famous 'fire and blood and anguish' speech, where he explains society must change or there will be violence. Goole says that everyone must feel responsible for everyone else.	
Gerald and Mr and Mrs Birling begin to question the role of the Inspector: was he a real inspector? Was this all a hoax? Did the Inspector show the same photo to everyone? Birling rings the local police station and finds out there is no Inspector Goole working there. Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald begin to grow in confidence once more, knowing their reputations are in tact and believe they can go back to where they were. However, Sheila and Eric have changed and cannot ignore what has happened. A phone call comes from the police which Mr Birling answers: the police explain a young girl has committed suicide and a police inspector is coming over to ask them some questions.	

Context key term 	Why is this significant?
Edwardian Period: The play is set in 1912 during the Edwardian period. This is the time between the end of the Victorian era and the start of the First World War in 1914. In this time period class divisions were still very clear with there being virtually no welfare state or benefits in place for the poorer sections of society.	By setting the play in this period, Priestley is able to remind his post-war audience what society was like only 30 years previously, when a small minority of rich aristocrats and middle-class business owners dominated the wealth in the country. At a turning point like 1945 when the play was written, Priestley wanted to encourage his audiences to push for social and political change in Britain. 
The Post-War Period: The play was performed in 1945 (in the Soviet Union and in the UK in 1946). This was a time of significant social, economic and political upheaval after two World Wars that completely altered the make-up of British society.	Priestley was a noted socialist and wanted to bring about change in British society. By performing this play to the public in Post-War Britain, Priestley was able to influence the British people into supporting socialist reforms. 
Socialism: A political philosophy that and theory that believes the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community. 	Britain pre-1945 had always been a capitalist or imperialist society and socialism was a relatively new political theory. The British Labour Party was formed several decades before advocating socialism in the country. In 1945 it won a famous General Election victory, ousting then Prime Minister Winston Churchill. New PM Clement Attlee brought in the British welfare state which included the National Health Service, where everyone in the country contributed to the NHS through National Insurance and everyone was able to use it without charge.
Capitalism: An economic and political system in trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, not the state.	Britain has – for most of its modern history – been a capitalist society. Priestley was frustrated at what he saw as economic inequality in society and wanted to use the Second World War as a catalyst for change. He therefore advocated socialism over capitalism.
The Titanic: A colossal passenger ship that sank on its maiden voyage from Britain to America in 1912. 	Arthur Birling boasts of the tremendous power of the Titanic in one of his early speeches in the play. However, Priestley and the audience are aware the Titanic sank a few days after Birling makes his speech. Priestley therefore uses the Titanic as a symbol of greed and capitalism and shows that its power and control will inevitably sink. It also makes Birling look incredibly foolish.

Character summary	Key Quotes	Associated themes or ideas:
<p>Mr Arthur Birling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mr Birling is described as “a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties but rather provincial in his speech.” •He represents middle class men who have made money via capitalism. •He refuses to accept responsibility for anyone else except himself, including the death of Eva Smith. •He represents capitalism and its ideals. •He also represents an older generation that is less likely to be influenced by ideas of socialism. •Despite his arrogance and confidence, Birling is no match for the wit, precision and intellect of The Inspector. 	 <p>“If we were all responsible for everything that happened to everybody we'd had anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn't it?” (Act 1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capitalism Generation gap Patriarchal society Individualism Class Gender Responsibility Reputation Aspiration
<p>Mrs Sybil Birling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •She represents many of the upper and middle class attitudes from the time: arrogance, sanctimony, snobbishness and selfishness. •She is part of the older generation that refuses to change or accept new ideas. She is happy to live in the status quo. •She uses her influence to hurt other people rather than help them – it is difficult for the audience to do anything but dislike Mrs Birling, as is the case with her husband. •She seems to have some control over her husband, determining when he should or should not speak. Her role as matriarch in the family goes against the established patriarchal society of the Edwardian period. 	 <p>“When you're married you'll realize that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business.” (Act 1)</p> <p>“You seem to have made a great impression on this child, inspector. (Act 2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capitalism Generation gap Patriarchal society Individualism Class Gender Responsibility Reputation Aspiration
<p>Sheila Birling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The daughter of Arthur and Sybil Birling and engaged to be married to Gerald Croft at the start of the play. •Sheila shows how gender roles are clearly defined at the start of the play: she is meant to be the sweet, innocent and naïve girl that gets married. •As the play progresses, her character changes and she becomes far more determined, confrontational and aware. •By the end of the play she represents a younger generation that is far more willing to take responsibility for the people around them. 	 <p>“But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people.” (Act 1)</p> <p>“And Eric's absolutely right. And it's the best thing any one of us has said tonight and it makes me feel a bit less ashamed of us. You're just beginning to pretend all over again.” (Act 3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Materialism Generation gap Gender equality Responsibility Reputation Class Guilt
<p>Eric Birling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The son of Arthur and Sybil Birling. •Eric represents the younger generation that are more socially responsible than their parents. •He drinks because he feels guilt about what he did: by violently forcing himself on Eva, he got her pregnant and helped to drive her towards suicide. •Eric sometimes has contrary opinions to his parents and it is he who brings up the idea of war and suggesting his father could have paid Eva more money. •Because he accepts responsibility by the end of the play, the audience come to respect Eric a lot more. 	 <p>“What about war?” (Act 1)</p> <p>“He could. He could have kept her on instead of throwing her out. I call it tough luck.” (Act 1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patriarchal society Generation gap Gender equality Responsibility Reputation Class Guilt
<p>Gerald Croft</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Engaged to be married to Sheila Birling and the son of wealthy aristocrats who are also rivals in business to Arthur Birling. •He represents the upper classes in the play. •We – the audience – want him to change, after all, he did help Daisy with money, but he doesn't. •He represents how the old class system is hard to remove – aristocrats don't want to lose their power and their status. 	<p>“Inspector: and you think young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things?</p> <p>Gerald: if possible – yes.” (Act 2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patriarchal society Generation gap Gender equality Responsibility Reputation Class
<p>The Inspector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inspector Goole is described as “an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness.” •Despite questioning a family of wealthy members of the upper middle classes, the Inspector appears calm and assertive throughout. He seems to have already pre-planned exactly who is going to speak to and when and how he will speak to them. •As Sheila comes to understand, the Inspector already knows how all the characters are connected to Eva. Because of this, gives him a ghost-like or supernatural quality to him. •He seems to be operating on a different level of consciousness to the other characters and this has led to a number of theories about who or what Inspector Goole is. 	 <p>“You see, we have to share something. If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt.” (Act 2)</p> <p>“We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night.” (Act 3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender equality Responsibility Reputation Class The supernatural Socialism Community
<p>Edna:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Edna's role in the play is seemingly insignificant, but she is the character that introduces the Inspector to the Birlings and she is the only genuine working class presence in the whole play. Like Eva, Edna is ignored by the other characters for most of the play which is hugely symbolic in itself. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class Responsibility

Dramatic device	Why is this significant?
Dramatic irony: When characters know less than the audience	At different points in the play the audience knows facts that some of the characters do not. For instance, Arthur Birling boasts about the Titanic, yet as an audience in Post-War Britain, we know that the ship sank. This then serves to make Birling's boasts look empty and foolish.
Foreshadowing: Hinting to the audience about what is going to happen later on in the play.	Clues about the Birlings' problems are hinted at from the very start of the play, for instance when Sheila mentions about the summer Gerald hardly came near her. It hints at what is going to be revealed later on in the play and keeps the audience eager to solve the mystery.
Stage directions: Used by the writer to indicate to the director and actors about how they should perform their roles.	Even though an audience can't see stage directions when a play is being performed, they are pivotal for helping to bring a play to life AND as students of literature we can analyse how they impact on the performance of a play. The stage directions at the very beginning of the play make clear to us about the status of the Birling family, for instance.
Cliffhangers: Keeping the audience in suspense from one part of a text to another.	Priestley employs a cliffhanger at the end of Act One and again at the end of Act Two. It means we as an audience are desperate to find out what happens in the subsequent scenes and so suspense and tension are built.



Form	Why is this significant?
Well-Made Play: A type of very structured play that was immensely popular in the 19 th and early 20 th centuries. The action often builds to a climax.	Priestley's play follows a traditional three act structure where he builds a problem before reaching a dramatic climax and then moving on to the resolution or solving the problem. However, the plot twist at the very end of the play moves away from this rigid structure and leads to the audience having to make their own judgments and conclusions.
Morality Play: An allegorical drama having personified abstract ideas as the main characters (such as Greed or Death) and presenting a lesson about good conduct and character to the audience. They were popular in the 15 th and early 16 th centuries.	An Inspector Calls is a kind of allegory, with different characters representing different sections of Edwardian society. It is also quite clear that Priestley wanted to educate or teach his audience about his own political viewpoints.
Crime and Mystery	An Inspector Calls uses a number of crime genre conventions, such as clues, a mystery to be solved, suspects, a dramatic climax before all is revealed, and so on.

