

'An Inspector Calls' by JB Priestley

Plot and structure

Priestley structures the play by dividing it into three Acts. The play uses both the features of a well made play and Greek unites of action, time and place.

Act One

- The Engagement Party
- Birling and Gerald talk alone
- Arrival of the Inspector
- Interrogation of Mr Birling
- Interrogation of Sheila
- Sheila's confession and suspicion

Act Two

- Gerald's confession
- Interrogation of Gerald
- Interrogation of Mrs Birling/
- Eric's entrance

Act Three

- Interrogation of Eric
- The Inspector Leaves
- The Inspector's Identity.

The Well-Made Play (Eugene Scribe 1791-1861)

Exposition - sets up the characters, setting and plot

Complication - introduces a problem that must be resolved

Climax - the highest point of the story – everything has worked up to this moment

Falling Action - the story starts to draw towards a close

Resolution - The writer may have left you thinking or answered all of your questions.

The Greek Unities:

Action: The action seems more intense and convincing because there are no complicated sub-plots

Time: The events on stage seem more immediate because they unfold in real time.

Place: The single naturalistic setting focuses the attention of the audience

A modern version of the medieval morality plays: Priestley takes the characters and audience on a journey of enlightenment from ignorance to knowledge. He warns them of the error of their ways and, through the Inspector, suggests an alternative.

Characters

Inspector Goole: the antagonist (he opposes Mr Birling and provides the catalyst for events in the play). Priestley's mouthpiece and an advocate for social justice.

Arthur Birling: the protagonist (lead character). A businessman and capitalist. Represents all that Priestley dislikes about society (Birling opposes social equality).

Sybil Birling: her husband's social superior. Represents wealthy middle class, snobbery and outdated attitudes.

Sheila Birling: begins as a naive and selfish girl but is influenced by the Inspector's views and learns from her mistakes. Represents Priestley's hope for the future.

Eric Birling: demonstrates the consequences of Birling's wealth and attitude – he is spoilt and thoughtless. He is the only one who commits criminal acts. Like Sheila, he redeems himself by learning from the Inspector.

Gerald Croft: Businessman engaged to Sheila. Politically closest to Birling (who adores him). Blind to the damage sustained by the poor as a consequence of the social hierarchy

Eva Smith/Daisy Renton: unseen in the play but central to the story of every character. A representative of social injustice.

Edna: the maid. Her presence reinforces the Birlings' wealth and status in society.

Eva Smith's Timeline

Date	What happened
September 1910	After helping to organise a strike at Birling & Co. Eva is sacked
December 1910	Eva gets a job at Milwards
January 1911	Sheila complains about Eva. Eva is sacked.
March 1911	Eva (Daisy Renton) meets Gerald. They become lovers.
September 1911	Gerald ends relationship. Eva moves to seaside for 2 months.
November 1911	Eva meets Eric. She gets pregnant. He steals. She leaves him.
Early Spring 1912	Eva is refused help by Sybil at the 'Brumley Women's Charity Organisation'.
April 1912	Eva Smith drinks disinfectant and dies.

Writer's purpose and intentions

To entertain: the play can be seen as a social drama, a political drama, a 'well-made play' a 'whodunnit' or a moral fable – it has widespread appeal

To change society: Priestley's didactic message is that of the Inspector: '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, with what we think and say and do. We don't live alone.'

Key Themes

Social class and status: Priestley shows that class hierarchies need to change

Social responsibility: the interrogation of each of the characters demonstrates the need for change

Personal responsibility: Priestley advocates the need for individuals to accept responsibility for their own actions. It is because Arthur, Sybil and Gerald, shirk this responsibility that the phone rings again at the end of the play, thus warning the characters and audience that they must change their attitude.

Morality: Priestley explores the idea of morality in terms of society, the behaviour of individuals and the treatment of others rather than in a religious sense. However, the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth) are evident in the behaviour of the characters and Priestley clearly warns against them.

Time: setting the play in 1912 allows Priestley to distance the audience from the action on stage whilst still teaching them a lesson about learning from mistakes. Priestley exploits the time setting of the play to shape our impression of Birling through dramatic irony. Lines such as 'fire and blood and anguish' make reference to the wars experienced by both Priestley and the contemporary audience.

Love: the play begins with the engagement between Sheila and Gerald but Priestley suggests that their relationship is already adversely affected by money, business, gender inequality and deceit.

Inequality: men/women (a patriarchal society leading to misogyny); class (upper and lower social classes are segregated. Money equals power (Capitalism and the focus on money rather than people).

Lies, secrecy and deceit: Priestley suggests that the lives of the upper and middle classes are based on hypocrisy through his depiction of the Birling family.

Exam skills

AO1: critical understanding (of both the text and the task)

AO2: analysis of language, structure and form (use subject terms)

AO3: understanding of writer's ideas and intentions, and context.

Context

1912: when the play is set. Just before the sinking of the Titanic and WW1. A time of industrial progress and prosperity. A time when stratification of society is still very fixed.

1945: when the play was written and first performed. After WW2. A changing society with the introduction of the welfare state, the NHS and a change in government from Conservative to Labour.

Priestley: a broadcaster, writer and socialist. He believed in the Welfare state (a system in which the government looks after the poor and vulnerable in society) and equality.

Writer's methods

Dramatic timing/structure: e.g. the timing of the Inspector's arrival; Eric's return at the end of Act 2; the sequence of the interrogations

Characterisation: the distinctive behaviour and syntax of each character

Dramatic irony: Birling's speeches in Act 1. Eric's entrance in Act 2.

Suspense and tension

Cliff-hanger: end of Act 2 and the ending of the play

Stage directions: '*lighting should be pink and intimate until the Inspector arrives, and then it should be brighter and harder.*'

Symbolism: port and whiskey; the engagement ring; the Inspector; the Titanic; the door bell; disinfectant; the telephone

Emotive language: 'died after several hours of agony...'

Rhetoric and oratory: speeches by Birling and the Inspector

Repetition: responsibility, agony

Social dialect: 'squiffy' ; 'Steady the buffs' 'chap'

Key Quotes

Birling: 'We're in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity.'

Birling: 'the way some of these cranks write and talk now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else.'

Sheila: 'but these girls aren't cheap labour - they're *people*'

Sheila: 'It's the only time I've ever done anything like that, and I'll never do it again to anybody.'

Gerald: '*[distressed]* Sorry – I - well, I've suddenly realised – taken it in properly – that she's dead –'.

Sheila: 'we all started like that - so confident, so pleased with ourselves until he began asking us questions.'

Sheila: 'He's been steadily drinking too much for the last two years.'

Inspector: 'I think you did something terribly wrong – and you're going to spend the rest of your life regretting it'

Mrs Birling: 'she was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position.'

Eric: '...afterwards she told me to go in but that – well, I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty – and I threatened to make a row.'

Inspector: 'but each of you helped to kill her. Remember that.'

Inspector: 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.'

Birling: 'the famous younger generation who know it all.'