

'An Inspector Calls' by J.B. Priestley: A Knowledge Organiser

Characters		
Inspector Goole	Priestley's mouthpiece; advocates social justice; serves as the Birlings' conscience	Socialist, moralistic, righteous, powerful, intimidating, unconventional, mysterious, imposing, sardonic, omnipotent
Mr. Arthur Birling	Businessman; capitalist; against social equality; a self-made man (new-money)	Capitalist, arrogant, foolish, Panglossian, emasculate, prejudice, ignorant, selfish, stubborn, vainglorious
Mrs. Sybil Birling	Husband's social superior; believes in personal responsibility	Arrogant, cold-hearted, insincere, prejudice, naïve, conformist, bitter, controlling, remorseless
Sheila Birling	Young girl; comes to change views and pities Eva; feels regret	Transformative, remorseful, socialist, pseudo-inspector, sensitive, astute, strong-minded, empowered
Eric Birling	Young man, drinks too much; forces himself on Eva Smith; regrets actions	Rebellious, reckless, immature, insubordinate, compulsive, desperate, disgraced, dualistic, irresponsible
Gerald Croft	Businessman; engaged to Sheila; politically closest to Birling	Aristocratic, evasive, secretive, dishonest, disingenuous, oleaginous, chivalric, privileged, pragmatic
Eva Smith	Unseen in play; comes to stand for victims of social injustice (changes her name to Daisy Renton)	Suffragist, victim, emblematic, allegorical, vulnerable, desperate, socialist, moralistic, principled

Theatrical Stagecraft: Dramatic Devices

Dramatic irony	Birling's speeches, Mrs. Birling's witless implication of Eric
Stage directions	Instructions for the actors; often revealing – such as the lighting change when the Inspector arrives: "Pink and intimate then brighter and harder"
Setting	Constant throughout but subtle changes e.g. lighting; characters on/off stage
Tension	Builds up throughout the play ; interrogation of characters, personal relationships, secrecy
Cliff-hanger	Eric's reappearance in Act 3; the ending allows the audience to make up their minds
Foreshadowing	Symbolism (The Titanic), Mr. Birling's "knighthood", war
Time-lapse	Set in 1912, written in 1945; audience in a privileged position.
The 4th Wall	The Inspector's final speech addressed directly to audience.

Social, Historical and Literary Allusions

"the Titanic"	The Titanic sailed from Southampton and sank in the early hours of 15th April 1912. Priestley clearly wants his audience to see his drama play out against a background of real historical events and he has also chosen a moment in time when Birling's comments appear particularly ironic.
"Nobody wants war"	In reality, economic rivalry between the British Empire and the new German Empire was one of the many causes of the First World War.
"Russia"	The irony here suggests that Russia will have progressed further than other European countries by the 1940s.
"Bernard Shaws and H. G. Wellses"	Both the noted Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and the father of science-fiction H. G. Wells (1866-1946) were well-known and outspoken socialists.

Plot	
Act 1	Set in April 1912, Brumley, Midlands, UK. The Birling family and Gerald Croft are celebrating Sheila Birling's engagement to Gerald with a dinner. Mr Birling lectures his son, Eric Birling, and Gerald about the importance of every man looking out for himself if he wants to get on in life. Edna (the maid) announces that an inspector has arrived. Inspector Goole says that he is investigating the death of a young woman who committed suicide, Eva Smith. Mr Birling is shown a photograph of Eva, after initially denying recognising the woman in the photo, he remembers firing her in 1910 for organising a strike over workers pay. Sheila recalls also having Eva sacked about her manner when served by her in an upmarket department store. The Inspector reveals that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald reveals to Sheila he had an affair with Daisy Renton.
Act 2	Gerald explains to The Inspector that he had an affair with Eva, but hasn't seen her since he ended their relationship back in Autumn 1911. Sheila gives her engagement ring back to Gerald. The Inspector turns his attention to Mrs Sybil Birling, she confesses that she also had contact with Eva, but Eva gave herself a different name to Mrs Birling. Eva approached a charity chaired by Mrs Birling to ask for help. Eva was desperate and pregnant but help was refused by Mrs Birling because she was offended by the girl calling herself 'Mrs Birling'. She tells Eva that the baby's father should be made entirely responsible. She also tells Inspector Goole that the father should be held entirely responsible and should be made an example of.
Act 3	Eric is revealed as the father. He stole money from Mr Birling's office to provide money to Eva. The Inspector delivers his final speech. After he leaves, the family begin to suspect that he was not a genuine police inspector. A phone call to the Chief Constable confirms this. Next, they phone the infirmary to be informed that no suicide case has been brought in. Mr Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald congratulate themselves that it was all a hoax and they continue can continue as before. This attitude upsets Sheila and Eric. The phone rings. Mr Birling announces to the family that a girl has just died on her way to the infirmary, a police inspector is coming to question them

Key concepts and context: Think about...

1912	Set just before WWI and the sinking of the Titanic. A moment of rising international tensions and industrial expansion. End of Victorian era saw the demise of the rigid class system. Labour Party, founded in 1900, gaining momentum. The Russian Revolution began in 1917.
1945	People were recovering from six years of warfare, danger and uncertainty. Class distinctions greatly reduced as a result of two world wars. Women had a more valued place in society. Desire for social change. Following WW2, Labour Party won a landslide victory over Winston Churchill and the Conservatives.
Wealth, Power and Influence	The Birlings and the Crofts are representative of the wealthy upper-class. They all misuse their social influence to benefit themselves. Their actions adversely affect the vulnerable people in society.
Blame and Responsibility	Who is to blame for Eva's death? Each of the Birlings contribute to a chain of events leading to the destruction of Eva Smith. What responsibilities do the characters have to each other? To society?
Public v Private	How do the public lives, the facades, of the Birlings juxtapose their private personas? What are their motivations for this? What are the repercussions, and for who?
Morality and Legality	What are the moral and legal laws of the society depicted in the play? How do they interweave? What actions do the characters undertake that are wrong, morally or legally?
Class Politics	How do the ideologies of capitalism and socialism collide in the play? Which characters are representative of which political allegiance? Is there a correlation between a character's political beliefs and their behaviours?
Prejudice	What are the prejudices held by the Birlings? What are their inherent views regarding class and status? How do they act on these prejudices, and what are the consequences?
Young v Old	What differences are evident between the younger and older generation? They react and behave differently throughout the play – why? What are their attitudes towards each other? What do they learn? Which characters change, and how?

ACT	Order of the Inspector's Questioning
Act 1	<i>Sheila and Gerald's engagement is celebrated.</i>
Act 1	<i>Birling says there will be no war; references Titanic</i>
Act 1	<i>Inspector arrives; a young girl has committed suicide.</i>
Act 1	<i>Birling threw her out after strike; Sheila had her fired for laughing.</i>
Act 2	<i>Gerald had an affair with Daisy Renton</i>
Act 2	<i>Mrs. Birling refused to give charity to Eva; blames father.</i>
Act 3	<i>Eric's involvement revealed; possible rape hinted at.</i>
Act 3	<i>Inspector leaves. Gerald returns; met policeman, no Inspector G</i>
Act 3	<i>Telephone rings; an inspector is coming.</i>

Key Notes
Priestley asks his audience to examine their individual and collective responsibility to society. He wants a welfare state .
The hypocrisy of middle-class Edwardian society is uncovered: appearance & reputation matter more than reality & morality .
Priestley criticises the selfishness of capitalism and wants a fairer, socialist future after the horrors of two world wars..
Priestley shows the older generation to be set in their ways, while the young are open to change .
Eva Smith is the embodiment of young, working-class women who were oppressed by the middle/upper classes .
The play demonstrates that when workers do not have full employment rights they cannot fight back

Character Quotes	
Birling's Confidence	'We're in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity'
Birling on society	'The way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else'
Sheila's recognition	'but these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people'
Sheila's regret	'it's the only time I've ever done anything like that, and I'll never, never do it again to anybody'
Sheila on the inspector	'we all started like that – so confident, so pleased with ourselves until he began asking us questions'
Sheila on Eric	'he's been steadily drinking too much for the last two years'
Inspector on guilt	'I think you did something terribly wrong – and that you're going to spend the rest of your life regretting it'
Mrs Birling defends herself	'she was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position'
Eric explains	'I'm not very clear about it, but afterwards she told me she didn't want 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'
The inspector says	'but each of you helped to kill her. Remember that'
Inspector's message	'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.'

Thematic Quotes	
Social responsibility	"We are responsible for each other" <i>Inspector</i> "Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities" <i>Inspector</i> "It's what happened to the girl and what we all did to her that mattered." <i>Eric</i>
Capitalism	"These silly capital vs labour agitations." <i>Birling</i> "A man has to make his own way" <i>Birling</i>
Class	"A girl of that class" <i>Mrs Birling</i> "Well, we've several hundred young women there, y'know, and they keep changing." <i>Birling</i>
Age	"the famous younger generation" <i>Birling</i> "What's the matter with that child?" <i>Birling</i> "Just keep quiet, Eric" <i>Birling</i>
Gender & attitudes to women	"I hate those <i>hard-eyed dough-faced women</i> " - <i>Gerald</i> "And you think young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things?" <i>Inspector</i> "She had far too much to say, far too much" <i>Birling</i>