

‘An Inspector Calls’ – key information

Core knowledge:

1. Context: (AO3)

- Set in 1912 (just before the sinking of the Titanic)
- WW1 was 1914-1918
- Written in 1945 (at the end of WW2)
- Edwardian values allowed status and wealth to have power over poverty
- Inequalities of treatment was rife – women had few rights
- Workers were about to strike for better conditions (after the brutalities of the Industrial Revolution and Victorian working conditions)
- Priestley was a socialist and campaigned for rights for all in society

2. Themes: (AO1 and AO3)

Theme	Characters	Plot details
Social responsibility	Birling Sheila Gerald Eric Mrs Birling Inspector	Consequences of each Birling/Gerald action Inspector's warning Double twist at end – lesson not learned
Gender	Sheila Mrs Birling Eva	Engagement ring Sheila's change of mind Eva's circumstances with Gerald, Eric and Mrs Birling
Age	Sheila – Mrs. Birling Eric – Mr Birling Gerald	Sheila and Eric's reactions to Eva's death more sympathetic Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald don't seem to have learned anything at end – more concerned with public appearances
Power	Mr Birling Mrs Birling Inspector	Mr Birling wields his power over his family – speeches at beginning, instructing Inspector Mrs. Birling tells children what to do (this is overturned at end when Eric and Sheila voice their objections) Inspector – maintains power over all the Birlings and Gerald (voice, information and structuring their confessions)
Class	Gerald Mr and Mrs Birling	Mr Birling's reference to Gerald's parents at beginning Mrs Birling being her husband's social superior Mr Birling's obsession with knighthood
Poverty and capitalism	Edna Gerald Eric Mrs Birling	Use of money to “buy” Eva – Gerald, Eric Withholding charity – Mrs. B Sheila and Mr Birling both use money and status to damage Eva

3. Key events: (AO1)

- The Birling family are celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling to Gerald Croft (a higher class businessman)
- An Inspector interrupts Mr Birling's speech about capitalism
- Mr Birling's confession – had Eva sacked for protesting about wages
- Sheila's confession – had Eva sacked from a dress shop as she was jealous of her
- Gerald's confession – “rescued” Eva/Daisy Renton from prostitution and installed her as his lover in a friend's set of rooms. Abandons her for Sheila and a respectable marriage.
- Mrs. Birling's confession – refuses “Mrs. Birling”/Eva social support from her charity – Eva is pregnant and unemployed
- Eric's confession – picked Eva up as a prostitute and raped her. Stole money from his father's business to pay her when she gets pregnant.
- Inspector turns out to be “false” and Mr and Mrs Birling + Gerald celebrate their “escape”
- Phone rings – an Inspector is on the line

4. Literary terms: (AO2)

- Cyclical structure – an Inspector starts the main plot and another Inspector appears at the end
- Morality play – the characters represent the sins of society
- Elements of a whodunnit play – who is most to blame?
- Stage directions – provide information about characterisation and key symbolic set details
- Drawing room drama – all set within the confines of the house (a reflection of the privileged class and their entertainment at the expense of others.

5. Prepared introduction: learn and adapt to the exam question

Priestley presents [key focus] to reveal the **hypocrisy** and **social injustice** of a society based on class and status. As a **socialist**, he was concerned by the ways that wealth and social standing could impact on others' happiness and lifestyles, as seen by the **Edwardian society** in the setting of the play and the form of the play as a **morality play or parable**. The Birlings' indifference to **social justice** is presented in the **cyclical structure** of the play, from the opening where the family is self-congratulatory of their success to their dismissal of the Inspector as “moonshine” at the end. Priestley's message is that of **social responsibility** and the warning of the negative impact of **capitalism** on society.

Paired quotations

Quotations	Analysis
<p><i>'The lighting should be pink and intimate'</i> (stage directions)</p> <p><i>'and then it should be brighter and harder'</i></p>	<p>The change in lighting is significant because of the affect it has on the mood of the performance. Initially, it is 'pink' and 'intimate', and this helps to create an atmosphere that is 'heavily comfortable' and secure; it complements the celebrations taking place on stage. However, the lighting becomes 'brighter and 'harder' when the Inspector arrives and, as a result, the mood becomes more serious to reflect the importance of the investigation. More widely, bright light is also associated with truth and discovery; this reflects the Inspector's determination to reveal the role played by each member of the family in the suicide of Eva Smith</p>
<p>"I say there isn't a chance of war" (Arthur Birling)</p> <p>"And I tell you that the time will come soon when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish" (Inspector)</p>	<p>Priestley presents Mr Birling as assured and over-confident to reflect his criticism of naïve attitudes towards responsibility. The dramatic irony understood by the post-war audience would heighten the idea that Mr Birling's attitudes and position are not to be trusted.</p> <p>Priestley's use of the violent imagery at the end of the play mirrors and contrasts Birlings' misplaced assured attitude: the rule of three "fire and blood and anguish" emphasises the consequences of society's treatment of each other and foreshadows the two major wars yet to hit Britain.</p>
<p>"a man has to make his own way – has to look after himself – and his family too, of course, when he has one" (Arthur)</p> <p>"She came to you to protect me – and you turned her away" (Eric – to Sybil)</p>	<p>Priestley's use of the pronouns "his" and "himself" links with the adjective "own" to emphasise and criticise the capitalist view that disregards poorer members of society. This statement is ironic given that both parents fail to look after Eric and his baby when it is not convenient or in their interests. The verb "protect" suggests that Eric feels let down by his parents: it is Eva who attempts to protect him against him ruining his reputation.</p>
<p>"But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else" (Arthur)</p> <p>"One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still with us. [...] We are responsible for each other." (Inspector)</p> <p>"You see, we have to share something. If there's nothing else, we have to share our guilt." (Inspector)</p>	<p>Priestley uses the noun "cranks" ironically to describe the reactions to socialist writings and views: "cranks" suggests someone to be derided and ridiculed and is a sharp reminder to the audience that to dismiss these views could be dangerous to society. The repetition of "everybody" links with the later stark warning the Inspector gives "millions and millions" of poor people who need support and emphasises the theme of social responsibility and interconnectivity through the play. Similarly, the idea of sharing responsibility: "share our guilt" is presented as the key closing message from the Inspector; the cosy family situation presented in the opening scene contrasts with the fragmented and damaged family that close the play.</p>
<p>"If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be asking for the earth." (Arthur)</p>	<p>Priestley's use of division in "these people" indicates the idea that members of higher social circles dehumanise those who do not share their status. The exaggeration and metaphor "asking for the earth" is ironic given the exploitative nature of Birling's industry. Priestley uses the Inspector highlight this irony</p>

<p>"But after all it's better to ask for the earth than to take it." (Inspector)</p> <p>"But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're <i>people</i>." (Sheila)</p>	<p>and juxtaposes "ask" with "take" to emphasise the difference between the social classes' attitudes and entitlement. Sheila reacts more empathetically, contrasting "these girls" with "people"; Priestley may be suggesting that the younger generation who will be important in building post war Britain may show more elements of compassion and hope.</p>
<p>"I'll never, never do it again to anybody." (Sheila)</p> <p>"Unlike the other three, I did nothing I'm ashamed of or that won't bear investigation" (Sybil)</p> <p>"Mother, I think it was cruel and vile." (Sheila)</p>	<p>Priestley uses the comparison between Sheila's and Mrs Birling's attitudes to being interrogated to highlight differences in social responsibility. Whilst both have acted immorally, Sheila's remorse and feelings of guilt shown in the passionate repetition of "never" and her later condemnation of her mother's actions: "cruel and vile" indicates that she has learned from the situation. Priestley uses the word "ashamed" in Sybil's speech to indicate that for higher class women, the notion of embarrassment and maintaining social standing is more important than genuine remorse. She is concerned with how she may look to others "bear investigation"; her reputation is more important than morals.</p>
<p>"If we were all responsible for everything that happened to everybody... it would be very awkward" (Arthur)</p> <p>"You began to learn something. And now you've stopped. You're ready to go on in the same old way." (Sheila)</p>	<p>Priestley uses the word "responsible" to highlight the morality aspect of his parable: the form hinges on ideas of a "whodunnit" structure alongside the ethics associated with a morality play. The use of the word "awkward" foreshadows the family's reactions at the end of the play: they are left feeling awkward and uncomfortable in their guilt. Priestley highlights the education provided by the Inspector in Sheila's acknowledgement of "learn"; Sheila's frustration symbolises Priestley concerns that the lessons of both wars will not be taken by society and that Edwardian values "old way" would re-emerge in a post-war Britain.</p>
<p>"Please, sir, an inspector's called" (Edna)</p> <p>"That was the police. A girl has just died" (Arthur)</p>	<p>Priestley's use of the cyclical structure of the play indicates that the Edwardian values displayed by the older Birlings would lead to no change in society. It is symbolic that Edna, the working-class servant, introduces the Inspector initially: she represents a similar position in society to Eva and perhaps emphasises that the working class people will introduce the socialist ideals to the higher classes. At the end, Birling answers the phone himself – perhaps a subtle shift to indicate a slight change in responsibility.</p>
<p>"You're squiffy" (Sheila – to Eric)</p> <p>"She said the father was only a youngster – silly and wild and drinking too much." (Sybil)</p>	<p>Priestley's use of informal language to describe Eric: "squiffy", "silly and wild" indicates the lack of concern for the younger generation's immoral behaviour. Eric represents the uncomfortable younger generation who might feel at odds with the attitudes of their Edwardian parents. Whilst Eric indicates some sense of responsibility towards his part in Eva's death, his actions are seen as reprehensible and more than just "silly" by the audience.</p>