

'An Inspector Calls' – key information

1. Context: (AO3)

- Priestley set the play in 1912 (just before the sinking of the Titanic) to reveal some of the remaining outdated ideas of **Capitalism** and **class hierarchy** of his post war audience.
- The play was written in 1945 (at the end of WW2) and was a reaction to the changes in society as a result of the wars: class systems had changed and attitudes were becoming more **Socialist**.
- Priestley criticises **Edwardian values**, which allowed **status and wealth** to have power over poverty.
- Priestley warns against the **social inequalities** due to **gender and class**.
- A more **Socialist Britain** was emerging, for example, 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 – *The play begins and ends with the Inspector's call (using a **circular structure**), revealing how little progress some of the Birlings have made with their understanding.*
- Morality play – *The use of the **morality play** form highlights the warnings that Priestley gives about the dangers of Capitalism and a lack of social responsibility.*
- Elements of a whodunnit play – who is most to blame?
- Stage directions – provide information about characterisation and key symbolic set details. *The use of the **stage directions** "pink and intimate" turning to "brighter" foreshadows the intense spotlight the Inspector will focus on the Birlings.*
- 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.
- Dramatic irony – the audience understands that Mr. Birling is wrong about the Titanic and WW1, but the characters do not. *Priestley uses **dramatic irony** in "Unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable" to highlight how incorrect Mr. Birling's myopic views are.*

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 uses a **morality play** to criticise the ways that wealth and social standing could impact on others' happiness and lifestyles. 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.

Key Vocabulary:

Aristocracy	The highest class in society typically comprising people who hold titles and land.	<i>Priestley presents Gerald as an aristocrat; someone who is out of touch with the working class public.</i>
Biblical Allusion	Reference to or use of language and stories associated with the bible and Christianity.	<i>Priestley uses the allusion to hell in "fire and blood and anguish" to symbolise the suffering caused by the bourgeoisie.</i>
Bourgeoisie	The capitalist class who own the means of production.	<i>The Birlings are representative of the bourgeoisie, who do not support the less fortunate in society.</i>
Capitalism	The system where goods and business are owned by private individuals.	<i>Priestley criticises the capitalist ideas, represented by Mr. Birling's attitude towards his workers.</i>
Chivalry	Courteous behaviour of a man towards a woman.	<i>Gerald is presented as chivalrous in offering to support Daisy, but only wants to use her.</i>
Dehumanisation	The process of denying a person or group of human qualities.	<i>Both Mr and Mrs Birling dehumanise Eva by calling her "cheap labour" and "girls of that sort".</i>
Didactic	Intended to teach, particularly a moral lesson.	<i>Priestley presents the Inspector as didactic in his approach to the Birlings: they need to be taught how to treat others better.</i>
Enlightened	Someone who has a more rational and modern viewpoint.	<i>Priestley presents Sheila and Eric as having more enlightened views by the end of the play: they accept their mistakes and understand that society has to become more socially responsible.</i>

Eternal Class Struggle	Class struggle, or class warfare or class conflict, is tension between the classes.	<i>The inequalities shown between Eva and Sheila demonstrate the tension between the classes.</i>
Exploitation	The action or fact of treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their work.	<i>Eva is represented as being exploited for her labour by Mr. Birling and by her vulnerability by Eric.</i>
Feminist	Someone who promotes women's rights.	<i>Priestley presents Sheila as increasingly feminist in her views when she argues with her father over Eva's sacking.</i>
Fragmented	Broken up.	<i>Priestley gives Eric fragmented speech to reveal the extent of his worries and anxieties.</i>
Generational Division	A difference of opinions between one generation and another regarding beliefs, politics, or values.	<i>Sheila and Sybil's attitude to marriage indicates the generational division and societal changes.</i>
Hierarchy	The social ladder, where some members of society are more privileged than others.	<i>The Birlings are presented as a family who are concerned with maintaining their status in the social hierarchy.</i>
Hubris	Overconfidence that backfires.	<i>Mr Birling is hubristic and arrogant in celebrating his achievements and boasting about the prospect of being given a Knighthood.</i>
Hypocritical	Behaving in a way that suggests someone has higher standards than is the case.	<i>Mrs Birling is represented as a hypocrite: she has a role on a charity committee, but refuses to help Eva.</i>
Misogynist	Someone who hates or is prejudiced towards women.	<i>Gerald is presented as misogynistic in his views towards Daisy: he wants to "save" her, but ends up hurting her further.</i>
Myopia	The quality of being short sighted.	<i>Mr and Mrs Birling are presented as myopic: they do not understand that their actions could have far-reaching consequences.</i>
Objectification	Treating a human as if they are an object for use.	<i>Both Eric and Gerald are presented as objectifying Eva/Daisy: they are only interested in their gain.</i>
Officer Class	Soldiers in WW1 who gave the orders rather than did the actual fighting.	<i>Gerald represents the Officer Class, who were out of date with the general public in World War One.</i>
Pejorative	Expressing disapproval or contempt for something.	<i>Sheila's pejorative dismissal of Mr Birling's argument for sacking Eva reveals her more enlightened views.</i>
Philanthropy	The desire to help and support others in the community.	<i>Mrs Birling is hypocritical in her approach to philanthropy: she does it not to help, but to maintain status.</i>
Repression	The process of trying to forget or hide from difficult or unpleasant thoughts.	<i>Eric is representative of the repressed youth, who cover their emotional hurt with alcohol.</i>
Social Conditioning	The way in which society makes people have certain beliefs and behaviours.	<i>Priestley presents Sheila as socially conditioned at the start of the play: she seems to accept her role as being engaged to Gerald as her fate.</i>
Social Responsibility	The belief that every person has an obligation to look after each other in order to help the wider community.	<i>Priestley warns the audience of the risks of a lack of social responsibility when the Inspector declares that the Birlings will learn their lesson in "fire and blood and anguish".</i>
Socialism	The set of beliefs that states that all people should share equally in a country's money.	<i>Priestley presents the Inspector as a Socialist and interested in creating a fairer world for the underprivileged.</i>
Status quo	The way things currently are and work.	<i>Mr and Mrs Birling are keen to cover up any potential scandal to maintain their status quo in society.</i>

Key quotations

Sheila: "You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl".



- The **metaphor** of the wall represents the **distancing** of the bourgeoisie from the working class.
- The **demeaning language** "that girl" represents the bourgeoisie's lack of **empathy**.
- Sheila represents the younger generation's ability to become more **enlightened**.

Key words:

- Enlightenment
- Class divide
- Generation divide

Mrs Birling: "Girls of that class."



- The **demeaning language** "that class" represents the bourgeoisie's superior attitudes to the working classes.
- The **infantilising language** "girls" demeans and patronises working class women.

Key words:

- Superiority
- Exploitation
- Class divide

Sheila (excited): "Oh – Gerald – you've got it – is it the one you wanted me to have?"



- The **use of dashes** reflects Sheila's excitement and her lack of power.
- The use of the **question** represents Sheila's dependency on Gerald and her social conditioning to get married.

Key words:

- Dependency
- Social conditioning

Sheila: "You and I aren't the same people who sat down to dinner here."



- The use of the **authoritative language** demonstrates Sheila's empowerment and intellectual enlightenment.
- The use of the **pronouns** 'you' and 'I' reflects her **new found** independence from Gerald and the ideas of the bourgeoisie.

Key words:

- Enlightenment
- Feminist
- Empowerment

Mr Birling: "All mixed up like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense"



- The dismissive tone of 'nonsense' represents the self-righteous arrogance of the bourgeoisie
- The simile of the 'bees' conveys his disapproval of socialism

Key words:

- Bourgeoisie
- Arrogance
- Simile
- Socialism

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



- The repetition of "we" emphasises the socialist desire to break down differences in society
- The metaphor of a "body" reminds the audience of Priestley's belief that we all depend on each other for health and happiness

Key words:

- Socialism
- Class Divide

Mr Birling: "Unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable".



- Priestley uses **dramatic irony** to emphasise the myopia and false confidence of the bourgeoisie.
- The dramatic irony also **foreshadows** the family's fall from grace from their secure and comfortable position.
- The **adverb** "absolutely" reflects the hubristic confidence of Mr. Birling.

Key words:

- Myopia
- Hubris
- Dramatic irony

Mrs Birling: "He certainly didn't make me confess – I had done no more than my duty."



- The **arrogant adverb** "certainly" reflects Mrs. Birling's hubris and disregard for her responsibility.
- The **legal language** of "confess" implies that capitalist views are on trial.
- The **noun** "duty" highlights the hypocrisy of wealthy bourgeoisie women in Edwardian times who could abuse their positions to support their feelings of superiority.

Key words:

- Superiority
- Guilt
- Capitalism

Stage directions: "The lighting should be pink and intimate until the Inspector arrives and then it should be brighter and harder".

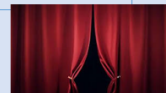


- Priestley uses the lighting as **symbolism** to mirror the Birling family's change from cosy and comfortable to under the spotlight.
- The "pink and intimate" could **foreshadow** how Eva is damaged by the Birlings: she is treated as an intimate object by Gerald and Eric.

Key words:

- Interrogation
- Harsh truths
- Foreshadow

Stage directions: "They all stare guilty, dumbfounded. The curtain falls"



- The **collective pronoun** "they" implies that the characters have been taught a lesson as a unit about their collective responsibility for others.
- The **adjective** "dumbfounded" implies that the Inspector's interrogation has left the family traumatised and shaken.

Key words:

- Reality
- Collective responsibility
- Impact

Mr Birling: "It's my duty to keep labour costs down".



- The **economic vocabulary** of 'labour costs' dehumanises the workers and suggests the inhumanity of the bourgeoisie.
- The **ambiguity** of 'duty' implies a criticism of Mr. Birling's and the Capitalist factory owners' lack of social responsibility.

Key words:
Economic vocabulary
Dehumanisation
Capitalism

Mr Birling: "I'd give thousands – yes – thousands."



- The use of the **hyphens** to indicate uncertainty and pauses implies the disempowerment that Mr. Birling feels at the end of the play.
- The **repetition** of 'thousands' suggests that Mr Birling still resorts to the power of money to solve issues. It echoes the criticism of Capitalist dependence on money for happiness.

Key words:

Fragmentation
Disempowerment
Futile