

JD PRIESTLEY'S

AN INSPECTOR CALLS

Knowledge Organiser



Social and Historical Context

Capitalism/Socialism	World War One and Two	Titanic	The Great Depression
<p>Capitalism is a system where businesses, property and industries (etc.) are privately owned in order for the owners to profit.</p> <p>Socialism is a system where everyone who contributes to the production of something own it. Rather than for profit, its aim is the equal distribution of wealth.</p> <p>When Priestley was writing, socialism was very new and popular. Like many writers of his time (including Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, whom Mr Birling refers to insultingly in act one), Priestley was broadly socialist in his political views.</p> <p>In the UK general election of 1945, held two months after the end of the Second World War in Europe, he took advantage of his fame as a writer and broadcaster to campaign for the Labour Party.</p>	<p>The First World War took place from 1914 to 1918. The Second World War later took place from 1939 to 1945, meaning the play is set before both wars but written after both. Priestley could use his experience of living through this time of great change.</p> <p>At the time Priestley was writing, people were recovering from 6 years of warfare. Due to the wars, class distinctions had massively reduced as rationing was put in place and suffering did not discriminate. There was a great desire for change after the wars. Immediately after WW2, the Labour party won a landslide victory over Winston Churchill's conservatives. Women also earned a more valued place. As many British men went away to fight, their positions in work had to be filled by women. This helped change perceptions. Men had to acknowledge the fact that women were just as capable as them. Many women enjoyed a newfound freedom that working and earning money allowed them.</p>	<p>RMS Titanic was a British passenger liner ship that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in the early hours of 15 April 1912, after colliding with an iceberg during her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York City. The Titanic was the largest ship afloat at the time she entered service. There were an estimated 2,224 passengers and crew aboard, and more than 1,500 died.</p> <p>The passengers of the Titanic were split into three classes. This was determined not only by the price of their ticket but by wealth and social class. Those travelling in first class, most of them the wealthiest passengers on board, included prominent members of the upper class such as businessmen and politicians. Second class passengers were middle class such as professors and authors. Third class passengers were mostly emigrants moving to the US. First-class was designed to be luxurious, with an on-board gym, swimming pool, libraries, and high-class restaurants.</p>	<p>The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in the history of the developed world, lasting from 1929 to 1939. It began after the stock market crash of October 1929 in America. It then affected countries across the world over the coming years.</p> <p>The period between 1912 and 1945 was a time of great austerity : WWI, for example, meant that income tax was doubled, meaning less in wages for workers. The 1930s saw the great depression with very high unemployment. In some towns and cities in the north east, unemployment reached as high as 70% as shipbuilding fell by 90%</p>

J. B. Priestley

John Boynton Priestley was born in Yorkshire, UK in 1894. He knew early on that he wanted to become a writer, but decided against going to university as he thought he would get a better feel for the world around him away from an academic community.

Priestley fought in World War 1, he joined the army and escaped death many times. After the war, he gained a degree from Cambridge University, moving to London to become a writer. He wrote successful articles and published his first novel in 1929. He wrote his first play in 1932 and went on to write 50 more. Much of his writing was controversial. He included new ideas and strong political messages.

Priestley wrote 'An Inspector Calls' after the First World War and like much of his work it contains controversial, political messages. He set 'An Inspector Calls' in 1912 because that era represented the opposite of what people were hoping for in 1945.

As a socialist, Priestley became very concerned about the consequences of social inequality. During 1942, he and others set up a new political party, the Common Wealth Party, which argued for public ownership of land, greater democracy, and a new 'morality' in politics. The party merged with the Labour Party in 1945, but Priestley was influential in developing the idea of the Welfare State which began to be put into place at the end of the war.

Dramatic Devices Used

Lighting	A change in lighting shows the change in atmosphere that the Inspector brings, indicating the truth being revealed.
Doorbell	The doorbell interrupts Birling's speech on his capitalist ideas that community is 'nonsense'. The inspector disrupts this.
Photograph	The Inspector only shows the photograph to one person at a time. This means that no one character can ever be sure that they have seen the same photograph as any other character.
Dramatic Irony	Birling's first speech is full of inaccuracies. This makes us question the reliability of his capitalist judgements. Mrs Birling's hypocrisy is also shown through the use of dramatic irony.
Contrasts	Priestley juxtaposes the beliefs of Birling and the Inspector. He links Sheila and Eva to highlight the differences in their lives because of their different social classes.
Cliff hangers	Act 1 ends with the Inspector saying 'Well?' to Gerald. Act 2 ends as Eric reappears, just as we realise he is the father.
Entrances	The timing of Mrs Birling, the Inspector and Eric's entrances are significant.
Twist	The final denouement is a shocking surprise to the characters on stage and the audience - a 'twist in the tale'.

The Plot

ACT 1	<p>There is a light-hearted atmosphere at dinner as the Birling family celebrate the engagement of Sheila to Gerald Croft. However, there are hints that not everything is as perfect as seems. Mr Birling, for example, is a bit too anxious to impress Gerald, Eric seems nervous and Sheila jokes with Gerald that he did not come near her the previous summer.</p> <p>Mr Birling is in good spirits and makes a number of speeches. One of his main themes is that a man needs to look after himself and his own family and not worry about the wider community. As he is telling them this, the door bell rings. Inspector Goole enters. Although Mr Birling tries to take control, the Inspector announces that he has come to investigate the suicide of Eva Smith, a young working-class girl who died that afternoon in 'the infirmary'.</p> <p>Mr Birling recognises the girl from a photograph and admits that he fired her from his factory when she became one of the ring-leaders of a strike asking for higher wages. Birling does not feel guilty; he cannot see that he has any responsibility for what happened to her afterwards.</p> <p>The Inspector then questions Sheila Birling. Sheila is distressed as she hears more about the girl's tragic story and the description of her suicide. When the Inspector reveals that Eva's next job was at a big shop called Milwards, but that she was sacked after a customer complained about her, Sheila becomes more distressed. When she too is shown a photograph of the girl, Sheila admits that it was her fault that Eva was sacked. She is horrified by what she did and feels guilty.</p> <p>When the Inspector then reveals that Eva went on to change her name to Daisy Renton, Gerald Croft's reaction reveals that he too knew the girl.</p>
ACT 2	<p>Gerald tries to exclude Sheila and cover up his involvement. However, Gerald admits that he knew Daisy Renton. He had met her in 'the Palace Bar', and let her stay in the flat of a friend of his when he discovered she was penniless. She became his mistress although Gerald broke off the relationship when he had to go away on business, giving her some money to see her through for a few months. Sheila is upset and disappointed; Gerald had told her he was busy at work when in fact he was having a relationship with this girl.</p> <p>Inspector Goole then moves onto Mrs Birling, who is convinced that she has no connection with the girl. After showing her a photograph of the girl Mrs Birling has to admit that she had seen the girl two weeks previously. The girl - now pregnant - had come to ask for financial assistance from the Charity Organisation where Mrs Birling was chairwoman. Mrs Birling had denied the girl any support, and refuses to feel any remorse. In fact, she is proud that she did her duty and blames the man who got Eva Smith pregnant.</p> <p>Sheila urges her mother to stop talking, as she and the audience have realised at this point that Eric is involved. Just as Mrs Birling blames the father of the baby, Eric re-enters the room.</p>
ACT 3	<p>The relationships in the family begin to break down. The Inspector interrupts the family argument to question Eric who then admits his relationship with the girl. He met her in the same place as Gerald and in his drunkenness, forced himself on her. Soon afterwards she discovered that she was pregnant. Eric offered to marry her, but she did not accept as she knew Eric did not love her. Eric stole money from Mr Birling's office to try and support her.</p> <p>Mr Birling's reaction shows that he is more concerned about covering up his involvement and avoiding a scandal. The Inspector delivers a strong message about each character's guilt in the affair. He warns what will happen if people do not realise that we are all responsible for each other and then leaves.</p> <p>The family begin to wonder about the Inspector. Gerald has discovered that there is no Inspector Goole in the police force. When they telephone the infirmary, they realise that there hasn't been a suicide case for months.</p> <p>Mr Birling is thrilled as he now thinks that they are relieved of any responsibility or guilt. Sheila and Eric, on the other hand, still feel guilty and insist that nothing has changed - each of them still committed the acts that the Inspector had accused them of.</p> <p>At this point, the telephone rings. Mr Birling answers it and tells the family it was the police on the line: an inspector is on his way to ask questions about the suicide of a young girl...</p>

Main Characters

Character	Summary	Words to describe	Key Quotations
Inspector Goole	<p>The Inspector is in his fifties, dressed in a plain dark suit. He initially seems to be an ordinary police inspector, but (as his name suggests) he could be something more ominous, perhaps even supernatural. Inspector Goole questions the Birlings (Mr Birling, Mrs Birling, Eric Birling, Sheila Birling) and Gerald Croft.</p> <p>The Inspector is a powerful, manipulative and interesting character and is Priestley's voice in the play. He represents Priestley's strong moral views. His job is to make the characters change their attitudes, face up to what they have done and start taking responsibility for each other - see his final message in the play.</p> <p>By the end of the play it is revealed that he isn't actually an Inspector. It is not clear who he is, Priestley leaves it up to the audience to decide. His name 'Goole' suggests a supernatural or ghost like element, and he seems to know what the characters will say before they do - many believe he represents the conscience of the characters/audience.</p>	Noble, humbled, socialist, authoritarian, omniscient, influential, moral, Priestley's mouthpiece.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'need not be a big man' 'creates at once an impression of solidity and purposefulness' 'speaks carefully' 'she'd swallowed a lot of strong disinfectant. Burnt her inside out, of course' 'A chain of events' 'A girl died tonight...in misery and agony - hating life' 'If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt.' 'you slammed the door in her face.' 'One Eva Smith has gone - but there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us' 'We are members of one body' 'if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.'
Arthur Birling	<p>Mr Birling is the head of the household. He has made himself wealthy as a business man and has some reputation in the town. He is the owner of Birling and Co., a factory which employs girls to work on machines. He believes that his workers' pay is fair and is oblivious to the fact that his actions have consequences. Arthur is the husband of Sybil Birling who is his 'social superior' and it is hinted that he is self-conscious about being from a more working-class background.</p> <p>At the start of the play he comes across as arrogant, making long speeches about his (wrong) predictions for the future. He also makes claims about how a man should look out for himself and not waste time helping others. Birling does not change or learn any lessons during the course of the play. He is mostly concerned with covering up a 'scandal' and is delighted when he thinks the Inspector was fake at the end of the play. He is firmly capitalist, and right-wing in his political views. He values wealth and social status and is a social climber.</p>	Arrogant, controlling, avaricious, ignorant, obstinate, static, uncaring, unapproachable, capitalist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'rather portentous man' 'I'm talking as a hard-headed, practical man of business.' 'lower costs and higher prices' 'The Germans don't want war' 'community and all that nonsense' 'If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be asking for the earth.' 'I can't accept any responsibility' 'Is there any reason why my wife should answer questions from you, Inspector?' 'not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble' 'There'll be a public scandal.' 'Probably a Socialist or some sort of crank' 'we've been had' 'the famous younger generation who know it all.'
Sybil Birling	<p>Sybil Birling is an unsympathetic woman with some public influence, sitting on a charity committee. She is described as a rather cold woman and is her husband's social superior. She is the only one of all the Birlings to almost resist The Inspector's attempts to make her realise her responsibilities. She has a lack of understanding of how other people live and thinks that all classes behave in a certain way, (she won't believe that a lower class girl would refuse to take stolen money). She only sees what she wants to see, she tells Sheila and Eric off for things that she considers impolite whilst turning a blind eye to Eric's drinking. Her cold nature causes her to blame the father of the child because she doesn't know the father is her own son. She does not learn from the Inspector. The speed at which she recovers after the inspector leaves reflects her coldness and lack of conscience.</p>	Snobbish, stubborn, conceited, obstinate, prejudiced, arrogant, cruel, ignorant, oblivious.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'rather cold woman and her husband's social superior' 'Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things' 'Please don't contradict me like that.' 'Girls of the class' 'disgusting affair' 'I think she only had herself to blame.' 'I didn't like her manner.' 'I consider I did my duty' 'Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility.' 'As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!' 'I don't believe it. I won't believe it...' '[shocked] Eric! You stole the money?' 'He certainly didn't make me confess.' '[triumphantly] Didn't I tell you?'

Main Characters continued

Character	Summary	Words to describe	Key Quotations
Sheila Birling	Sheila Birling is Arthur and Sybil's daughter and is in her early twenties. At the start of the play, she is celebrating her recent engagement to Gerald Croft. She comes across initially as naïve and childish. She is very shocked to hear the news of Eva Smith's death, she is also very regretful of her own involvement in the suicide. As the play continues, she matures. She shows an assertive side by standing up to her mother and father and she also shows that she is insightful and intelligent - she can see where the Inspector's investigation is going and tries to warn the others. By the end of the play she has grown up and has realised that her actions can have grave consequences. She learns her lesson. She takes responsibility and changes; she also tries to encourage the members of her family to do the same.	Immature, spoilt, envious, petulant, naïve, altruistic, compassionate, penitent, guilty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'very pleased with life' 'all last summer when you never came near me' 'don't be an ass, Eric' 'Now I really feel engaged.' 'But these girls aren't cheap labour - they're people. [recognises it with a little cry]' '[miserably] So I'm really responsible?' 'I'll never, never do it again to anybody.' 'You mustn't build up a kind of wall between us and that girl.' / 'the Inspector will just break it down.' 'I remember what he said' / 'It frightens me the way you talk'
Eric Birling	Eric is the son of Mr and Mrs Birling and works for his father. He is in his early twenties and we discover early on that Eric has a drinking problem and that he has been drinking steadily for almost two years. Eric is quite naïve, unlike Gerald. His involvement with Eva is used to convey how higher classes abused their power over the working class. When he realises his part in Eva's death, he is clearly distressed and understands the gravity of the situation, he can't understand why the others don't. By the end of the play, like his sister, he becomes aware of own responsibilities, he is ashamed and seems to be capable of changing for the better.	Immature, reckless, dishonest, naïve, shy, lacks confidence, culpable, penitent, altruistic, humbled, transformed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive' 'She's got a nasty temper sometimes' 'Why shouldn't they try for higher wages?' 'You know, don't you?' (to Sheila about drink) 'Why you little sneak!' 'I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty' 'I wasn't in love with her or anything - but I liked her - she was pretty and a good sport.' 'she treated me - as if I were a kid.' '[unhappily] My God - I'm not likely to forget' 'I still feel the same about it.'
Gerald Croft	Gerald Croft is a handsome, upper class man. His parents are above the Birlings socially, and possibly disapprove of his engagement to Sheila as they don't attend the dinner. At the start of the play, Gerald comes across as confident and charming. This changes after his affair with Eva Smith is revealed. He initially tries to cover it up but becomes more open and honest and we hope that he will change. However, he lets the audience down in the final act by trying to get the family out of trouble, he doesn't learn or change. He represents the selfish attitudes of the upper class, how ingrained these attitudes were in the upper class and how difficult it was to change them.	Charming, compassionate, arrogant, manipulative, ingratiating, static, unchanging, complacent,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'easy well-bred young man-about-town' 'You couldn't have done anything else.' 'I think Miss Birling ought to be excused from any more questioning' 'gave me a glance that was nothing less than a cry for help' 'I was sorry for her' 'I'm rather more - upset - by this' 'that man wasn't a police officer...I'm almost certain' 'Everything's all right now Sheila. What about this ring?'
Eva Smith	Although we never meet Eva, Priestley uses Eva as an important symbol. Eva represents ordinary people who can be destroyed when society fails to them. She promotes the idea that we have collective social responsibility through the other characters' treatment of her. Despite her lower social class and death, Eva has the upper hand in the play as she is the one who has shown the others who they really are.	Vulnerable, poor, determined, hard-working, impoverished, exploited, symbolic, victim.	
Edna	Edna, the parlour maid, is a reminder of the presence of the lower classes, whom families like the Birlings inconsiderately keep as servants. She is the only lower class character to appear on stage and highlights the Birlings' wealth as well as the themes of inequality, power, responsibility and class	Poor, invisible, ignored.	

<p>KEY THEMES:</p> <p>Capitalism v Socialism</p>	<p>Eva Smith, a worker, is mistreated first by her capitalist boss (Arthur Birling). From there, she suffers four further injustices that give a very negative impression of capitalism. In his final speech, the Inspector warns that it is only through socialism ('one body') that mankind can hope to prevent such tragedies in the future.</p> <p>The characters who appear to change for the better, Sheila and Eric, also seem to show a transition from more capitalist to more socialist views.</p>
<p>Social Responsibility</p>	<p>Priestley is interested in our personal responsibility for our own actions and our collective responsibility to society, to take care of one another through a shared responsibility. In 1912 there was no welfare state in Britain. Poor people often depended on charity. But wealthy people, such as Mrs. Birling, in the play, usually controlled the charity. Priestley wanted to create a change in society and make the upper class feel more responsible for the rest of society. Quality of life was low after the war, Priestley believed both the rich and poor would benefit from a focus on looking out for one another.</p> <p>Priestley shows different attitudes towards social responsibility in the play. Mr Birling thinks that the idea of social responsibility is 'nonsense whereas the inspector acts as Priestley's mouthpiece. Sheila and Eric appear to learn their social responsibilities.</p>
<p>Social Class</p>	<p>Before World War Two, Britain was divided by class. The war helped bring these two classes closer together however Priestley wanted to highlight that inequality between the classes still existed and that the upper-classes looked down upon the working-class in post-war Britain.</p> <p>J B Priestley is trying to show that the upper class are unaware that the easy lives they lead rest upon hard work of the lower classes.</p> <p>Priestley was also interested in how a person's class determines the decisions they make.</p> <p>Through the play, we see only rich, middle and upper class characters (other than the maid). We see through each interrogation, these classes' treatment of the working class (Eva). Especially through Mrs Birling, we see some of the stereotypical attitudes towards these classes. Sheila and Eric display the naivety and ignorance that comes with growing up middle class.</p>
<p>Age/ generation divide</p>	<p>The younger generations are more accepting of socialist ideas and are more willing to change. Sheila and Eric accept their part in Eva's death and feel guilty and responsible. They offer the chance for a positive future. The older generation, Mr Birling and Mrs Birling, and in many ways Gerald Croft, strongly believe in capitalism and caring only for themselves. The parents are unable to admit responsibility and their behaviours and attitudes seem fixed in their ways.</p> <p>Gerald Croft is caught in the middle, being neither very young nor old. In the end he sides with the older generation, perhaps because his upper class roots influence him to want to keep the status quo and protect his own interests.</p>
<p>Gender</p>	<p>After World War Two, many existing prejudices of women had changed as women had taken over work from men away at war, proving their capabilities. Not all men saw this change in attitude as a good thing and stayed stuck in the past. Priestley explores the impact of these new gender roles through the independence of Eva Smith and the sexist attitudes of Mr Birling.</p> <p>In the play, all the women are portrayed as delicate characters- particularly Sheila who the men protect from many things including that Eva Smith committed suicide. Set in 1912, the women in the play were seen as possessions to their husband and did not work or have careers due to the patriarchal society. Mrs Birling was also protected from outside affairs, such as the knowledge that many upper class men attended prostitute bars and that her son drank excessively. Through showing many types of women, Priestley tries to show the community as a whole through the characters.</p>
<p>Conflict</p>	<p>Priestley shows that conflict is at the heart of the Birling family by making characters in the same family have opposing views and making them stand up to each other, conveying conflict is present in upper class even though the upper class hid it from society.</p> <p>Priestley's creation of conflict supports his message that no one is perfect in society, removing the façade that the upper class had. Priestley also conveys the conflicting views between the upper and lower class: the younger and older generations; male and females; capitalism and socialism, and many more.</p>