

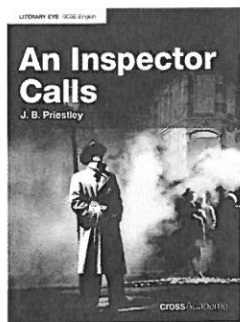
LITERARY EYE GCSE English

An Inspector Calls

J. B. Priestley



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Steve Eddy

An Inspector Calls

J. B. Priestley

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ISBN 978-1-907251-16-0

Design by:

Oxford Designers & Illustrators

Printed by:

De Montfort Print, Leicester

Paper certified by independent third parties as sourced from well-managed forests and other controlled sources.

Published by:

Cross Academe Limited

St John's House

5 South Parade

Oxford OX2 7JL

Context

J. B. Priestley's life, 1894–1984

Born in Bradford, the son of a teacher, John Boynton Priestley worked as a junior office clerk before serving in the infantry from 1914 to 1919. During World War One he saw front-line service in France, narrowly escaped death, and experienced a gas attack. He later said that the war had an important effect on his views and writing.

Priestley graduated from the University of Cambridge with a degree in history and politics. He moved to London and became a freelance writer, achieving success first as an essayist and novelist, and then as a playwright. He wrote his first play, *Dangerous Corner*, in 1932. One of his favourite themes was the long-term consequences of our actions.

The nature of time

Some of Priestley's plays are influenced by his reading of J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927), which questions the belief that time travels in one direction. The idea that time could be warped so as to enable precognition influenced *An Inspector Calls*: the mysterious Inspector could be seen as a foreshadowing of the 'real' inspector about to arrive at the end of the play.

Socialism

Priestley was a socialist like playwright George Bernard Shaw and novelist H. G. Wells (dismissed by Birling in Act One). His own experiences had helped to convince him that we are all responsible for each other – the view put forward by the Inspector. On the other hand, Priestley did not want a violent revolution, as had occurred in Russia in 1917. Interestingly, *An Inspector Calls* was first performed not in London but in Moscow – in two theatres at the same time.

Two contexts

An Inspector Calls was written in 1945, immediately after World War Two, but set in 1912, two years before the start of World War One. These wars brought about huge social changes, including the growth of socialism, because of the roles of ordinary men in the two wars, and of women in their absence. Arthur Birling is confident that there will be no war. In retrospect, his inaccurate predictions cast doubt on the validity of all his views.

Class differences

The play is partly about class. Mrs Birling and the Crofts are upper-class; Birling is a self-made man who has become wealthy by exploiting his workers. Despite his wealth, we see signs of his insecurity about his social status. The play begins with him wanting to impress on Gerald that he gets the same brand of port as Gerald's upper-class father, and that he is likely to receive a knighthood. He is also anxious for the Inspector to know that he has been Mayor of Brumley.

Mrs Birling is from a higher-class background than her husband, which is why she tells him off for praising the meal, obliging their guest, Gerald, to agree. This is inappropriate behaviour for the class to which he aspires.

Gender

When the play was written, women were beginning to have a higher status in society, partly because of their role during the 1939–45 war. We see the new assertiveness of the younger generation of women both in Eva Smith (asking for a pay rise, and leading a strike) and Sheila (challenging her parents). We also see Priestley's views on how men exploit women, in Eva's treatment at the hands of Gerald and Eric, and even Birling.

Key quote

“ Britain, which in the years immediately before this war was rapidly losing such democratic virtues as it possessed, is now being bombed and burned into democracy. ”
BBC Radio Broadcast (1940)

Play notes

Act One

► *Opening directions up to 'She and SHEILA and ERIC go out. BIRLING and GERALD sit down again' (p. 7)*

The opening stage directions

The opening directions set the scene. The Birlings have money, but their 'good solid furniture' is 'heavily comfortable' and does not make the room 'cosy and homelike'. It sounds like a hotel. What does this suggest about what they value?

Arthur Birling is 'rather provincial in his speech' (he has a regional accent), and his wife is his 'social superior'. Some landowning families were prepared to link themselves through marriage to a 'socially inferior' business family in return for financial gain.

Activity 1

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Read the opening speeches of Birling, Gerald, Sheila, Mrs Birling and Eric. For Eric, include the stage direction 'ERIC suddenly guffaws'.

- Given the opening character descriptions, how do you think each speech should be spoken?
- What impressions of character do you get from these speeches?

A family celebration

► *Read to 'Arthur, what about this famous toast of yours?' (p. 3)*

Birling passes the port to Gerald, which suggests that he accepts Gerald as part of the family. Birling notes that the families buy the same port. The *subtext* here (what he could be suggesting but not saying) could be 'Our families are equal: your father is higher class than me but I am just as wealthy.'

Activity 2

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

What do you think the subtext of the following lines on pages 2 and 3 could be?

- MRS B. (*reproachfully*) Arthur, you're not supposed to say such things—
- GERALD ...I insist upon being one of the family now. I've been trying long enough, haven't I?
- ERIC ...Suddenly I felt I just had to laugh.
- SHEILA Don't be an ass, Eric.

Business benefits

► *Read down to Sheila's line 'Now I really feel engaged' (p. 5)*

Birling is pleased to be getting a son-in-law who is a good match for his daughter, and he looks forward to the family businesses 'working together – for lower costs and higher prices' (p. 4). Even while celebrating, he is still thinking about business. One way in which the family alliance could produce 'lower costs' is if Croft and Birling keep wages down to the same level.

Activity 3

DRAMATIC IMPACT

Identify lines that:

- make the mood seem relaxed and happy;
- hint that things could go wrong.

Make a mind map or spidergram to show what could go wrong. For each possibility, write down a line or phrase that hints at it.

The state of the nation

► *Read to the exit of Mrs Birling, Sheila and Eric (p. 7)*

Birling makes a long speech broken only by brief comments from Eric and Gerald. He wants to mark the occasion and put the coming marriage in context, giving the young couple a kind of 'send-off'. He also feels that it is up

Key point

Gerald calls his father 'the governor', showing respect – which Birling would approve of – but also humour: he feels he can be informal with Birling.

to employers like him to safeguard the nation by ensuring that 'the interests of Capital' are protected.

Father and future son-in-law one to one

Mrs Birling has tactfully got Eric out of the room. Birling and Gerald chat confidentially, sharing a joke about the Birlings being 'a nice well-behaved family' (p.8). Birling offers Gerald a cigar – suggesting his acceptance of him almost as an equal. Compare this with the way Birling treats Eric.

Birling tries to reassure Gerald that the Birlings are almost the social equals of the Crofts. Birling thinks Gerald's aristocratic mother will regard him more highly when he becomes *Sir Arthur*.

Activity 4

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Read up to Eric's entry (p.9) aloud. Draw a figure to represent each man. Add a speech bubble for each containing a line that you think is important, and a thought bubble for each to suggest what might be going on in the back of each man's mind as they talk.

Activity 5

DRAMATIC IMPACT

Read from Eric's entry (p.9) to his defiant 'Nothing' (top of p.11). Much of the dramatic impact comes from things that are initially hinted at but not revealed until later. Our interest is engaged as we begin to suspect that Eric has something to be nervous about. Answer the following questions:

- What hints are there that Eric may have things to hide?
- What does Eric's attitude seem to be towards his father's advice?

Enter Inspector Goole

► Read from where Edna opens the door and announces the Inspector, to his line 'No, she didn't exactly go on the streets' (p.16)

The stage directions reveal that the Inspector has to give 'an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness', which gives him an air of authority (p.11). Birling is pleasant to him at first, but becomes impatient when



the Inspector refuses to state his business immediately. The Inspector reveals that he has come about a girl who has committed suicide. Priestley uses a device to make the Inspector's knowledge of her believable – her diary.

The Inspector quickly establishes himself as a man who cannot be intimidated or sidetracked. He interrupts Birling and refuses to let Gerald and Eric see the photograph he shows Birling.

Birling's responsibility

Birling recognises Eva Smith as an employee whom he fired, but he is not unsettled by this connection, although he must realise that some people might blame him: 'I can't accept any responsibility' (p.14). In addition, he is uncomfortable when Eric quotes his earlier assertion that 'a man has to look after himself'.

Birling acknowledges that Eva was 'a good worker', but makes it clear that the pay claim in which she was involved never had any chance of success: 'I refused, of course' (p.14). He resents the Inspector asking why. Moreover, he justifies himself: 'it's my duty to keep labour costs down' (p.15). Eric questions this, signalling the beginnings of family tensions, while Gerald supports Birling. Birling calls the strike 'a pitiful affair' but claims that Eva Smith, as a ringleader, 'had to go' (p.15).

Birling tries to intimidate the Inspector by warning him that he knows the Chief Constable (p.16). He is angry that Eric sides with Eva, and feels that it is time for the Inspector to leave.

The 2009 Stephen Daldry production, with Inspector Goole in the foreground and Mr Birling and Gerald in the dining room.

Key point

There is **dramatic irony** in Birling's 'state of the nation' speech: the audience knows that most of his predictions have been proved wrong. Do you know which ones?

Key point

The Inspector's use of the word 'exactly' in 'No, she didn't exactly go on the streets' implies that what happened to Eva was in some way like her resorting to prostitution (p.16).

Key point

The Inspector repeats the fact that Birling sacked Eva Smith 'for wanting twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and six', implying that this was unjust (p. 19).

Key quote

“A nice little promising life there, I thought, and a nasty mess somebody's made of it.”
Inspector Goole (p. 21)

The Inspector accuses Sheila of using her power to punish Eva.

Activity 6**DRAMATIC IMPACT**

Pick out three points when the Inspector asserts himself in a way that surprises and/or irritates someone. Explain why his words or actions have this effect.

Sheila on trial

► Read from 'SHEILA has now entered' to the end of Act 1

Sheila's mood on 'gaily' entering is in contrast to the mood that has been generated by the Inspector. Birling tells Sheila to 'Run along' (he sees her as a girl rather than an adult), but the Inspector tells her to stay. This makes Birling threaten to report him. Unperturbed, the Inspector introduces himself and the purpose of his inquiry to Sheila, who is 'rather distressed', though she takes an interest in the young woman: 'Pretty?' Note the Inspector's grim police-style humour: 'She wasn't pretty when I saw her today...' (p. 18).

When Birling hears that the Inspector did not come only to see him, he changes his tone and apologises. The Inspector takes his time to explain that after Birling fired Eva Smith she changed her name.

Eric and Sheila are sympathetic to Eva, especially when the Inspector describes her life: 'no relatives to help her, few friends, lonely, half-starved, she was feeling desperate' (p. 19). Do you think that, for a police inspector, he seems very involved in her situation?

Notice how Birling continually expects the worst of Eva: 'And then she got herself into trouble there, I suppose'; 'Not doing her work properly?' (p. 20).

When the Inspector mentions that 'a customer complained about her', Sheila's agitation shows that she suspects her own involvement, which is confirmed when she sees a photograph and recognises the girl as the one she got fired from Milwards (p. 20).

The Inspector gradually becomes more challenging with the family. When Eric says he thinks he should go to bed, the Inspector tells him, 'I think you'd better stay here' (p. 22). Gerald calls this 'heavy-handed', and the Inspector justifies it by saying that he is only being as 'easy' (forthright) with the family as they are being with him.

Gradually Sheila's story emerges. Unlike her father, she accepts responsibility, and is distressed by her part in the suicide. She readily explains her role:

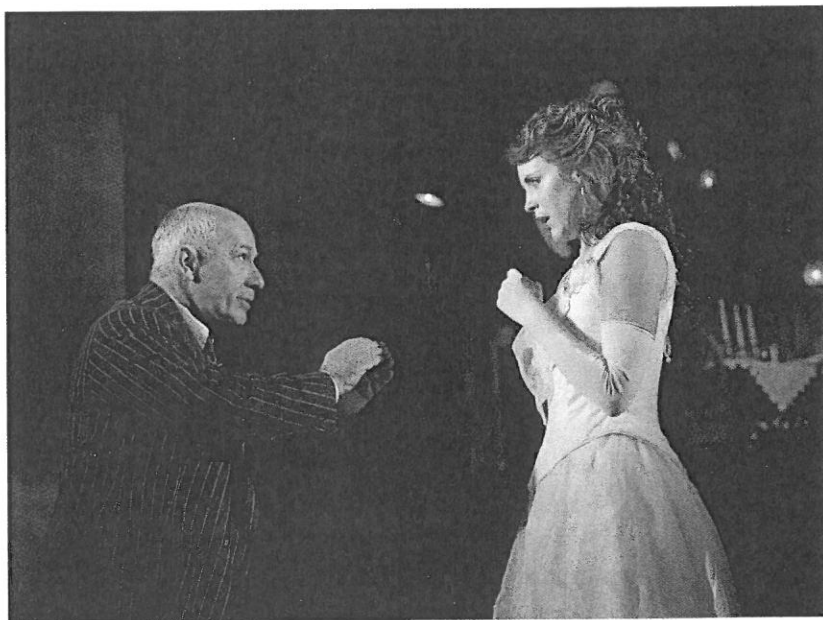
'I went to the manager at Milwards and I told him that if they didn't get rid of that girl, I'd never go near the place again and I'd persuade mother to close our account with them.' (p. 23)

Sheila gives a frank account of her petulant behaviour (pp. 23-4). The nearest she comes to self-justification is when she says that she has never done anything like this before, and never will again (p. 24).

Daisy Renton

It is now Gerald's turn to be grilled. The turning point comes when Goole tells the family that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton (p. 25). Gerald is startled and then tries to deny knowing Daisy. While the Inspector is temporarily outside, Sheila tells Gerald not to be stupid: 'You gave yourself away as soon as he mentioned her other name' (p. 26). Sheila presses home her suspicions: 'Were you seeing her last spring and summer, during that time when you hardly came near me, and said you were so busy?' (p. 26).

His shame and discomfort are revealed by his silence. Even when he admits to the affair to Sheila, he still tries to convince her that they can keep it from Inspector Goole. Sheila, however, knows better.



Activity 7**CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

Find evidence that shows that Sheila:

- does not like to hear about suffering;
- has a bad temper;
- can be jealous;
- is intelligent;
- is prepared to admit her mistakes.

Act Two

Act One ended at a tense moment, and on a question. Act Two continues from the same point, and with the same question, from the Inspector to Gerald: ‘Well?’

Family tensions

► Read to the Inspector’s line ‘... we’ll have to share our guilt’ (p. 29)

Gerald is still trying to reveal as little as possible to the Inspector. When he says, ‘I think Miss Birling ought to be excused any more of this questioning,’ do you think he is protecting her, or himself (p. 27)?

Tensions now arise between Gerald and Sheila. Gerald accuses her of only wanting to stay in order to watch him be ‘put through it’ by the Inspector. She tells him, ‘And if you’d really loved me, you couldn’t have said that.’ Do you think this is true? She thinks that Gerald now regards her as a ‘selfish, vindictive creature’ (p. 28). Only the Inspector’s intervention halts the argument.

Mrs Birling gets it all wrong

► Read from Sheila’s line ‘Yes. That’s true. You know’ (p. 29) to her ‘Of course he did’ (bottom of p. 33)

The first suspicion about the Inspector’s identity arises when Sheila tells the Inspector, ‘I don’t understand about you’ (p. 29). When Mrs Birling enters ‘briskly’, she is ‘quite out of key’ with the mood of the scene, and begins confidently to set about dismissing the Inspector. When Sheila tells her she is ‘beginning all wrong’, she is baffled (p. 29). She dismisses the whole inquiry as ‘this absurd business’ (p. 30). She tries to send Sheila to bed, then tells her off for contradicting her, and finally reveals her class prejudices: ‘Girls of that class—’ (p. 30).

Sheila knows there is no point in her mother trying to ‘build up a wall’ between the Birlings and Eva Smith: the Inspector will destroy it. Nonetheless, Mrs Birling blunders on, until checked by the revelation that Eric is a seasoned drinker. Her shocked reaction is one of denial: ‘It isn’t true’ (p. 32). Only Gerald’s confirmation makes her believe it.

Tensions mount, as Birling enters, having failed to get Eric to go to bed, because the Inspector wants to speak to him. Mr Birling angrily threatens the Inspector: ‘I don’t propose to give you much more rope’ (p. 33). Mrs Birling angrily demands of the Inspector what he wants to know. When the Inspector, at his own pace, takes up Eva’s story once more, and mentions her name change to Daisy Renton, Gerald makes one more feeble effort to deny knowing her, which Goole brushes aside: ‘You gave yourself away at once’ (p. 33).

Activity 1**CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

In this part of Act Two we see family tensions and a range of moods, especially Mrs Birling’s mood being out of key with Sheila’s. Imagine you are able to interview Mr Birling, Mrs Birling, Gerald and Sheila. Write a first-person statement for each one saying how they feel about the situation, about each other and about the Inspector.

Gerald confesses

► Read from the Inspector’s line ‘And anyhow I knew already’ (top of p. 34) to Sheila’s line ‘Yes, but after all ...’ (p. 38)

This section reveals an intimate betrayal: Birling and Sheila barely knew Eva Smith, but Gerald came to know her well – yet still left her when it suited him. It must be hard for him to tell the story of his affair to the Inspector, especially with Sheila present. Her ironic comments (p. 34) do not make it any easier:

- ‘Well, we didn’t think you meant Buckingham Palace.’
- ‘I wouldn’t miss it for worlds—’
- ‘I’m supposed to be engaged to the hero of it. Go on Gerald.’

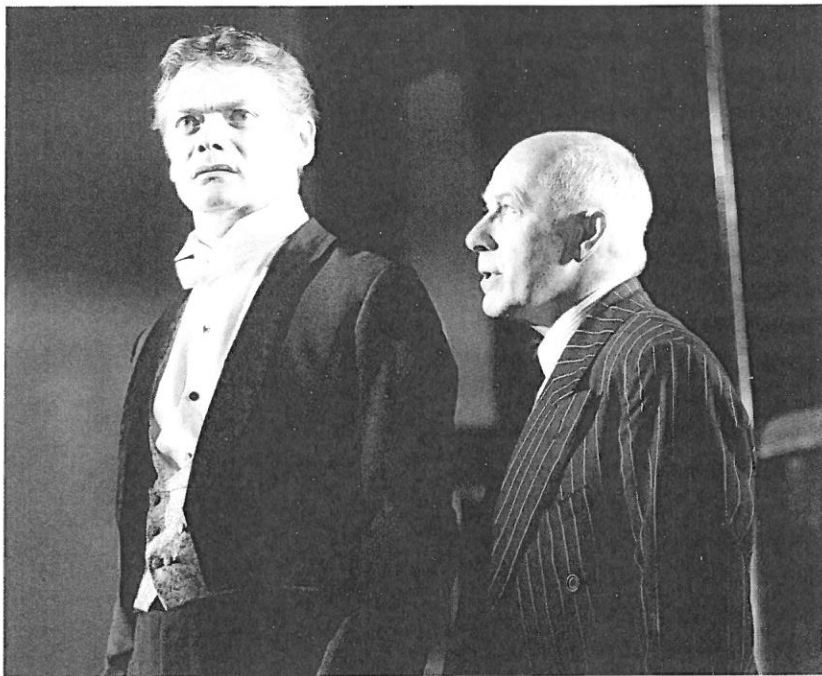
Gerald gives a full account of his affair with Daisy. He was in the Palace bar when he saw her with a drunken Alderman Meggarty.

Key quote

“ You see, we have to share something. If there’s nothing else, we’ll have to share our guilt. ”
Inspector Goole (p. 29)

Key point

Gerald’s account of Daisy loosely corroborates those given by Birling and Sheila. This argues against there being more than one girl involved.



The Inspector turns his attention to Gerald: 'Come along, Mr Croft. What happened?'

Key point

Gerald evidently made Daisy happy. Does this make us more sympathetic towards him, or less so because he still left her? Was it just class that came between them?

Key point

Sheila's use of the conditional tense ('We'd have to start...') shows that it is not certain that she will have Gerald back.

Gerald says that she gave him 'a glance that was nothing less than a cry for help': he sees himself as her rescuer (p. 35).

Hearing that Daisy was about to be evicted, Gerald insisted on her moving into his friend's vacant flat. However, he denies doing this so that he could 'make love to her' (p. 37). Instead, he thinks that their affair was 'inevitable', because she was 'young and pretty and warm-hearted – and intensely grateful' (p. 37).

When Sheila asks Gerald if he was in love with the girl, he replies with honest uncertainty. Sheila, however, is bitterly ironic: 'You were the wonderful Fairy Prince. You must have adored it, Gerald' (p. 38). Again, he admits to this.

Activity 2

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

- Copy out the lines in which Sheila is being ironic. Explain in what way each one is ironic.
- Explain why you think Sheila speaks to Gerald ironically.

The end of the affair

► Read from Gerald's 'Is there anything else you want to know...?' (p. 38) to his exit (p. 40)

Gerald has by now given up all attempts at concealment. He seems to remember Daisy fondly, saying that she was 'very gallant' about his breaking off their relationship (p. 38). He goes on to say, 'She told me she'd been happier

than she'd ever been before' (p. 39). Gerald's parting cash gift enabled Daisy to go away for a while to reflect on their relationship.

Before Gerald leaves, Sheila hands back her engagement ring. However, we see a deepening of her character in her speech beginning 'I don't dislike you as I did half an hour ago, Gerald' (p. 40). She respects his honesty, but she feels that for their relationship to continue, 'We'd have to start all over again...' (p. 40).

Activity 3

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

You are an agony aunt/uncle. You have received letters from Sheila and Gerald giving details of his affair and of the engagement. Sheila says she does not know if she can trust Gerald now. Gerald says he wants to regain her trust. Write a letter of advice to either Sheila or Gerald. Make accurate references to the information in the play.

Mrs Birling's guilt

► Read from Gerald's exit (p. 40) to the end of Act Two

There is another hint that Sheila suspects the Inspector: 'You know, you never showed him that photograph of her' (p. 40). Goole gives only a partial explanation. Why do you think he does this?

Goole shows Mrs Birling a photograph (but is it *the* photograph?), and she pretends not to recognise the girl. He tells her frankly, 'You're not telling me the truth' (p. 41). Both she and Birling are outraged, but Sheila backs the Inspector. Meanwhile, we hear from the slamming door that Eric has left the house. Neither Mr nor Mrs Birling suspect that he may have had a reason for leaving.

Mrs Birling, 'after a pause', admits to having seen Eva Smith two weeks earlier when she came to ask the Brumley Women's Charity Organization for help. It quickly emerges that Eva called herself 'Mrs Birling', which the real Mrs Birling sees as 'gross impertinence' (p. 43).

The words 'impertinence' (Mrs Birling) and 'impudence' (Mr Birling) mean more than just 'rudeness': they are *value-laden* words, implying that Eva, as a lower-class person, should have shown Mrs Birling respect simply because she was upper class.

Mrs Birling explains that she did not believe Eva's story. She therefore made sure the girl was refused help. She insists: 'Unlike the other three, I did nothing I'm ashamed of or that won't bear investigation' (p.44). She feels that not only Gerald, but also her husband and Sheila, are partly to blame. Dramatically speaking, her self-righteousness sets her up to fall further than the other characters. The twist that leads to this begins when the Inspector announces that Eva was pregnant (p.45). He condemns Mrs Birling: 'you slammed the door in her face' (p.45). Sheila agrees with him; even Birling admits that this could damage the family's reputation.

Mrs Birling continues to justify herself. She still feels that it was the father's responsibility. It emerges from her account that the father was a young man, 'silly and wild and drinking too much', who stole money to give to Eva (p.46). Does this sound like someone we know?

It is Sheila who guesses that the father is Eric. Mrs Birling blunders on, insisting that the young man 'ought to be dealt with very severely' (p.48). When the truth does finally emerge, her distress is expressed as denial: 'I don't believe it. *I won't believe it*' (p.49). The dramatic moment reaches its peak with Eric's silent return.

Activity 4

DRAMATIC IMPACT

Act Two ends on a peak of tension and suspense. Pick out four or more key moments in the unfolding of the plot, from Gerald's exit to when Mrs Birling is confronted with the truth. For each moment, copy out a line and then explain why it is a turning point.

Act Three

Eric reveals all

► Read up to Birling's line 'Why, you hysterical young fool...' (p.55)

Family tensions continue to grow. Sheila stirs things up by telling Eric how their mother has been 'blaming everything on the young man who got this girl into trouble'. Eric is bitter: 'You haven't made it any easier for me, have

you, Mother?' (p.50). Her response – 'But I didn't know it was *you*...' – hints at her double standards: she would not want her own son to be 'dealt with very severely'.

Eric, like Gerald, met Eva at the Palace bar. He was 'a bit squiffy' (p.51) and threatened to 'make a row' if she didn't let him into her lodgings (p.52). He 'didn't even remember' having sex with her on this first occasion (p.52). However, there were other times – until she got pregnant. His crime, in his father's eyes, is far worse because he took the £50 he gave her from Birling's office. Do you believe Eric's claim that he 'intended to pay it back' (p.54)?

Family tensions are running high. Eric accuses Birling of not being 'the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble'; Birling retaliates by calling Eric 'spoilt' (p.54). However, Eric's emotions explode when he hears of his mother's role: 'you killed them both' (p.55). Worse, he accuses her of never trying to understand – he feels misunderstood and unacknowledged, especially by her. He seems on the verge of physically attacking her – when the Inspector intervenes.

Dramatic dashes

In this part of Act Three there are numerous dashes, both at the end of speeches, as in Sheila's '...made an example of—' (p.50), and in the middle, as in Eric's 'Oh – my God! – how stupid it all is!' (p.52). The first sort usually

Key point

Birling's main concern on hearing about the £50 is to 'cover this up as soon as I can' (p.54). This matters more to him than the young woman's death.

The Inspector confronts Mrs Birling.



Key quote

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

Inspector Goole (p. 56)

shows that another character interrupts, while the second sort indicates that a character's words are coming out brokenly.

Activity 1**DRAMATIC IMPACT**

Look back at all the uses of 'dramatic dashes' in this section.

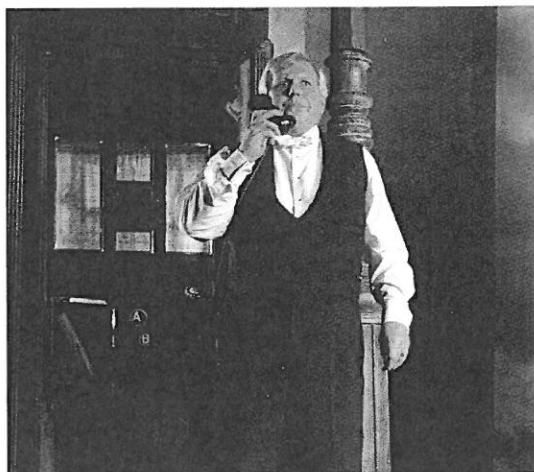
- Give at least one example of each type of usage. Explain how these dashes show characters' interaction and feelings, and how this affects the changing mood of the play at this point.
- Which characters most often interrupt? Which are most often interrupted? What does this reveal about them?
- Which characters have the most, and which the fewest, dashes in the middle of their speeches? What does this reveal?

Inspector Goole takes charge – and takes his leave

► Read from the Inspector's 'Stop!' (p. 55) to the end of the stage direction following his exit (p. 57)

The Inspector has made each character give his or her account of their involvement with Eva Smith. He now becomes like a judge passing sentence: 'This girl killed herself – and died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her. Remember that. Never forget it' (p. 55).

He reminds each in turn of their guilt – first Mrs Birling, then Eric, then Sheila, and finally Birling. He repeats the exact amount of the pay rise that Eva Smith was refused. He condemns each in turn, although noting that Gerald 'at least had some affection for her and made her happy for a time' (p. 56).



Mr Birling calls Colonel Roberts to check Goole's identity.

The Inspector's final speech is like that of a judge summing up at the end of a trial. He reminds the characters, and the audience, that Eva was just one of millions of exploited working-class people.

The Inspector's assertion of social responsibility could be seen as the key message of the play. His final warning of the 'fire and blood and anguish' that will come 'if men will not learn that lesson' is a powerful warning to the audience (p. 56).

Activity 2**LOOKING AT LANGUAGE**

Reread and analyse Inspector Goole's final speech. Consider the following questions:

- How does he use repetition for effect?
- How does he make us realise that Eva represents more than just one young woman?
- How does he combine short and long sentences?
- What images does he use and what is their impact?
- In what other ways does he make this speech powerful?

Now use your ideas to write a continuous paragraph on how this speech makes a powerful impact on the audience.

Activity 3**DRAMATIC IMPACT**

The Inspector has gone, but there is a quarter of the play still to come. What do you imagine will take place in the time left?

Blame and doubt

► Read from Birling's line 'You're the one I blame for this' (p. 57) to Gerald's return (p. 61)

The family divisions deepen as Birling worries that a scandal will affect his knighthood, and defends himself and his wife, while Sheila and Eric have taken the Inspector's lesson to heart. Eric asks, 'What does it matter now whether they give you a knighthood or not?' (p. 57). Sheila is similarly dismissive: 'The point is, you don't seem to have learnt anything' (p. 58).

After the mutual blame, the doubt begins. Eric reminds his father of his confident speech in Act One: 'You told us that a man has to make his own way, look after himself' (p. 58). Sheila reflects on the Inspector, and a moment

later voices her doubts: 'It doesn't matter much now, of course – but was he really a police inspector?' (p. 58).

To Eric and Sheila, the truth of what each of them has done is what matters; to the Birlings, and later, Gerald, avoidance of a scandal is everything. Birling becomes excited when he thinks that perhaps Goole was a hoaxer, then angry when it occurs to him that the others need not have revealed so much. He now thinks that the Inspector was probably 'a Socialist or some sort of crank' (p. 60).

Activity 4

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

- (a) What evidence is there so far to suggest that Goole is not a real Inspector? What do Mr and Mrs Birling think was suspicious?
- (b) In what way does Mrs Birling's comment on what they should do now reflect her attitude towards gender roles?

Who was the Inspector?

► Read from Gerald's entry (p. 61) to Sheila's 'Yes. The same photograph.' (p. 67)

Birling continues his efforts at damage limitation, trying to avoid telling Gerald about the guilt of Mrs Birling and Eric (p. 61). Sheila feels there is no point in trying to hide their shared guilt, but agrees to keep quiet for now. Gerald now astounds Mr and Mrs Birling by announcing: 'That man wasn't a police officer' (p. 62). He has been doing some detective work of his own, and has found out that Inspector Goole is not on the local force. Birling quickly confirms this by phoning the Chief Constable.

The mood of Mr and Mrs Birling changes in response to this news, but Sheila and Eric do not share in this. As Sheila says with bitter sarcasm: 'I suppose we're all nice people now' (p. 63). Mrs Birling shows her high self-opinion: 'I was the only one of you who didn't give in to him' (p. 63). Birling is already making light of 'that fellow's antics' (p. 64).

One girl, or more?

The next stage in the unravelling of the case comes when Gerald raises a key question: 'But how do you know it's the same girl?' They have all been involved with a girl, but was it the same one (p. 66)?

Activity 5

DRAMATIC IMPACT

The audience will at this point be considering this new twist. List the evidence for and against it being the same girl that each character has been involved with.

No suicide, no girl?

► Read from Gerald's line 'How do you know it's the same photograph?' (p. 67) to the end of the play

Gerald's reasoning quickly establishes that the Birlings could each have been shown a different photograph. (Gerald did not see one at all.) This means that there is no proof that he and each of the Birlings were connected with the same young woman.

This line of argument does not impress Eric who says that even if there were several girls, 'That doesn't matter to me. The one I knew is dead' (p. 69). Birling counters, 'Is she? How do we know she is?' Gerald has evidently worked this out already: 'That's right... How do we know any girl killed herself today? You've got it' (p. 69). There is a tense moment when Gerald phones Brumley Infirmary and discovers that there has been no suicide. Mr and Mrs Birling, and Gerald, are delighted. Birling speaks 'jovially'. Sheila, however, points out: 'If it didn't end tragically, then that's lucky for us' (p. 70).

Birling is just enjoying teasing Sheila and Eric about their attitude, when another shock comes: the phone rings and they learn that a girl has just died after drinking disinfectant, and that an inspector is on his way to ask some questions.

Activity 6

DRAMATIC IMPACT

The timing of the discoveries is important in keeping the audience engaged. So too is the way in which the characters' moods change. Remind yourself of the text from Gerald's entry (p. 61) to the end of the play. Then make a three-column table. In column 1 indicate the main turning points in the characters' understanding of what has occurred. In column 2, make notes on how they affect the mood of each character. In column 3, record phrases or lines which indicate their mood. You could start with Gerald's 'That man wasn't a police officer' (p. 62).



The Inspector waves a photograph, but is the same photograph shown to all?

Key point

Sheila raises the two big questions that occupy the rest of the play: was Goole a real police inspector, and how much does it matter?

Key quote

“ And I say the girl's dead and we all helped to kill her – and that's what matters. ”
Eric (p. 65)



Characters

Arthur Birling

Key quote

“ A man has to make his own way – has to look after himself. ”

Birling (p. 9)

Key point

Priestley portrays Birling as typical of men who feel that their status should get them what they want.

Key quote

“ Well, it’s my duty to keep labour costs down... ”

Birling (p. 15)

His position

Arthur Birling is proud of his achievements, but his accent and his memories reveal his humble background. He supports the economic system that has allowed him to succeed: ‘We employers at last are coming together to see that our interests – and the interests of Capital – are properly protected’ (p.6). It seems obvious to him that ‘hard-headed, practical’ businessmen know better than left-wing intellectuals, but his ‘state of the nation’ speech is full of predictions which fail to come true.

A need to impress

Birling wants to impress. In his opening speech he points out that he buys the same port as Gerald’s father. He also tells Gerald that he is likely to receive a knighthood (p.8). This is partly to reassure Gerald’s mother, but it also reflects his sense of self-importance. He again asserts his own importance when he tells Goole, ‘I was an alderman for years – and Lord Mayor two years ago – and I’m still on the Bench’ (p.11). He later tries to intimidate Goole by saying that he plays golf with the Chief Constable (p.16).

Businessman and family man

Birling sees himself as a businessman. He therefore has no regrets about Eva Smith. He is happy that his daughter is going to marry Gerald, but partly because he wants the two families’ companies to work together ‘for lower costs and higher prices’ (p.4). He is protective towards his family, protesting when Goole upsets Sheila (p.21), and trying to stop her hearing about Gerald’s affair (pp.34 and 37). In return, he expects loyalty and resents

Sheila’s lack of it (p.50). However, he does not understand his children or respect their individuality. He calls Sheila a child (pp.21 and 33) and it is clear that Eric feels unsupported by him (p.54).

Unchanged

Birling is unchanged at the end of the play, although the final phone call threatens this. For him, the family’s problems are over if the Inspector was a hoaxer. He admits to having had ‘a bit of a scare’, but he is relieved to have avoided a ‘public scandal’ (p.70).

Activity 1

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Find and explain quotes showing the following character traits in Birling:

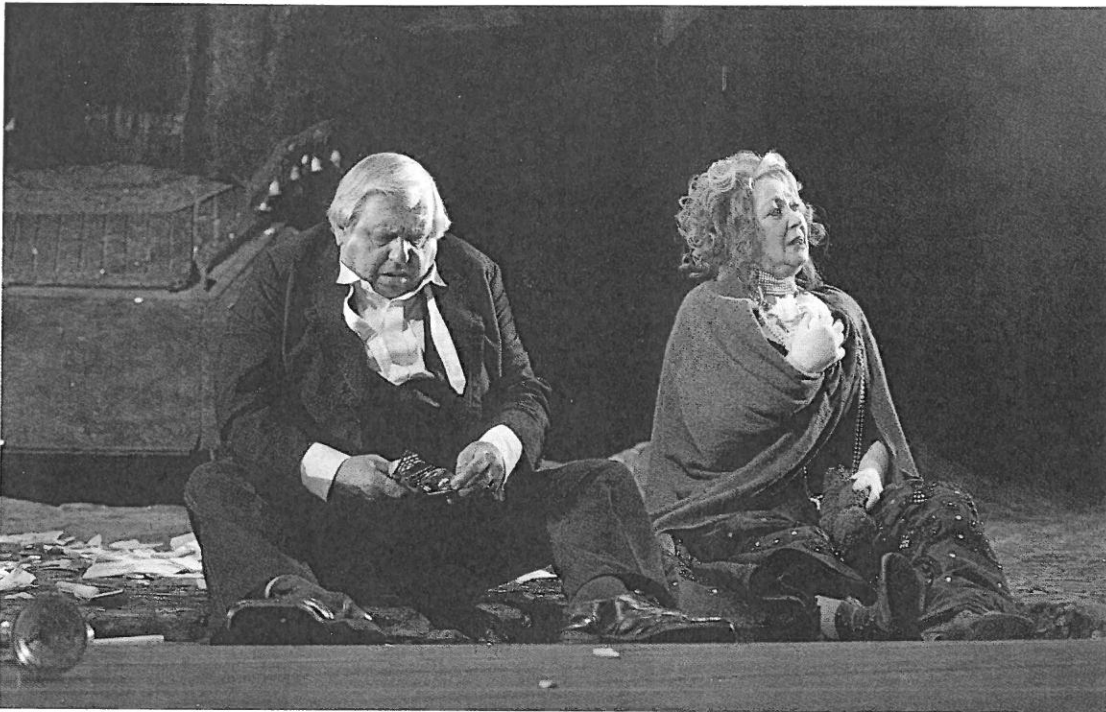
- his pride in his humble background;
- his sense of self-importance;
- his pride in being a ‘hard-headed’ businessman;
- his inability to relate to his children;
- his inability to learn from the Inspector’s visit.

Find at least one quote for each trait.

Sybil Birling

Her snobbery

Mrs Birling is aware of class distinctions, showing embarrassment when Birling compliments the cook (p.2) and telling him off for talking business (p.4). She also disapproves of the slang word ‘squiffy’ (p.3). She resents Eva Smith’s ‘gross impertinence’ (p.43) in calling herself Mrs Birling, and refuses to believe in her moral stance: ‘She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position’ (p.46).



Mr and Mrs Birling consider the prospects of a public scandal.

Her lack of compassion

Despite heading a charity for women in need, Mrs Birling showed no compassion towards Eva Smith. She feels 'perfectly justified' in having dismissed her (p.47). Yet under pressure she tries to shift blame onto Birling: 'it wasn't I who had her turned out of her employment' (p.46). She is even more forceful in blaming 'some drunken young idler' (p.48). Priestley deals with Mrs Birling with special severity, having her fall into a trap of her own making: she is confronted with the knowledge that Eric is a hard drinker and the father of the dead woman's child. She has helped to kill her own grandchild.

There is **dramatic irony** in the way Mrs Birling is trapped. The audience will realise before her that the 'drunken young idler' is Eric. There is also **situational irony**: we know that she would not apply the same standards to her own family, yet Eric is condemned by her words.

Unchanged

Mrs Birling is quick to claim that she would have handled the situation better than her husband (p.63). When the hoax appears to be confirmed, she is relieved and 'amused', and cannot see why the family should not carry on as before (p.71).

Activity 2

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

How do the following lines reveal Mrs Birling's outlook?

- 'When you're married you'll realize that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business.' (p.3)
- 'Girls of that class—' (p.30)
- 'That – I consider – is a trifle impertinent, Inspector.' (p.30)
- 'You know of course that my husband was Lord Mayor... ' (p.31)
- 'I don't believe it. I *won't* believe it...' (p.49)

Key quote

“ Oh – she had some fancy reason. As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money! ”

Mrs Birling (p. 47)

Gerald Croft

His relationship with Mr and Mrs Birling

Gerald is the son of Sir George and Lady Croft, and Birling is keen to have him as a son-in-law. Gerald is described as 'very much the easy well-bred young man-about-town', yet he seems anxious to please the Birlings (p.2). When Birling praises the dinner, Gerald agrees enthusiastically – 'Absolutely first-class' (p.2). The same can be said of his response when Birling talks about the business benefits of the

Key point

It is only in Act Three that Gerald finally apologises: 'I did keep a girl last summer. I've admitted it. And I'm sorry, Sheila' (p.66).

Key quote

“ I didn't install her there so that I could make love to her... I was sorry for her, and didn't like the idea of her going back to the Palace bar. ”
Gerald (p.37)

marriage (p.4). In Act One, Gerald says relatively little because he is feeling his way with Mr and Mrs Birling. So, when Birling makes a speech about 'the interests of Capital', Gerald limits his response to a respectful 'I believe you're right, sir' (p.6). He is also quick to congratulate Birling on his expected knighthood (p.8).

We see that Gerald is happy to side with the older generation when he and Birling tease Eric: 'Sounds a bit fishy to me' (p.9); 'Unless Eric's been up to something' (p.10). He nods 'confidentially' to Birling, excluding Eric from their joke. He also defends Birling: 'You couldn't have done anything else' (p.15), and 'I know we'd have done the same thing' (p.17).

His relationship with Sheila

When Gerald says that he's been 'trying long enough' to join the family, he is only half-joking; he is also hinting that his patience is wearing thin (p.3). However, we are alerted to Sheila's suspicions about him when she refers to 'last summer' when he had no time for her (p.3). His response reveals that they have had this out before, and we later learn that he is lying: 'And I've told you – I was awfully busy at the works all that time' (p.3). Gerald tries to maintain the lie in Act Two, but, to his credit, he drops it quickly. When the truth emerges, he defends himself from Sheila's scorn with sarcasm: 'Thanks. You're going to be a great help, I can see'; 'I'm glad I amuse you—' (p.34).

His relationship with Eva Smith (Daisy Renton)

Gerald's behaviour towards Daisy was not entirely bad. He portrays himself as the girl's rescuer, responding to her 'cry for help' (p.35). He listened sympathetically and got her something to eat when he discovered that she was hungry (p.36). Learning that she was about to be evicted, he 'insisted' on her moving into his friend's flat.

Gerald is shocked by the girl's death. He speaks almost tenderly of her, even with Sheila present, and never tries to blame the girl for their affair. He admits to enjoying her gratitude, says that she was 'gallant' about his ending the relationship, and that she said she had

been happy with him (p.38). He also made her a parting gift of money.

His attitude towards the Inspector

Gerald shares the older generation's view that the Inspector ought to show them respect. He warns him that he is getting 'a bit heavy-handed', as they are all 'respectable citizens' (p.22). However, his identification with the Birlings is even stronger in Act Three. He agrees with Birling that if Goole is a fake, this 'makes *all* the difference' (p.63). He is pleased when he works out that the Inspector may have tricked them: 'There were probably four of five different girls' (p.68). His spirits lift further when he discovers that there is no dead girl at the Infirmary.

Activity 3**CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

- (a) Draw up a two-column table headed 'For' and 'Against'. Record the points in Gerald's favour and the ways in which he behaves badly.
(b) Write a paragraph assessing Gerald, based on your table.

Sheila

A playful, intelligent young woman

Sheila is playful, and teases Gerald – 'I'd hate you to know all about port' (p.2) – though she is intelligent enough to distrust his excuses for not seeing her: 'Yes, that's what *you* say' (p.3). Her intelligence is also shown in her quick realisation that Gerald knew the dead girl. She is also the first to realise that Eric is the father of the girl's unborn baby, and the first to suspect that Goole is not genuine.

Her conscience

Although her behaviour in Milwards, which leads to Eva Smith's dismissal, is that of a selfish and spoilt child, she regrets it bitterly and accepts that she is partly responsible for the girl's death (p.23). Even earlier, when Sheila hears about her father firing Eva, she is sympathetic: 'But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're

Key quote

“ Everything's all right now, Sheila. (Holds up the ring.) What about this ring? ”
Gerald (p.71)



Sheila comforts Eric as the horror of what has happened sinks in.

people' (p.19). She is also the first to realise that the Inspector seems to be judging them all, warning her mother against even trying to resist him: 'You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl. If you do, then the Inspector will just break it down' (p.30).

Her growth

Sheila is surprisingly calm about Gerald's affair, perhaps because she suspected it. However, she is appalled that her parents, and Gerald, continue to think that all that matters is avoiding scandal. At the end of the play, she resists clutching at an easy resolution. Although she says she respects Gerald's honesty, she is not just about to take him back.

Activity 4

LOOKING AT LANGUAGE

Explain what is revealed by the following lines spoken by Sheila:

- 'You're squiffy.' (p.3)
- 'I'm sorry, Daddy. Actually I was listening.' (p.6)
- 'I felt rotten about it at the time and now I feel a lot worse.' (p.23)
- 'You and I aren't the same people who sat down to dinner here.' (p.40)
- '...it frightens me the way you talk, and I can't listen to any more of it.' (p.71)

Eric

Insecurity

Eric is a troubled young man, lacking Gerald's easy self-confidence. He first enters the script with a guffaw that he cannot explain, showing his social awkwardness. Left with his father and Gerald, he speaks in a rather naïve way about women being 'potty' about clothes, then lays himself open to suspicion by beginning to say 'Yes, I remember – ' then stopping himself (p.9). When Gerald jokingly suggests that he has 'been up to something', he is uneasy and responds defensively (p.10).

It emerges that Eric is a hard drinker; Gerald and Sheila are aware of this, but not his parents. It is at the end of a drunken night that he first goes home with Eva Smith. Do you think his drinking is just the wildness of youth, or does he drink to put himself at ease socially?

His assertiveness

Although unsure of himself, Eric can be assertive at times. He speaks 'defiantly' to his father when asked 'What's the matter with you?' (p.11). He also tries, though ineffectively, to challenge his father on his political views: 'What about war?' and 'Yes, I know – but

Key quote

“ I say the girl's dead and we all helped to kill her – and that's what matters— ”
Eric (p.65)

Key quote

“...it's better to ask for the earth than to take it.”

Inspector Goole (p. 15)

still—’ (p. 6). When he hears about his father firing Eva Smith, he declares that it is not a ‘free country’, as Birling claims, ‘if you can’t go and work somewhere else’ (p. 15). He even challenges Gerald’s defence of Birling: ‘He could have kept her on instead of throwing her out’ (p. 15).

His conscience

Eric is sympathetic towards Eva Smith, even before realising his own involvement. He feels that it was ‘tough luck’ for her to be fired (p. 15). According to his own account, he was ‘in a hell of a state’ about her pregnancy, and gave her money to live on (p. 53). He admits to having stolen this from the business, although he claims that he meant to repay it (p. 54). Like Sheila, he feels that even if the Inspector was a hoaxer, it does not alter the fact of their guilt: ‘He was our police inspector all right’ (p. 59). Later, he still insists, ‘We did her in all right’ (p. 68). He is particularly savage in condemning his mother for refusing to help the girl: ‘you killed her’ (p. 55).

Activity 5**CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

(a) Find and explain at least three quotes suggesting that Eric feels overlooked, misunderstood and unsupported by his parents.



Alistair Sim as Inspector Goole in the 1954 film version.

(b) Comment on Eric’s relationship with his parents.

(c) How did Eric treat Eva? What can you say in his defence?

Inspector Goole

An enigma

Like the family, we are left largely in the dark about Inspector Goole. However, we see that he is confident, uncompromising and blunt, determined to make the family face their guilt. He describes how a young woman ‘Burnt her inside out’ with disinfectant, dying ‘in great agony’ (p. 11). He insists on his own methods: ‘One person and one line of inquiry at a time’ (p. 12). He uses words sparingly, mostly letting the family incriminate themselves. However, he does make occasional moral judgements and seems more sympathetically involved with the girl than most inspectors might be.

He is unmoved by the older Birlings’ efforts to intimidate him with their status and connections. When Birling says that he plays golf with the Chief Constable, Colonel Roberts, the Inspector ‘drily’ replies ‘I don’t play golf’ (p. 16). When Birling accuses him of making a mess of their family celebration, he retorts that someone has made a mess of Eva Smith’s life (p. 21).

The Inspector seems to know a lot about Eva Smith. He says she was ‘living in lodgings, with no relatives to help her, few friends, lonely, half-starved... feeling desperate’ (p. 19). However, he says he ‘never spoke to her’ (p. 54). Do you find this suspicious?

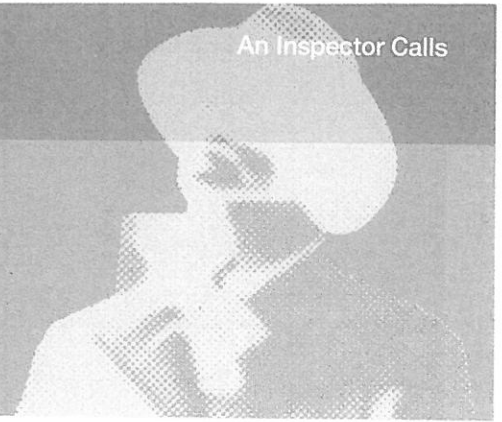
Who is he?

In analysing Inspector Goole, think about his dramatic role, not just his character. As Eric says, he is the family’s inspector, meaning that his role has been to uncover their moral shortcomings.

Activity 6**CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

What, in your view, is the Inspector’s main moral message? Find and explain at least two quotes to support your view.

Themes



Responsibility

The central theme in the play is responsibility. Inspector Goole's role is to point out to all the main characters how they are responsible for the death of Eva Smith – or at least, how they have behaved in a way that might well have contributed to the suicide of Eva Smith or someone *like* her.

As a socialist, Priestley was very much concerned with social responsibility. In this respect he was in tune with the Labour Government that was voted into power after the war, in 1945 – the same year that *An Inspector Calls* was published. It set about forming the Welfare State, to provide financial support for the unemployed and poor and to provide health care for all. In the play, the younger generation, represented by Sheila and Eric, anticipate this political development.

Birling's view on social responsibility is definitely not that of the Labour Party. It is summed up in his line 'A man has to make his own way – has to look after himself' (p.9). He thinks that this pursuit of self-interest is for the good of the country, and even of the world. This is essentially the capitalist view of society, and Birling says that 'the interests of Capital' should be 'properly protected' (p.6). In his opinion, if workers do not want to work for the wages on offer, they can go elsewhere: 'It's a free country' (p.15). However, as Eric replies, 'It isn't if you can't go and work somewhere else.' In other words, although in theory a working man or woman can work elsewhere, in practice the employers co-operate to keep wages down.

The Inspector puts the opposite view – that people in society are responsible for each other, and that if the privileged classes continue to pursue self-interest the result will be disaster. He does not try to blame any one person,

telling the family: 'You'll be able to divide the responsibility between you when I've gone' (p.54).

Even early on he hints that the wealthy exploit the poor and that there are numerous poor working-class women like Eva Smith: 'If there weren't, the factories and warehouses wouldn't know where to look for cheap labour. Ask your father' (p.19). His accusations become stronger as the play goes on. He tells Eric that he 'Just used her for the end of a stupid drunken evening, as if she was an animal, a thing, not a person' (p.56).

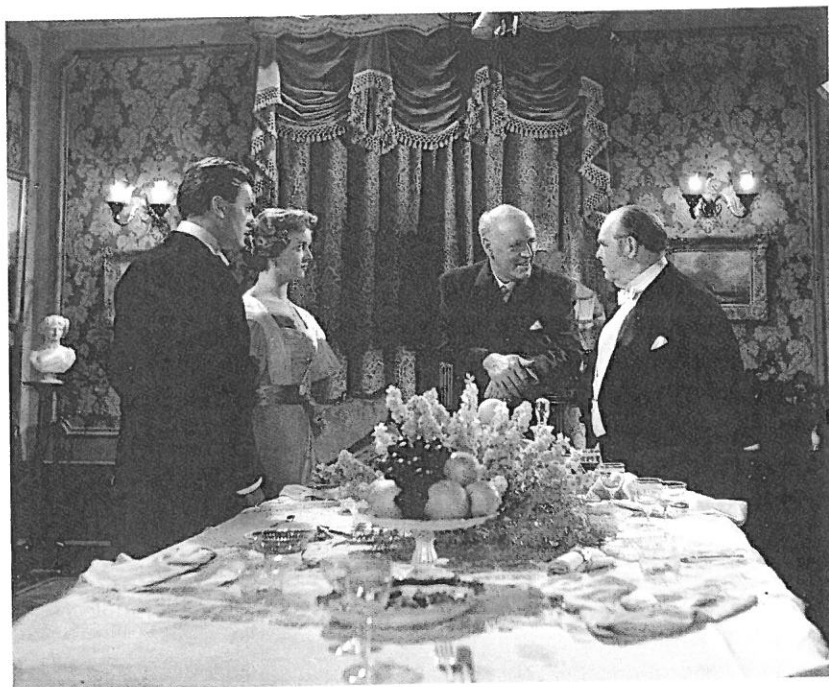
His final speech sums up his views. He says there are 'millions of Eva Smiths' whose chance of happiness is 'intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do'. He warns that if people do not realise this, 'they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish' (p.56). Here Priestley is referring to the war which ended in 1945, and perhaps to the Russian Revolution (p.56). He was a socialist but he did not want revolution in Britain. That is why the Inspector says 'It's better to ask for the earth than to take it' (p.15).

Although very concerned with social responsibility, Priestley is also writing about personal responsibility. Gerald, for example, who does seem to have tender feelings for Eva, none the less behaves irresponsibly towards her. Even though he begins as her rescuer, responding to her 'cry for help', he allows her to become emotionally attached to him when he has no intention of marrying her, and he must inevitably hurt her (p.35). To his credit, he does at least take responsibility for what he has done, as we see when he speaks of Eva not blaming him for ending their relationship, and he comments, 'I wish to God she had now. Perhaps I'd feel better about it' (p.39). Sheila's approval – 'I rather respect you more than I've

Key quote

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

Inspector Goole (p. 56)



The 1947 film interpretation of the Birlings' dining room, with Gerald, Sheila and Birling in formal dress and Inspector Goole in a 'plain darkish suit'.

ever done before' – confirms the value of him taking responsibility (p. 40).

The younger and more feckless Eric is more irresponsible in his treatment of Eva, but is deeply affected when he realises that the pregnant girl he knew is now dead – especially when he learns of his mother's role in this. Mrs Birling has already brought the issue of personal responsibility to prominence in condemning the father of the pregnant girl's child: 'He should be made an example of' and 'compelled to confess in public his responsibility' (p. 48). Eric, for his part, holds his mother responsible for the death of the girl and of his own child: 'Then – you killed her... you killed them both' (p. 55).

The Birlings and Gerald feel varying degrees of responsibility towards the dead girl. Both older Birlings insist that they are in no way responsible for the death – although it could be argued that Mrs Birling's vehement blaming of the father (and even her slight blaming of her husband) suggests that at some level she feels guilty. Gerald is 'upset' by hearing about the death of his mistress (p. 39), but is much more cheerful when he is able to prove that in fact no girl has died (p. 70). This rather undermines the sense of responsibility that he seemed to show earlier. Only Sheila and Eric continue to feel a strong sense of personal responsibility towards someone they have wronged.

Key point

The only working-class character in the play is Edna the maid. Eva Smith is working-class, but of course she never appears in person.

Activity 1

FOCUS ON THEMES

Imagine you are Inspector Goole. Write a speech in which you directly accuse each of the main characters, summing up how they were responsible for the suicide.

Class

When *An Inspector Calls* was written, class consciousness was stronger than now. However, the class system was being challenged because so many working-class men had died in the war, while working-class women had worked in factories and on farms. This was a major factor in ushering in the first Labour Government in 1945.

Mrs Birling and Gerald are members of the old upper class. Their families have been wealthy for many generations. Arthur Birling, on the other hand, is from a poorer background (we never find out how poor) and has worked his way up. This is why he is keen to emphasise his importance when speaking to Gerald and to the Inspector, talking about having been Mayor of Brumley, of serving as a magistrate and of his expected knighthood. It is a significant reason for him wanting his daughter to marry into the Croft family. It is also why his wife picks him up on what she sees as lower-class behaviour, like talking business at a family gathering.

Eric and Sheila seem to see themselves as upper class. Sheila assumes that she is worthy of Gerald, and that Eva Smith should show her respect. Mrs Birling very clearly sees herself as upper-class, looking down on Eva Smith and 'girls of that class' (p. 30). Even Eric, who is sympathetic to the plight of his father's workers, uses Eva for drunken sex (p. 15).

Birling sees it as the natural order of things that men like him should become wealthy by exploiting the working class, that strikes for better pay should be put down and that the 'troublemakers' should be fired. His attitude towards class could be related to the principle of the 'survival of the fittest', an idea popular in the early twentieth century but which found particular expression in Nazi ideology. On a political level, he even seems to think there is a natural hierarchy that applies to nations. Hence he says that Russia 'will always be behindhand naturally' (p. 7).

Inspector Goole seems almost classless, at least in his speech. However, he clearly sympathises with the working classes, as we see in his comments on the ‘lonely, half-starved... desperate’ Eva Smith (p. 19). He is also unimpressed by Birling’s claims to social importance. For example, when Birling says that he plays golf with the Chief Constable, the Inspector is drily dismissive: ‘I don’t play golf’ (p. 16).

Activity 2

FOCUS ON THEMES

Find and copy out short quotes from the play that show the following:

- Birling is proud of his humble origins;
- Birling wants to impress Gerald’s mother, Lady Croft;
- Sheila thought that the girl in Milwards owed her respect;
- Eric sympathises with the plight of the working class;
- Goole is critical of employers’ treatment of the working class.

Gender

In 1945, when the play was written, women had more opportunities than in 1912, when it is set, but fewer than today. Although the Inspector, in his final speech, says that there are ‘millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths’, it is significant that Priestley chose to make a young woman the focus of his play (p. 56). By doing so he underlines the fact that women were perhaps even more exploited than men.

Mrs Birling plays a traditional role in the family. She allows herself to criticise her husband at times, but on the whole she accepts that it is a woman’s role to support her husband’s career. She involves herself in charity work, but has no career of her own. She also tells Sheila that she will have to accept that men with important jobs are often preoccupied with them.

Gerald and Eric both exploit Eva Smith, although Gerald less obviously so. Part of the reason this happens is that, as a young working-class woman, it is harder for her to find work than it would be for a man. Her main hope of survival would have been to marry.

Gerald’s account of his first meeting with Eva (Daisy) sheds further light on the treatment of women by men. He meets her in the

Palace bar, a place frequented by prostitutes or ‘women of the town’, probably the ‘hard-eyed dough-faced women’ whom Gerald says he hates (p. 34). There he sees Alderman Meggarty forcing himself on Eva and comes to her rescue. Meggarty assumes it is acceptable to make advances to her, whether she welcomes them or not. Gerald’s role is more noble than Meggarty’s, but Sheila is being ironic when she describes him as a ‘Fairy Prince’ rescuing a ‘damsel in distress’. He admits to enjoying this role, at least for a while. It is clearly not a relationship of equals, but one in which the man, however well-meaning, holds the power.

Activity 3

FOCUS ON THEMES

Write a statement as if from each main character (apart from the Inspector) expressing what that character might say about the opposite sex.

The generations

The main characters divide up loosely into older and younger generation. The Birlings are obviously of the older generation, while Sheila and Eric are of the younger. Gerald is only a few years older than Sheila, but identifies more with the older generation. The Inspector is older, but brings the most radical ideas to the play.

We see something of a generational clash between Arthur Birling and his son. Eric feels misunderstood and overlooked, his opinions neither encouraged nor taken seriously. When he protests on Eva’s behalf, ‘I don’t see why she should have been sacked just because she’d a bit more spirit than the others,’ Birling responds angrily: ‘Unless you brighten your ideas, you’ll never be in a position to let anybody stay or to tell anybody to go’ (p. 16).

Birling does not regard Eric’s views as even worthy of consideration. However, there is a more passionate clash between Eric and his mother, who he feels has never understood him or even tried to do so (p. 55).

Sheila does not clash with her parents, but she pleads with her mother not to try to dismiss the Inspector’s attempt to make them feel their responsibility for Eva Smith. She sees how her mother tries to distance the family from Eva, but feels that they cannot avoid responsibility.

Key quote

“It’s about time you learnt to face a few responsibilities. That’s something this public-school-and-Varsity life you’ve had doesn’t seem to teach you.”

Birling to Eric (p. 16)



The Birlings – a family divided.

The key difference between the older generation of Birlings (and Gerald) and the younger generation is that the younger is prepared to accept the lesson taught by the Inspector. Mr and Mrs Birling think that all that matters is avoiding a damaging scandal. Even Gerald thinks that he and Sheila should be able to put his affair behind them and carry on as if nothing has happened.

The Inspector is aware that he makes more of an impression 'on the young ones. They're more impressionable' (p.30). This suggests that they are more open to moral improvement and, in turn, that society's hope for the future lies with the younger generation, not with old-school capitalists like Birling or the traditional upper classes, represented by Mrs Birling.

The 'generations' theme could also be seen in terms of family. The Birling family are perhaps typical of their class, but despite their money they are not a particularly happy family. Birling patronises Sheila, speaking to her as if she is a little girl, and he is dismissive of his son. Eric in turn feels that he cannot confide in his father. However, he perhaps feels even more let down by his mother, because she has never tried to understand him. In a sense, her failure to help the mother of his child, and his accusing his mother of murder, also reflects on the Birlings' failure to function as a family. We do not meet Gerald's father, but from the way in which he speaks about him it seems as if their relationship might be a better one.

Key quote

“ You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl. If you do, then the Inspector will just break it down. ”
Sheila (p. 30)

Activity 4

FOCUS ON THEMES

(a) Sum up the main differences between how the older and younger Birlings are affected by finding out that Inspector Goole was, in all probability, a hoax.

(b) Explain why Gerald sides with the Birlings over the apparent hoax.

Time and prediction

A further theme within the play is that of time. The play was written in 1945 but set in 1912, so Priestley can use the ironies of hindsight. The main examples of this are found in Birling's long 'state of the nation' speech, in which he confidently makes several predictions that the audience in 1945 would know had failed to come true (pp.6–7). Contrary to his expectations, by 1945 there had been not one but two world wars, Russia had become a major world power and the *Titanic* had sunk. His inaccurate predictions cast doubt on all his opinions.

Time also features in the manner in which the story unfolds. At the start of the play, the key event on which it is based – the death of Eva Smith – has already occurred (or so we are led to believe). We learn of each character's involvement with her in a series of narrative flashbacks that gradually bring us up to two weeks before her supposed death. This could be seen as only a narrative device, were it not for the surprise ending, which raises the possibility that the Inspector has been a visitor from the future who has somehow predicted a real tragedy.

Priestley was interested in the concept of time and even time travel. His book *Man and Time* (1964) explores theories of time and investigates the phenomenon of precognitive dreaming (people having dreams which come true). It is likely that he was deliberately exploring these ideas in the play.

Activity 5

FOCUS ON THEMES

How likely do you think it is that Priestley intended Inspector Goole to be seen as a voice from the future, or even a time traveller? What is your interpretation of the surprise twist at the end of the play?

Structure

The dramatic unities

Many plays follow principles supposedly derived from the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE). He said that a play should have the unity of a living organism and that its action should be spread over no more than 24 hours. From this, sixteenth-century critics developed the idea that a play should have three unities:

- action – one main plotline;
- time – the action should take place over no more than 24 hours (strict critics said stage time should match time covered by the plot);
- place – only one setting.

An Inspector Calls follows these unities strictly, in that it is in ‘real time’: there are no jumps where we have to assume that time has passed. The plot all revolves around ‘Eva Smith’ (Daisy Renton): there are no subplots – as found, for example, in many Shakespeare plays. Lastly, the action takes place in the Birlings’ dining room; characters leave temporarily, but we never follow them. This adherence to the dramatic unities has the effect of intensifying the action. We follow a single plot, without being distracted by any other storylines. In some plays, these provide variety and added interest, but in *An Inspector Calls* this kind of variety is provided by the narrated flashbacks into each character’s memories of Eva (Daisy).

Similarly, although we travel back in time in these narratives, the fact that the action takes place in ‘real time’ means that there is no let-up in the gradually mounting dramatic tension. This is reinforced by the stage directions at the start of Acts Two and Three, which stipulate that the ‘scene and situation’ are exactly as at the end of the previous Act.

Finally, the fact that we are never taken outside the Birlings’ dining room creates the

sense that their responsibility for the death of Eva Smith – and our shared responsibility for those like her – can never be escaped. Whenever characters leave the room, it serves a specific dramatic purpose. For example, when Mrs Birling, Sheila and Eric go out in Act One (p. 9), this leaves Birling and Gerald to have a man-to-man talk which reveals Birling’s social aspirations and Gerald’s desire to present himself as a respectful future son-in-law. When Gerald leaves in Act Three, this enables him to follow up his suspicions about the Inspector by asking a police sergeant about him. He is able to shock the family by revealing, ‘That man wasn’t a police officer’ (p. 62).

A well-made play

An Inspector Calls is also ‘a well-made play’. This refers to a particular genre (type) of play following certain rules. It reflects this genre in that it has a single tightly constructed plot with suspense, a series of climaxes and revelations, leading to a final climax near the end of the play. Such plays can also include one character who presents a moral lesson to the other characters – in this case, the Inspector.

A further feature of the genre is action taking place before the start of what we see on stage. In *An Inspector Calls* this action includes all that happens to ‘Eva Smith’ from asking for a pay rise at the factory to her suicide. This is revealed through another device of well-made plays – the finding of a diary. The diary enables the Inspector to reveal some of the more intimate details of Eva’s life leading up to her suicide, as when he tells Gerald about her going away to ‘some seaside place... to be alone, to be quiet, to remember all that had happened between you’ (p.39). The diary device also adds to the impression of Eva being alone in the world, as if the diary is her only ‘friend’.

Key point

The genre of the well-made play was developed by the French playwright Eugène Scribe (1791–1861) in around 1825.

Table 1 *The timescale for the unfolding story of Eva Smith*

Event	Date	Act	Page
Asks for a pay-rise. Goes on strike	August 1910	1	14
Fired from factory	September 1910	1	15
Employed at Milwards	December 1910	1	20
Fired because of Sheila	January/February 1911	2	24
Meets Gerald	March 1911	2	34
Splits with Gerald. Goes away for 2 months	September 1911	2	38–9
Meets Eric	End November 1911	3	51
Pregnant. Sees Eric for last time	February 1912?	3	54
Denied help by Mrs Birling	February/March 1912	2	43

Two timescales

One striking feature of the play is that, while the action takes place in 'real time', the story of 'Eva Smith' is spread over about 16 months, as shown by Table 1.

A kink in the story order

You can see from the table that there is a 'kink' in the story order. The last character to be involved with 'Eva Smith' was Mrs Birling, but the last story told is Eric's. This enables Priestley, through the Inspector, to set a trap for Mrs Birling. She condemns the irresponsible young father before she finds out that he is in fact her own son. This order also means that the biggest revelation – the father's identity – comes last, and that the emotional climax of Eric accusing his mother of murder can come in Act Three. At this point the family is in a state of upheaval. Both they and the audience are at their most susceptible to the Inspector's moral lesson.

Pacing

Another feature is the play's careful pacing – the speed and regularity of revelations and mini-climaxes. For example, as you can see from the timescale table, we learn on page 20 that Eva was taken on at Milwards; then on page 21 we see Sheila upset by her photograph. However, we do not find out until page 23 why Sheila was upset, and we only get the full story on page 24.

In addition, Acts One and Two end on cliff-hangers, ensuring that the audience will be comparing expectations in the interval and

will be keen to find out what happens next. This tension is enhanced by the continuation of the next Act from exactly the same point.

The Inspector

Another structural feature is that a major character – the Inspector – disappears early in Act Three, having delivered his resounding moral message to the family and to the audience. This leaves the family to consider who he was, and to divide up according to how important they think his identity is. As he puts it: 'There'll be plenty of time, when I've gone, for you all to adjust your family relationships' (p. 51).

The final twist arrives just when the older Birlings and Gerald think they are off the hook, and the phone call comes announcing that a real inspector is visiting to investigate a real suicide. This gives a circularity to the play's structure. The family is plunged back into the situation they were in when the Inspector first arrived in Act One (p. 10), but with the key difference that they now know all about each other's involvement with 'Eva'.

This twist means that there is, in a sense, no resolution to the play. Is Eva Smith the girl who now appears to have died? Who was Inspector Goole? Will the guilty characters confess?

Activity 1

DRAMATIC IMPACT

We have seen how Priestley draws out the time between Sheila sobbing at the sight of the photograph and her telling her story. Write a paragraph about how this 'drawing out of time' works with the other guilty characters.

Exam practice

Individual exam board requirements vary, but you will benefit from studying the following series of questions, whatever your board.

Sample questions

1. 'Priestley's great dramatic gamble in *An Inspector Calls* is to show the central character, Eva Smith, only through the accounts of others.' Write about how Priestley portrays her, and how far you think his gamble pays off.
2. How does Priestley explore the theme of responsibility in *An Inspector Calls*?
3. '*An Inspector Calls* is a clever and entertaining play, but not one which engages our emotions.' How far do you agree?
4. Give advice to the actor playing Mr Birling on how he should portray the character on stage.
5. Explore how Priestley makes Inspector Goole's final moments in the play so effective.
6. '*An Inspector Calls* is essentially an optimistic play.' How true do you think this is? Remember to support your ideas with evidence from the play.

How to tackle question 1

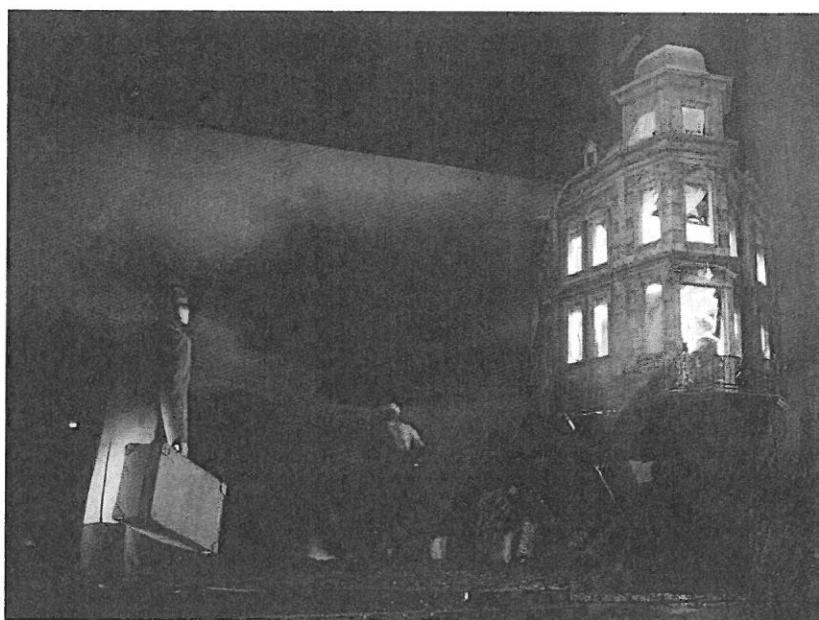
Start by underlining key words in the question in order to understand what it is really asking and what opportunities and clues it gives. Here are some phrases for special attention:

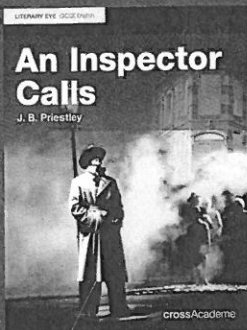
- *great dramatic gamble* – this suggests that not giving Eva Smith a normal role has advantages and disadvantages, so you need to consider what these are;
- *the central character, Eva Smith* – you can question the assumptions of the question. Is there just one Eva Smith? Is she central?
- *how Priestley portrays her* – invites you to write about Priestley's techniques;
- *how far you think his gamble pays off* – invites you to evaluate and give your personal opinion.

A possible plan

- Eva Smith has no lines: she is dead at the start of the play. She is 'central' in that the Birlings and Gerald have all wronged her.
- Advantages: we piece together her story from other characters' accounts and the Inspector's comments; this is engaging and sheds light on the characters. Not seeing her leaves open the possibility that she is more than one person, or represents all working-class women.
- Disadvantages: she is the character most deserving of our sympathy, but it is hard to identify with someone we never 'meet'. The play could drag while her story is told.
- How portrayed: different views are compared – Gerald's is the most detailed and sympathetic; Mrs Birling's is the least sympathetic.
- Evaluation: the gamble is a partial success. Priestley makes a political point, but we cannot feel much for a character we never meet and who may not even exist!

The dramatic set of the 2009 Stephen Daldry production.





LITERARY EYE GCSE English

An Inspector Calls

J. B. Priestley

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John Boynton Priestley (1894–1984) wrote 27 novels as well as 43 plays. His fourth novel, *The Good Companions* (1929), was a huge success and won him a national and international reputation. However, it was during World War Two that Priestley reached the height of his fame, with a series of Sunday night broadcasts on the BBC that inspired listeners and drew audiences of 16 million.

Priestley himself felt that his real talent lay as a dramatist. Among his many plays, *An Inspector Calls* (1945) is his best known and it is still widely staged today. It was made into a film in 1954, starring Alistair Sim as Inspector Goole.

A life-long socialist, Priestley declined a knighthood and a peerage but in 1977 accepted the Order of Merit.

978-1-907251-16-0

ISBN 978-1-907251-16-0



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