

An Inspector Calls – J. B Priestley (1945) – Knowledge Organiser

Contexts and concepts	
<p>J.B. Priestley: As well as being a writer, Priestley was very interested in politics and inequality in Britain. He co-founded the Common Wealth party in 1942 which later became part of the Labour party.</p>	<p>1912: The play is set in 1912 and allows Priestley to remind his audience how out of touch and powerful the rich were before the war. It was also a time when the <i>Titanic</i> famously sank despite being seen as '<i>unsinkable</i>' by Mr Birling.</p>
<p>Socialism: One of the key ideas of socialism is that there should be equality for all to improve everyone's lives. Priestley was a socialist and felt that post war Britain needed to adopt these policies.</p>	<p>1945: The play was written at this time – just after the second world war. At this time, the world was going through huge economic, social and political changes and Priestley used his play to put across his own ideals and ideas.</p>
<p>Capitalism: This system is the opposite of socialism and creates inequality as trade and industry is controlled by private owners. Britain is a capitalist society and Priestley felt that this needed to change.</p>	<p>Literary context: The play is sometime described as a <i>morality play</i>. These were popular in the middle ages and were written to teach a lesson to the audience.</p>

Themes and how they link to character and contexts	
<p>Social responsibility: Throughout the play, we see how every single member of the family has played a part in Eva's death. Priestley uses his characters to make the audience take more personal responsibility for their actions. The Inspector's reminder that '<i>we don't live alone</i>' is directed at both the characters onstage as well as the audience.</p>	<p>Age: Priestley's older characters (Mr and Mrs. Birling) are very set in their ways and they have strong ideas about behaviour and privilege. Priestley uses them to shine a light on this, but he also uses Sheila and Eric, the younger generation, to show how attitudes can change and be improved. We can see this change when Sheila exclaims '<i>but these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people</i>'.</p>
<p>Class divide: From the very start of the play, we see how the Birling family are rich and privileged with little concern for the people who work from them. Through the Birling family's treatment of Eva, we see how few rights the working classes had both in the workplace or when asking for help/charity.</p>	<p>Gender divide: Mr Birling is very dismissive of Eva as she is a woman and therefore her position in society is weaker. Priestley also shows how all women were seen as weaker and should be 'protected' from the world. The Inspector questions this when he asks – <i>and you think young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things?</i></p>

Play summary
<p>Act 1: The play opens at the Birling family home where Arthur and Sybil Birling are celebrating the engagement of their daughter, Sheila, to Gerald Croft with their son, Eric. The men are having a conversation after dinner when Edna, the maid, announces that an Inspector Goole has arrived. The Inspector tells the family that he is investigating the death of Eva Smith who has committed suicide by drinking disinfectant. Mr Birling does not remember her but is then reminded that he fired her years ago for trying to organise a strike over workers' pay. He states that her death is not his responsibility. Sheila is horrified when she discovered that she caused Eva to be fired a second time after she complained about Eva when she was her assistant at a dress shop. The Inspector tells then that after Eva was fired again, she changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald reacts to this.</p>
<p>Act 2: Gerald admits to the Inspector and Sheila that he knew Daisy. He explains that he saved her from being taken advantage of by another man, but that he did also have an affair with her. He stopped the affair and gave her some money. Sheila is disgusted but admires Gerald's honesty. Mrs Birling now admits that she knew Eva through her work with a Women's charity. Eva had used the name 'Mrs Birling' when she approached the charity which Sybil was offended by. Sybil refused to give the pregnant Eva any financial help as she thought that was the father's responsibility and that he should be held accountable for her death. Sheila seems to realise the Eric is the father of the child although Mrs Birling does not until she sees Eric and begins to go back on what she has said.</p>
<p>Act 3: Eric is forced to admit that he had an affair with Daisy and impregnated her. He admits they both got drunk and he went back to her flat. She did not want to sleep with him, and he became violent and she relented. When he learnt she was pregnant, he stole some money from his father which she refused to accept as well as his proposal of marriage. The Inspector tells the family that they are all responsible for the death of Eva/Daisy. After he leaves, Birling calls the Chief Constable and the hospital, and they realise it has all been a hoax. Mr and Mrs Birling along with Gerald are pleased that life can go back to normal whereas Sheila and Eric are much more upset. The play ends when the phone rings again and Mr Birling announces that an Inspector is coming to the house as a girl has just died on her way to the hospital.</p>

Characters and what Priestley may have wanted them to represent	
<p>Inspector Goole: The Inspector is often described as 'Priestley's mouthpiece' and he is certainly the character with the most compassionate and socially progressive views in the play. He reminds the Birlings (and the audience) that <i>We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.</i> He also has a super-natural quality and confidence as he knows all of the answers to the questions he is asking therefore he is a calm and powerful presence in the play.</p>	<p>Mr Arthur Birling: Mr Birling is described in the stage directions as '<i>heavy looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties</i>'. He is the patriarch of the family and, as rich business owner, feels he is better than others, especially those who work for him. He is used in the play to show the dangers of capitalism and how he is not going to change or take responsibility for his actions and the treatment of others. He is relieved when it is discovered that the Inspector isn't real and thinks can go back to 'normal'.</p>
<p>Mrs. Sybil Birling: Sybil Birling is Mr Birling's wife and also represents capitalism and the upper and middle classes. She appears to be totally unfeeling and although she is a chairwoman of a charity, refuses to help Eva Smith. Like Mr Birling, she does not change her attitude throughout the play and can't understand why her children are not '<i>as amused as we are</i>' when the Inspector's visit turns out to be a hoax.</p>	<p>Sheila Birling: Sheila represents the younger generation in the play and Priestley uses her to show how attitudes can change. At the start of the play, Sheila seems to be happy to follow the role of a devoted fiancée. However, as she discovers how her behaviour caused Eva to be fired, she promises that '<i>I'll never, never do it again to anybody</i>'. She is prepared to accept responsibility and rethink her actions.</p>
<p>Eric Birling: Eric is the drunken son of Mr and Mrs. Birling who, like Sheila, represents the younger generation. At the start of the play, we can see how he argues with his father and thinks that he could have kept Eva in a job – <i>I call it tough luck.</i> However, he admits to being violent towards Eva, making her pregnant and stealing from his parents. By the end of the play, we do see that he deeply regrets his actions and wants to take responsibility for his terrible actions.</p>	<p>Gerald Croft: Gerald is the son of a rich businessman and is the fiancée of Sheila Birling. He is from a younger generation, but he also symbolizes how upper and middle-class prejudices are carried from parents to children. He has a very 'traditional' view of women and want to protect Sheila from everything. Although he does help Eva/Daisy after their affair, he sides with Mr and Mrs. Birling at the end of the play and wants everything to return to how it was.</p>
<p>Eva Smith/Daisy Renton: Eva Smith/Daisy Renton is a character we never see in the play as it revolves around the news of her suicide. The violent nature of her death – she drank disinfectant - is shocking and shows how helpless she felt. She represents all of the social injustices at the time as she is a factory worker who is sacked for asking for more money, a shop worker who is fired on the whim of a rich woman and a desperate woman who is used sexually by two rich and privileged men who do not support her through the troubles in her life.</p>	