

## 'An Inspector Calls'

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How does Priestley use the character of the Inspector to suggest ways that society could be improved?

Write about:

- what society is shown to be like in the play and how it might be improved
- how Priestley presents society through what the Inspector says and does.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

### 'An Inspector Calls' – Grade 5 sample answer

In 'An Inspector Calls' Priestley uses the character of the Inspector to highlight the problems in society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The people who the Inspector visits – the Birlings are part of why he does this. Priestley was a socialist and disliked the capitalist viewpoint. We can see this from the way Priestley presents Mr Birling (a capitalist) as an ignorant and dislikeable character who contrasts to the inspector who seems to know everything about them. Mr Birling makes a speech at the beginning of the play addressing his family in which he is made to look foolish. He describes the Titanic as "unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable" and also disagrees that there will be a war. This makes him look stupid and therefore his capitalist views are looked down on by the audience. The play is set in 1914 but is made for a 1945 audience who would have been through two wars since then and will have witnessed the sinking of the Titanic. This would have made the audience of the times dislike Mr Birling even more. The inspector is used in this case to completely contrast Mr Birling by presenting the Inspector to be smart and knowing. Therefore the audience would look at his views to be superior to that of the Birlings. What Priestley is saying through this contrast is that we are ignorant to follow the same views as Mr Birling.

Society in the play is shown to be very disjointed and class orientated. We see this through what the inspector does and what the Birlings say in answer to the Inspector's queries. Mrs Birling is a key character in terms of this as she refers to Eva as "girls of that class". This is referring to Eva becoming a prostitute when she became desperate for an income. This shows that one of the big problems in society at the time was the gap between classes and the fact that Mrs Birling refers to the lower classes like this implies that there was a lot of prejudice caused by this. This makes Mrs Birling a dislikeable character as the inspector is also completely against her views.

Both Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald, even after they have been questioned, fail to accept responsibility for Eva Smith's suicide whereas Sheila and Eric immediately feel guilty. This highlights another problem in society at the time. The age gap and difference in generation. We see even at the start of act 1 the difference between Gerald, Mr Birling and Mrs Birling, and Eric and Sheila. Sheila uses new modern terms such as "squiffy" which are heavily looked down on by the others as a juvenile phrase. Responsibility is one of the biggest themes in the play and we see the inspector trying to show how important it is that the Birlings accept what they have done. When Mr Birling denies his involvement with Eva Smith, the inspector says "I'm going to disagree with you there". This shows that the inspector is used by Priestley to act as a contrasting character to the others and also to act as Priestley's mouthpiece. After the questioning from the inspector is over, Mr and Mrs

Birling as well as Gerald fail to accept the responsibility for Eva's suicide whereas the younger generation feel guilty for what they have done showing outward and "involuntary" outbursts of their pain such as Eric saying "damn you, damn you" after finding out his mother turned away Eva from her help centre. This is a problem in society because it shows how the older generation act less maturely than the younger generation when it comes to accepting responsibility. The younger generation are also shocked at what they hear about the way that the lower classes live which shows that they are sympathetic whereas the older generation almost speak as if they deserve it. Mrs Birling says "the father of the child is the one fully responsible". This shows that younger people of a high class were shielded from how the lower classes lived.

The inspector's character suggests ways in which society could be improved by going against the capitalist views of the Birlings. This is especially apparent in his final speech in which he says "there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths" This shows that the inspector is trying to solve the problems in society by making people aware of others. This reflects Priestley's socialist views. I think that this sentence in particular is aimed at the younger generation as they are usually shielded from such things. Ignorance was one of the main problems in society at the time and the inspector is trying to get the next generation of people to be a little less ignorant.

Another way in which the inspector tries to solve problems in society is the way that he threatens the Birlings about what will happen if they do not solve the problems. He quotes the bible "in fire, blood and anguish". This shows that the inspector is a religious type in that he looks after his fellow man. It also implies that if they don't change and accept responsibility there will be major repercussions.

To sum up Priestley highlights some of the key problems in society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and uses the inspector to offer an alternative viewpoint to that of the ignorant Birlings. Priestley believed that some people when trained properly could travel backwards and forwards in time and the inspector can be looked upon as one of those people.

### **'An Inspector Calls' – Grade 8/9 sample answer**

Priestley uses the character of the Inspector, and the overall structure of the play, to highlight problems in the society that existed in the time the play was set (1912, 2 years before the First World War) and how these were still poignant in the time the play was written – 1945, after the Second World War.

In 'An Inspector Calls', Priestley uses structural techniques to put his socialist viewpoint across. Socialist is the political ideology of having higher taxation to fund services that benefit everyone in society and make the distribution of wealth more balanced. It is a political belief that was becoming more popular at the time of the play being written, as the UK had just endured two horrific World Wars.

The structural technique used by Priestley to present his viewpoint on how society could be improved (by embracing socialism) is foreshadowing. At the end of Act 3, in his final speech, the Inspector says that "if men will not learn this lesson, they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish". As the play is set in 1912, this could be seen as foreshadowing the upcoming World Wars which Priestley may be suggesting could have been stopped if people had looked after one another instead of themselves. Here, Priestley has also used language to demonstrate how important the Inspector's speech is: the repetition of the conjunction "and" and the group of three nouns, along with the religious connotations of "fire and blood and anguish" all do this to show Priestley's viewpoint on how society could be improved.

Another structural techniques used by Priestley is the introduction of characters. At the beginning of the play, Mr Birling's capitalist speech about how "a man has to look after himself" (which Priestley does not agree with) is deflated by "a sharp ring of a doorbell": the entrance of the Inspector. This is used to show the superiority of the Inspector, who acts as Priestley's socialist mouthpiece, and therefore the inferiority of Mr Birling – the epitome of capitalism in the play. As well as this, the Inspector's superiority is shown in his complete control throughout the play. This is shown by the Inspector's response to Mr Birling: he says "(massively) Public men have responsibilities as well as privileges". The adverb "massively" in the stage direction highlights the Inspector's power over Mr Birling, making him appear pompous and weak.

Additionally, Priestley uses form to emphasise his perspective and suggest ways that society could be improved. It could be argued that 'An Inspector Calls' takes the form of a Morality Play: a type of play that was popular in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries which usually included the seven deadly sins and had a moral message. The fact that this morality play was written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century may show that morality is timeless, and is still an important issue to a playwright like Priestley who uses this form of play to suggest ways that society could be improved. Some audiences may think that each capitalist character in the play represents one of the sins: for example, Sheila is jealous and Mr Birling is greedy. By giving the play a moral message in a form that was popular hundreds of years ago, Priestley may be criticising modern society for still facing the same problems and may therefore be suggesting that something needs to dramatically change.

Throughout the play, Priestley presents the capitalist characters – the Birling and Gerald – as having done something that led to the death of Eva Smith (who represents a generic, working class person that the family would not have cared about before the events of the play). The audience's reaction to the characters' initial actions is worsened by how some characters respond to the Inspector: for example, Priestley presents Gerald and Mr Birling to be similar in that they both feel Birling was justified in sacking Eva Smith for wanting higher wages. Gerald says to Mr Birling, "I know we'd have done the same thing". This foreshadows that neither character will become sympathetic later in the play, or appear to regret their actions. By creating both an older and younger character with a lack of social responsibility, Priestley may be highlighting how the problems in society were spread across the generations and therefore a huge change in attitudes would be needed for society to improve.

However, Priestley does create two sympathetic character who are shown to understand the Inspector's message of social responsibility and moral accountability: Sheila and Eric. These two characters may have been created by Priestley to show how society might be improved: by taking responsibility for ones actions and looking after each other. For example, in Act 2, Sheila says, "(eagerly) Yes, that's it. I know I'm to blame – I'm desperately sorry". The adverb desperately and the stage direction "eagerly" both show her sincerity and readiness to accept her own part in the death of Eva Smith.