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**ClassicNote on An Inspector Calls**

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## Biography of Priestley, J.B. (1894-1984)

John Boynton Priestley was born in 1894 in Bradford, a city in the north of England, in what he famously described as an "ultra respectable" suburb, perhaps not too dissimilar from Brumley, the aspiring middle-class town in which the Birlings of *An Inspector Calls* reside. He studied at a grammar school, after which he spent some time working as a junior clerk in a wool office.

In 1914, he joined the army and served during World War I in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, 10th Battalion. In 1916, he was wounded by mortar fire. In his volume of reminiscences, *Margin Released* (1962), he reflects on his early life and war service, and he is aggressively critical of the army, particularly the officer class (mainly made up of upper-class men).

He received an ex-officers' grant in 1919, and went to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, to study. After receiving his university education at Cambridge, Priestley moved to London in 1922, where he quickly gained a reputation as a writer. His first major success was a novel, *The Good Companions* (1929), which was in fact his third novel, and his fourth, *Angel Pavement* (1930) helped secure his international reputation. Priestley was criticized for his work, though, at one point even prompting him to launch a lawsuit against Graham Greene for a defamatory portrait of him in Greene's novel *Stamboul Train* (1932).

His reputation today, however, is mainly as a playwright, and he had a string of West End successes throughout the 1930s and 1940s, including *Dangerous Corner* (1932), *Time and the Conways* (1937) and, of course, *An Inspector Calls* (1947). Priestley was fascinated by the time theorist Dunne, and Dunne's influence can be felt in several of his plays, most of which bear to some degree a fascination with theories of time.

During the Second World War, Priestley was a very popular broadcaster on BBC Radio. He published collected versions of his broadcasts in two volumes, *Britain Speaks* (1940) and *All England Listened* (1968). Only Winston Churchill was listened to more than Priestley. Eventually, however, Priestley's broadcasts were cancelled, since Churchill's cabinet (a Conservative one) believed that they were too leftist. Priestley also chaired committees and lobbied for the socialist cause.

Priestley's broadcasts are often partly credited with the Labour Party's landslide victory in the 1945 general election, and they are often cited as evidence of the growing acceptance of leftist ideas in the United Kingdom. Priestley's politics can be seen throughout his work, particularly through the mouthpiece of the Inspector in *An Inspector Calls*.

His most significant work from the postwar period are his novels *Bright Day* (1946), *Festival at Farbridge* (1951), and *The Image Men* (1968). His most ambitious literary critical output, however, can be found in his reflections on theatre, *The Art of the Dramatist* (1957) and a wider survey, *Literature and the Western Man* (1960). He also published *Journey Down a Rainbow* (1955) and a play, *Dragon's Mouth* (1952), with his third

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wife, Jacquetta Hawkes. He also famously wrote a book on Edwardian England, *The Edwardians*.

Priestley was awarded the Order of Merit in 1977, seven years before his death in 1984.



## About An Inspector Calls

**"We cannot go forward and build up this new world order, and this is our war aim, unless we begin to think differently: one must stop thinking in terms of property and power and begin thinking in terms of community and creation. Take the change from property to community. Property is the old-fashioned way of thinking of a country as a thing, and a collection of things in that thing, all owned by certain people and constituting property; instead of thinking of a country as the home of a living society with the community itself as the first test."**

—J.B. Priestley, *Postscripts*, BBC radio broadcast, 21 July 1949

As Priestley was writing *An Inspector Calls*, the United Kingdom was in a bad state: the Second World War had concluded only a year before in 1945. Food was still being rationed, and many towns and cities had suffered massive damage during the Blitz. The political situation in the UK was about to shift massively with the first Labour government in several years, led by Clement Attlee, beginning work in 1946, the same year Priestley's play was first performed. The National Health Service (NHS) was also founded in 1946, taking effect on July 5, 1948.

The government's unusually high degree of control of the people because of the war had given some of the British new inspiration to use the government to promote equality, to attack Britain's problems with poverty, and thus to try to end the economic and social ills that were sometimes attributed to the country's class system. These issues also were clearly on Priestley's mind, since *An Inspector Calls* is one of the most famous and explicit espousals of socialism that has ever graced the British theatre.

Priestley's work was successful in part because he detected the mood of many in the country. Many of the people, he thought, had turned selfish and cynical despite (or perhaps because of) their massive sacrifices during the war: "They are trying to take as much as they can and give as little as possible in return. They are cutting themselves off from the welfare of the community. They are losing all pride and interest in the job. They are not behaving like good citizens ... They believe this to be a rotten world and they do not propose to do anything themselves to improve it." There, in a concise paragraph, lie the attitudes of the play's characters the Birlings, expressing the attitudes that the play attacks.

Priestley wrote extremely quickly. He remembered writing *Dangerous Corner* (1932) "very quickly as a technical experiment and as proof that I could write for the stage" (1962). He also claimed that he wrote three of his most famous plays, *Time and the Conways* (1937), *An Inspector Calls* (1946), and *The Linden Tree* (1947), in "about ten days" each.

*An Inspector Calls* was initially performed in Moscow in 1945, and only subsequently in Britain. Its London premiere was at the New Theatre in October 1946, with a cast including Ralph Richardson. The play was later

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made into a motion picture. For more on the play's stage history, see the section on *A Stage History* in this ClassicNote.

Priestley's play had Christian resonances for its original audience. Northrop Frye, a literary critic and theorist who worked closely on the Bible during his critical career, wrote in his diary on 12 January 1952 that he had seen *An Inspector Calls*:

"Down to a rather a cheap theatrical trick at the end, the play was a study in the contrast between the religious & the moral conceptions of guilt ... The inspector leaves & the whole thing is proved a hoax, whereupon the parents pick up where they left off. The younger people - son and daughter at least - are more deeply touched, but even they don't appear to have the strength of mind to face the fact that all that guilt is potential in them whatever the accidents of consequence may be. At that point the phone rings and the real action starts, the inspector having been of course God."

It is rare to see Priestley's play interpreted in such a Christian context today, even though England today remains a Christian nation and retains a high percentage (but a decreasing percentage) of Christians. It is interesting that Priestley's message has found more resonance in modern theories of politics and sociology than in Christian conceptions of sin, forgiveness, and guilt. This set of different, even contradictory, interpretations suggests a universality that might ensure the long-term endurance of Priestley's play.



## Character List

### Arthur Birling

Husband of Sybil, father of Sheila and Eric. Priestley describes him as a "heavy-looking man" in his mid-fifties, with easy manners but "rather provincial in his speech." He is the owner of Birling and Company, some sort of factory business which employs several girls to work on (presumably sewing) machines. He is a Magistrate and, two years ago, was Lord Mayor of Brumley. He thus is a man of some standing in the town. He describes himself as a "hard-headed practical man of business," and he is firmly capitalist, even right-wing, in his political views.

### Gerald Croft

Engaged to be married to Sheila. His parents, Sir George and Lady Croft, are above the Birlings socially, and it seems his mother disapproves of his engagement to Sheila. He is, Priestley says, "an attractive chap about thirty ... very much the easy well-bred young-man-about-town." He works for his father's company, Crofts Limited, which seems to be both bigger and older than Birling and Company.

### Sheila Birling

Engaged to be married to Gerald. Daughter of Arthur Birling and Sybil Birling, and sister of Eric. Priestley describes her as "a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited," which is precisely how she comes across in the first act of the play. In the second and third acts, however, following the realization of the part she has played in Eva Smith's life, she matures and comes to realize the importance of the Inspector's message.

### Sybil Birling

Married to Arthur. Mother of Sheila and Eric. Priestley has her "about fifty, a rather cold woman," and--significantly--her husband's "social superior." Sybil is, like her husband, a woman of some public influence, sitting on charity organizations and having been married two years ago to the Lord Mayor. She is an icily impressive woman, arguably the only one of all the Birlings to almost completely resist the Inspector's attempts to make her realize her responsibilities.

## Eric Birling

Son of Arthur and Sybil Birling. Brother of Sheila Birling. Eric is in his "early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive" and, we discover very early in the play, has a drinking problem. He has been drinking steadily for almost two years. He works at Birling and Company, and his father, we presume, is his boss. He is quite naive, in no way as worldly or as cunning as Gerald Croft. By the end of the play, like his sister, Eric becomes aware of his own responsibilities.

## Inspector Goole

The Inspector "need not be a big man, but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness." He is in his fifties, and he is dressed in a plain dark suit. Priestley describes him as speaking "carefully, weightily ... and [he] has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before he speaks." He initially seems to be an ordinary Brumley police inspector, but (as his name might suggest) comes to seem something more ominous--perhaps even a supernatural being. The precise nature of his character is left ambiguous by Priestley, and it can be interpreted in various ways.

## Edna

"The parlour maid." Her name is very similar to "Eva," and her presence onstage is a timely reminder of the presence of the lower classes, whom families like the Birlings unthinkingly keep in thrall.

## Eva Smith

A girl who the Inspector claims worked for Birling and was fired, before working for Milwards and then being dismissed. She subsequently had relationships with Gerald Croft and then Eric Birling (by whom she became pregnant). Finally she turned to Mrs. Birling's charitable committee for help, but she committed suicide two hours before the time of the beginning of the play; she drank strong disinfectant. It is possible, though, that the story is not quite true and that she never really existed as one person. Gerald Croft's suggestion that there was more than one girl involved in the Inspector's narrative could be more accurate.

## Daisy Renton

A name that Eva Smith assumes.

## Major Themes

### Class

Taking the play from a socialist perspective inevitably focuses on issues of social class. Class is a large factor, indirectly, in the events of the play and Eva Smith's death. Mrs. Birling, Priestley notes, is her husband's social superior, just as Gerald will be Sheila's social superior if they do get married. Priestley also subtly notes that Gerald's mother, Lady Croft, disapproves of Gerald's marrying Sheila for precisely this reason. Finally, everyone's treatment of Eva might be put down (either in part or altogether) to the fact that she is a girl, as Mrs. Birling puts it, "of that class." Priestley clearly was interested in the class system and how it determines the decisions that people make.

### Youth and Age

The play implicitly draws out a significant contrast between the older and younger generations of Birlings. While Arthur and Sybil refuse to accept responsibility for their actions toward Eva Smith (Arthur, in particular, is only concerned for his reputation and his potential knighthood), Eric and especially Sheila are shaken by the Inspector's message and their role in Eva Smith's suicide. The younger generation is taking more responsibility, perhaps because they are more emotional and idealistic, but perhaps because Priestley is suggesting a more communally responsible socialist future for Britain.

### Responsibility and Avoiding It

Though responsibility itself is a central theme of the play, the last act of the play provides a fascinating portrait of the way that people can let themselves off the hook. If one message of the play is that we must all care more thoroughly about the general welfare, it is clear that the message is not shared by all. By contrasting the older Birlings and Gerald with Sheila and Eric, Priestley explicitly draws out the difference between those who have accepted their responsibility and those who have not.

### Cause and Effect

The Inspector outlines a "chain of events" that may well have led to Eva Smith's death. Her suicide, seen in this way, is likely the product not of one person acting alone, but of a group of people each acting alone; it resulted from several causes. If Birling had not sacked Eva in the first place, Sheila could not have had her dismissed from Milwards, and Eric and Gerald would not have met her in the Palace bar. Had she never known Eric, she would never have needed to go to the charity commission. This series of events is closely associated with Priestley's fascination with time and how things in time cause or are caused by others.

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## Time

Time, which deeply fascinated Priestley, is a central theme in many of his works. He famously was interested in Dunne's theory of time, which argued that the past was still present, and that time was not linear as many traditional accounts suggest. *An Inspector Calls* explicitly deals with the nature of time in its final twist: has the play, we might wonder, simply gone back in time? Is it all about to happen again? How does the Inspector know of the "fire and blood and anguish," usually interpreted as a foreshadowing of the First and Second World Wars?

## The Supernatural

The Inspector's name, though explicitly spelled "Goole" in the play, is often interpreted through an alternative spelling: "ghoul." The Inspector, it seems, is not a "real" Brumley police inspector, and Priestley provides no answer as to whether we should believe his claim that he has nothing to do with Eva Smith. What are we to make of the police inspector who rings to announce his arrival at the end of the play? Is the original Inspector, perhaps, a ghost? What forces are at work in the play to make the Birlings really accept their responsibility and guilt?

## Social Duty

"We do not live alone," the Inspector says in his final speech, "we are members of one body." This perhaps is the most important and central theme of the play: that we have a duty to other people, regardless of social status, wealth, class, or anything else. There is, Priestley observes, such a thing as society, and he argues that it is important that people be aware of the effects of their actions on others. The Birlings, of course, initially do not think at all about how they might have affected Eva Smith, but they are forced to confront their likely responsibility over the course of the play.

## Glossary of Terms

### Bench

the location where the judge sits in court; used colloquially as shorthand for the legal and judiciary system as a whole

### Brumley

a town that Priestley invents in the North Midlands, UK, the broader setting of the Birlings and the play

### capitalism

a system of economic and social organization in which investors take financial risks in order to maximize profit. The means of production thus are controlled privately, and products are traded in markets. Capitalism seems to flourish when people specialize in particular tasks, and this division of labor makes owners, workers, and products interdependent, also often leading to high efficiency and higher overall standards of living. The socialist critique points out that the welfare of the workers--most of the people society--is not the primary motivation of the capitalist, leading to various kinds of alienation and unfair situations.

### Chief Constable

the title given to the most senior police officer in charge of a local police force in England

### disinfectant

strong bleach, used for cleaning, which would bring about a horrible death if swallowed

### Dunne

John William Dunne, a famous theorist on the subject of time, whose work Priestley was familiar with and fascinated by.

## Honors List

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(British spelling: "Honours List") The United Kingdom's honors system is a long-established way for the British monarch to reward bravery, service to the country, or achievements more generally. Birling is to be given a knighthood, an honor that Gerald's father already has.

## **infirmary**

hospital

## **knighthood**

A high honor conferred by the British monarch that descends from medieval chivalry. It carries the title "Sir" but not much else beyond the honor itself.

## **left-wing**

a general political term used to describe leftists, people who tend to want to change established traditions and cultural patterns in order to create a different, more "fair" distribution of wealth and privilege; the British term does not as often suggest leftist extremism as it does in the United States

## **miners' strike**

a strike is a refusal to work by an organized group of workers, acting together in order to improve their situation (such as working conditions, wages, and benefits) over against their employer. The miners' strike was the industrial action taken in Britain as a result of working conditions and inadequate pay agreements for the workers in the coal mines. The strike concluded in October 1911 as a result of action taken by Home Secretary Winston Churchill, who later would lead the nation.

## **North Midlands**

an area of England, usually thought to contain South Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, and Derbyshire

## **right-wing**

a general political term used to describe conservatives, those who tend to recognize the value of traditional cultural and moral values or even a hierarchical society, and who tend to encourage individual merit, hard work, and personal responsibility as the sources of wealth and honor; the British term does not as often suggest rightist extremism as it does in the United States

## socialism

a political ideology which suggests that capitalism unfairly gives power and wealth to only a small fraction of society, meaning that a small group controls capital and runs society. As a possible political and economic system, socialism works to minimize differences of power and wealth so that everyone works mainly for the benefit of everyone else. Socialists, very generally, argue for equality, and maximizing each person's potential is limited by serving the best interests of everyone else. The capitalist critique points out that the limitation on entrepreneurship and redistribution of wealth and power tend to discourage people from working hard and taking responsibility for themselves, and that the ideology demands moral conformity rather than counting on charity--a view that socialists tend to see instead as selfishness.

## squiffy

a slang term for drunk or intoxicated

## Titanic

The RMS *Titanic* was a massive, *Olympic*-class passenger liner which famously sank despite being thought of as unsinkable. It sank about two weeks after the evening on which Priestley sets *An Inspector Calls*.

## Short Summary

One evening in the spring of 1912, the Birlings are celebrating their daughter Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft, who is also present. Husband and wife Arthur and Sybil Birling, along with their son Eric, are pleased with themselves. Birling toasts the happy couple, and Gerald presents Sheila with a ring which absolutely delights her.

Birling makes a lengthy speech, not only congratulating Gerald and Sheila, but also commenting on the state of the nation. He predicts prosperity, particularly referring to the example of the "unsinkable" Titanic, which set sail the week earlier. Birling styles himself as a "hard-headed man of business."

The women leave the room, and Eric follows them. Birling and Gerald discuss the fact that Gerald might have "done better for [himself] socially": Sheila is Gerald's social inferior. Birling confides to Gerald that he is in the running for a knighthood in the next Honors List. When Eric returns, Birling continues giving advice, and he is passionately announcing his "every man for himself" worldview when the doorbell rings.

It is an Inspector, who refuses a drink from Birling. Birling is surprised, as an ex-Lord Mayor and an alderman, that he has never seen the Inspector before, though he knows the Brumley police force pretty well. The Inspector explains that he is here to investigate the death of a girl who died two hours ago in the Infirmary after committing suicide by drinking disinfectant. Her name was Eva Smith, and the Inspector brings with him a photograph, which he shows to Birling—but not to anyone else.

It is revealed that Eva Smith worked in Birling's works, from which she was dismissed after being a ringleader in an unsuccessful strike to demand better pay for Birling's workers. The Inspector outlines that "a chain of events" might be responsible for the girl's death, and—for the rest of the play—interrogates each member of the family, asking questions about the part they played in Eva Smith's life. We then discover that Sheila Birling encountered Eva Smith at Milwards, where Sheila jealously insisted that she was dismissed. Sheila feels tremendously guilty about her part in Eva's death. It becomes clear that each member of the family might have part of the responsibility.

Eva Smith then, we discover, changed her name to Daisy Renton—and it is by this name that she encountered Gerald Croft, with whom she had a protracted love affair. Sheila is not as upset as one might expect; indeed, she seems to have already guessed why Gerald was absent from their relationship last summer. He put her up in a cottage he was looking after, made love to her, and gave her gifts of money, but after a while, he ended the relationship. Gerald asks the Inspector, whose control over proceedings is now clear, to leave—and Sheila gives him back his engagement ring.

The Inspector next interrogates Mrs. Birling, who remains icily resistant to accepting any responsibility. Eva Smith came to her, pregnant, to ask for help from a charity committee of which Mrs. Birling was chairperson.



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Mrs. Birling used her influence to have the committee refuse to help the girl. Mrs. Birling resists the Inspector's questioning, eventually forcefully telling him that the father of the child is the one with whom the true responsibility rests.

It transpires, to Mrs. Birling's horror, that Eric was, in fact, the father of the child, and she has just unwittingly damned her own son. Once Eric returns, the Inspector interrogates him about his relationship with Eva Smith. After meeting her in a bar when he was drunk (he has a drinking problem), he forced his way into her rooms, then later returned and continued their sexual relationship. He also gave her money that he had stolen from his father's works, but after a while, Eva broke off the relationship, telling Eric that he did not love her.

The Inspector makes a final speech, telling the Birlings, "We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish." He exits.

After his exit, the Birlings initially fight among themselves. Sheila finally suggests that the Inspector might not have been a real police inspector. Gerald returns, having found out as much from talking to a policeman on the corner of the street. The Birlings begin to suspect that they have been hoaxed. Significantly, Eric and Sheila, unlike their parents and Gerald, still see themselves as responsible. "He was our police inspector all right," Eric and Sheila conclude, whether or not he had the state's authority or was even real.

Realizing that they could each have been shown a different photograph, and after calling the Chief Constable to confirm their suspicions, Mr. and Mrs. Birling and Gerald conclude that they have been hoaxed, and they are incredibly relieved. Gerald suggests that there were probably several different girls in each of their stories. They call the Infirmary and learn delightedly that no girl has died that night—the Infirmary has seen no suicide for months. Everyone, it seems, is off the hook, even if each of their actions was immoral and irresponsible. Only Sheila and Eric fail to agree with that sentiment and recognize the overall theme of responsibility. As Birling mocks his children's feelings of moral guilt, the phone rings.

He answers it and is shocked, revealing the play's final twist: "That was the police. A girl has just died—on her way to the Infirmary—after swallowing some disinfectant. And a police inspector is on his way here—to ask some—questions—"

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## Quotes and Analysis

BIRLING

A friend of mine went over this new liner last week - the *Titanic* - she sails next week - forty-six thousand eight hundred tons - forty-six thousand eight hundred tons - New York in five days - and every luxury - and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable.

*Act One*

Priestley's love of dramatic irony is biting here, and his irony is never more satirical than in these comments of Birling's, which, to his original audience in 1946, must have seemed more controversial than they do today because the sinking of the ship was within people's memory. Symbolically, just as the *Titanic* is destined to sink, so too is Birling's political ideology, under the Inspector's interrogation. The ship was a titan of the seas, and its imminent failure "next week" suggests the dangers of capitalistic hubris, illustrating the risk of the entrepreneur.

GERALD [laughs]: You seem to be a nice well-behaved family -

BIRLING: We think we are -

*Act One*

Coming early in the play, these lines also exemplify Priestley's love of dramatic irony: the last thing the Birlings have been is well-behaved. These lines also suggest the alliance between Gerald and Birling, two men who share the same values, whose bond will become stronger after the Inspector's exit.

BIRLING

But take my word for it, you youngsters - and I've learnt in the good hard school of experience - that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own - and -

*We hear the sharp ring of a front door bell.*

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*Act One*

Birling is taking an individualist, capitalist point of view about personal responsibility, and his lines here provide the general attitude of his speeches since the play began. According to him, experience proves that his point of view is correct, in contrast to the possibly more idealistic "youngsters." Yet, the bell marks the moment at which the Inspector arrives, and it is no accident that the socialist-leaning Inspector arrives at precisely this moment.

INSPECTOR

... what happened to her then may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events.

*Act One*

In this fascinating excerpt, the Inspector outlines the nature of the moral crime the Birlings and Gerald have committed against Eva. Each of them is responsible in part for her death, and together they are entirely responsible. This construction is itself a metaphor for Priestley's insistence that we are all bound up together and responsible communally for everyone's survival. Note, too, that the repetition in the Inspector's lines reflect the "chain" he is talking about.

SHEILA

[laughs rather hysterically]

Why - you fool - *he knows*. Of course he knows. And I hate to think how much he knows that we don't know yet. You'll see. You'll see. *She looks at him almost in triumph.*

*Act One*

Sheila, shortly before the end of Act One, crucially understands the importance of the Inspector and the fact that he has more information than he is revealing. She is the first person in the play to really begin to understand the Inspector which, in turn, leads her to see her relationship with Gerald in a more realistic, more

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cynical way.

INSPECTOR

Yes, Mr. Croft - in the stalls bar at the Palace Variety Theatre...

GERALD

I happened to look in, one night, after a rather long dull day, and as the show wasn't very bright, I went down into the bar for a drink. It's a favorite haunt of women of the town -

MRS. BIRLING

Women of the town?

BIRLING

Yes, yes. But I see no point in mentioning the subject ....

*Act Two*

Eva Smith, by the time she encounters Eric in the Palace bar, seems to be working as a prostitute, and indeed, the fact that the Palace bar is a location known for prostitutes looking for business is here partly mentioned but partly suppressed. Moreover, this information points out the streetwise character of Gerald Croft, and it might even lead to questions about precisely what he *was* doing in that bar, at night, other than just happening to "look in" after a "dull day" and having "a drink."

INSPECTOR

She kept a rough sort of diary. And she said there that she had to go away and be quiet and remember "just to make it last longer." She felt there'd never be anything as good again for her - so she had to make it last longer.

*Act Two*

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This is an unusually personal moment from the Inspector, who gives us one of the first insights into Eva Smith's feelings and personality. He claims, of course, that he has found a diary in Eva Smith's room, though many interpretations have argued that the Inspector in fact has a more personal connection to Eva Smith: perhaps he even is her ghost, or a ghoulish embodiment of her dead child? Priestley never tells us, but there is certainly opportunity for the actor in this part to suggest a more personal connection. Note, too, the interest in time on Eva's part, keeping a diary and making a point of remembering the past nostalgically.

BIRLING

You'll apologize at once ... I'm a public man -

INSPECTOR [massively]

Public men, Mr. Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges.

*Act Two*

Here the Inspector, who by this middle act of the play is gaining in power and control over the situation, "massively" silences Birling with a putdown. It is not the first or last time that Birling is cut off mid-thought. It is also important because Priestley points an extra finger of blame at Birling not just for his actions, but for his failure to see that his public position entails a duty of responsibility to other people. Interestingly, this attitude draws on the traditional notion of the upper classes taking responsibility for the welfare of the lower classes, but in the newer, more democratic life of Britain, the "public men" are not necessarily of higher social class even if they have more public privileges; at any rate, their position of power comes with responsibility.

INSPECTOR

We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night.

*Act Three*

The Inspector's final lines, from a longer speech he makes shortly before his exit, are a blistering delivery of

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Priestley's socialist message. Moreover, his promise of "fire and blood and anguish" also looks forward to the First and Second World Wars, a resonance, which, to Priestley's 1946 audience, must have been quite chilling.

BIRLING

... we've been had ... it makes *all* the difference.

GERALD

Of course!

SHEILA [bitterly]

I suppose we're all nice people now.

*Act Three*

These lines illustrate the mood of this last part of the play, as well as the split between the Birlings and their children. Sheila and Eric realize the importance of the Inspector's lesson, notably that they need to become more socially responsible whether or not the particular scenario was a valid example. In contrast, their parents absolutely fail to learn such a lesson, arguing that the failure of the example invalidates the Inspector's argument. Why still feel guilty and responsible? It also is significant that Gerald Croft takes Birling's side (uncritically) rather than Sheila's.

## Summary and Analysis of Act One

The scene is set one evening in the spring of 1912 in the dining room of the Birlings' house in Brumley, an "industrial city in the North Midlands" of England. Priestley specifies that the room has "good solid furniture" and is "heavily comfortable, but not cozy and homelike." As the curtain rises, the four Birlings—Arthur, Sybil, Sheila and Eric—are seated at the table with Gerald Croft. Edna, the parlor maid, is clearing the table after dinner. The Birlings have just eaten dessert. They are "celebrating a special occasion" and are "pleased with themselves."

Birling is pouring port, which, he remarks, is the same port that Gerald's father buys. He is going to toast the engagement of Sheila and Gerald Croft. Mrs. Birling quietly ticks down Birling for complimenting the cook on the meal they have just eaten in front of Gerald, and Birling replies that he is treating Gerald "like one of the family." Gerald, in turn, comments that he has been trying for long enough to be one of the family, which eventually provokes Sheila to remark that he didn't try particularly hard "all last summer," when he "never came near" her and she wondered what had happened. Gerald simply replies that he was very busy at the works.

Mrs. Birling tells Sheila that she will have to get used to men spending all of their time and energy on their work, just as she did. Sheila disagrees and, half playfully, tells Gerald to "be careful," which provokes a sudden guffaw from Eric. Sheila tells Eric he is "squiffy," and Sybil, conscious of Gerald's presence, moves Arthur back onto his toast.

Arthur says this is one of the happiest nights of his life, though he is sorry that Sir George and Lady Croft (whose forename he appears to have forgotten) cannot join this "quiet little family party." Birling tells Gerald that he is "just the kind of son-in-law I always wanted" and that Gerald and Sheila will make each other happy. He also makes clear, none too subtly, that he has ambitions for Crofts Limited and Birling and Company (the smaller of the two firms), though they are currently competitors, to work together at some point in the future, as a result of this marriage. Birling makes the toast, and Gerald and Sheila drink to each other, Gerald hoping that he makes her "as happy as you deserve to be." He then produces a ring, which Sheila is hugely delighted to receive.

Mrs. Birling attempts to take Sheila out into the drawing room to leave the men to talk, but Birling has not yet finished his speech. He launches into a protracted speech, touching on current events and making some predictions. Despite the miners' strike, Birling argues, there will be no labor trouble in the future, and he openly says "fiddlesticks!" to the suggestion that war with Germany is inevitable. The world, Birling says, is making too much progress for war, and he cites airplanes and automobiles, as well as a new ship, as examples of progress. The ship is "the Titanic—she sails next week—forty-six thousand eight hundred tons—forty-six thousand eight hundred tons—New York in five days—and every luxury—and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable."

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Birling's speech is important, he argues, because the (left-leaning) intellectuals, "these Bernard Shaws and H.G. Wellses," can't be allowed to "do all the talking. We hard-headed practical business men must say something sometime." As Birling finishes, Sybil and Sheila leave for the drawing room—and, presumably for a ticking down for his manners, she summons Eric, too.

Birling smokes a cigar and Gerald lights a cigarette, both men pouring themselves more port. Birling suggests that Gerald's mother, Lady Croft, "feels you might have done better for yourself socially," though Lady Croft does not object to Sheila otherwise. Gerald begins to disagree, but Birling has another target in sight, revealing that he might be knighted in the next Honors List. All should be well, Birling thinks, "so long as we behave ourselves, don't get into the police court, or start a scandal—eh?"

Eric enters, commenting that the women are talking about clothes again. Birling advises in good humor that clothes to a woman are a "sign or token of their self-respect." Eric starts to say something, but then checks himself and falls silent—even when prompted by Birling to continue. Birling sets out on another long sermon of sound advice, uttering ideas central to his philosophy:

"the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive—community and all that nonsense. But take my word for it ... that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own—and—"

Birling's sentence is never completed, for he is interrupted by the ring of the doorbell. Edna announces that a police inspector named Inspector Goole is at the door, asking for Birling. Birling tells her to show him, commenting to Gerald that he is "on the Bench," and that this may be "something about a warrant."

The Inspector enters and, in short clipped sentences, greets Birling and refuses to accept a drink. Birling comments that, though he has been alderman and Lord Mayor, he has never seen the Inspector before, though he knows the "Brumley police officers pretty well." The Inspector remarks that he is new, and "only recently transferred," before telling Birling why he has come. A young woman died two hours ago in the Infirmary. She committed suicide by swallowing strong disinfectant. The Inspector says he has been to the girl's room and found a letter and a diary—her name was Eva Smith, but Birling claims not to recognize it.

The Inspector reminds Birling that Eva Smith was employed in his works at one point, and, when Birling does still not remember, the Inspector shows him a photograph of her that he says he found in her room. As Gerald and Eric try too to look at the photograph, the Inspector prevents them from seeing it. When the two men ask why they can't see the photograph, the Inspector remarks that he likes to work this way, with "one person and one line of inquiry at a time." At this point in the play, the Inspector speaks in short, clipped answers, which can sometimes be very enigmatic.

As the Inspector surmises, Birling has now remembered Eva Smith: she was discharged from her employment at his works at the end of September in 1910. Gerald attempts to leave, sensing the potential for embarrassment,



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but when Birling introduces him to the Inspector, the Inspector gravely says he would prefer that Gerald stay. Birling, “somewhat impatiently,” tells the Inspector that there is nothing “mysterious” or “scandalous” about this business, since it happened more than eighteen months ago, and therefore it can have nothing to do with this girl’s suicide.

The Inspector disagrees, saying that “what happened to her then may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events.” Birling concedes but adds that he cannot be expected to have responsibility for everyone he has ever met. He then tells the story of Eva Smith’s dismissal from his works.

Eva Smith, Birling narrates, was a lively, good-looking girl who was a good worker and about to be promoted. When the girls came back from vacation, however, they were restless and decided to ask for more money. Birling was already paying a rate that was just what “is paid generally in our industry,” and he refused to raise it.

The Inspector interrupts Birling to ask him why he refused to raise the rate, and Birling gets somewhat irritable, telling the Inspector, “I don’t like the tone.” Birling eventually explains that “if they didn’t like those rates, they could go and work somewhere else.” The girls, Birling continues, then went on strike, and after the strike failed, the company let all of the girls except the “four or five ringleaders” come back at the old rates. “She’d had a lot to say—far too much—so she had to go.” Gerald Croft concurs that Birling “couldn’t have done anything else.”

Birling is starting to become a little unsettled by the Inspector, and he asks Goole to spell his name, which he does. Birling then tries to threaten the Inspector by mentioning that he is an “old friend” of the Chief Constable, Colonel Roberts. The Inspector simply remarks, “I don’t see much of him.” Eric comments that, were it up to him, he would have let Eva Smith stay at the factory, which provokes an angry putdown from Birling, who then tries to close the case: “I don’t see we need to tell the Inspector anything more.”

Sheila enters from the drawing room to find out what is happening, and she is surprised to see the Inspector. As Birling attempts to shoo her out, the Inspector asks her to stay, much to Birling’s chagrin. He launches into an angry little speech, telling the Inspector he has “half a mind to report you.”

The Inspector ignores him and tells Sheila what happened to Eva Smith. He also tells her that Eva was very pretty and only twenty-four years old. In the course of the conversation that follows, the Inspector reveals that he thinks that Gerald, Eric, or Sheila might know something about this girl; he did not come simply to see Birling. The atmosphere in the room changes as everyone begins to feel that something ominous is coming.

Sheila continues to ask about Eva Smith, despite the fact that Birling is keen to get her to leave the room, though she comments that she has never heard the name before. The Inspector then reveals that Eva Smith used more than one name, and she changed her name after being sacked by Birling. Eva Smith, the Inspector continues, was an orphan and had no parents to return to, so she spent two months living in lodgings, making no money,

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“lonely, half-starved ... desperate.” Sheila is horrified, only to be told by the Inspector that

“There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence in every city and big town in this country, Miss Birling. If there weren’t, the factories and warehouses wouldn’t know where to look for cheap labor.”

“It would do us all a bit of good,” the Inspector adds, if “sometimes we tried to put ourselves in the place of these young women.” Eva Smith, the Inspector continues, then managed to find work at Milwards, a shop which Sheila immediately says she goes to. Eva worked at Milwards very happily until, after a couple of months, she was suddenly told that she had to go. There was nothing wrong with how she was doing her work, but, the Inspector adds, a customer had complained about her. The Inspector shows an agitated Sheila the photograph of the girl, and she runs out of the room, clearly having recognized the girl. Birling, angry with the Inspector’s behavior, follows after her.

Gerald asks to see the photograph, and the Inspector replies, “all in good time.” After a short discussion, Eric tries to go to bed, and the Inspector stops him in turn. Sheila returns and “looks as if she’s been crying.” Sheila realizes her responsibility, which prompts the Inspector to say that she is not entirely responsible, but “partly to blame. Just as your father is.”

Sheila then tells the story of her encounter with the dead girl. She had gone into Milwards to try something on, and she insisted on trying a dress which, in the end, didn’t suit her at all. The girl had brought the dress up from the workroom and had held it up against herself to illustrate something—and “it just suited her. She was the right type for it, just as I was the wrong type,” Sheila reports. When she had tried the dress, she had caught sight of the girl smiling, as if to say, “Doesn’t she look awful.” She complained to the manager and made a big fuss.

At the end of this narrative, Sheila almost breaks down. “How could I know what would happen afterwards?” she asks, adding that if the girl had not been so pretty, she would never have done it. “I couldn’t be sorry for her,” she concludes. Sheila wishes she could help the girl, but, as the Inspector cursorily points out, “Yes, but you can’t. It’s too late. She’s dead.”

Sheila plaintively wonders why this had to happen, and the Inspector announces that he is not going “until I know *all* that happened.” He then reveals that, after being sacked from the shop, the girl changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald starts at the name and asks to get himself a drink. The Inspector, taken by Eric, leaves the room, going to the drawing room to find Mr. Birling, who in turn has gone to update Mrs. Birling on what has happened. Sheila and Gerald, the engaged couple, are left alone onstage together.

Sheila has realized that Gerald knew Daisy Renton, and she also correctly guesses that he was seeing her last summer—during the time when Sheila herself hardly saw him. Gerald admits it but says that it “was all over and done with, last summer. I hadn’t set eyes on the girl for at least six months.” Gerald then asks Sheila to keep this information from the Inspector. She laughs at him, saying that the Inspector already knows—and knows more than any of them. “You’ll see,” she finishes, just as the door slowly opens to reveal the Inspector looking

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at them. “Well?” the Inspector asks, as the curtain comes down at the end of Act One.

## Analysis

*An Inspector Calls*, as its curtain rises, does not seem particularly different from many other plays popular in the same period. A middle-class family sits around a table, having just enjoyed a satisfying dinner, and the maid clears the table. The scene sets the expectation that this is going to be a family drama, maybe even a comedy, and the focus will be on this happy family environment. Yet, Priestley’s play undergoes a subtle shift in mood and tone until it has become something much more unusual, which defies both its initial expectations and its seeming naturalism.

This first tableau, for example, can be seen as something other as a cozy emblem of this rich family’s life, for among them is a picture of one of the “millions and millions” of Eva Smiths, here working for what is likely a minimum wage, clearing the table and putting out port and cigars. It is no accident, surely, that “Eva” the girl and “Edna” the maid have such similar names. The presence of Edna onstage throughout the play symbolizes the presence of Eva and reinforces Priestley’s ultimate point about the abuse of power and the failure to take sufficient responsibility for one’s actions toward others.

Immediately, with the Inspector’s interrogations of Birling and Sheila, we see Priestley’s key salvo: the lower-class individuals are the responsibility of the middle and upper classes. This idea draws on traditional class morality. But as the society has become less hierarchical, the new way of expressing this morality is to say that society at large should care for people who are poor and need support. As Birling did not worry about firing the girls who led the strike for more wages, as Sheila did not think twice about causing the shop assistant to get in trouble, so too do the Birlings routinely ignore Edna during the play. Edna’s silence in the play, though she begins as a natural component of the comfortable family room as the curtain rises, gradually comes to seem more and more significant as the play goes on.

The early part of the act provides further indicators of what is to come. Sheila’s slightly acidic comment about Gerald’s supposed absence last summer plants the idea that there must be a better reason for the absence (we will learn it soon enough: Gerald has had a lover), and her comment illustrates the cracks which are present from the very beginning in the relationship between Sheila and Gerald. Eric’s unmotivated laugh in the middle of the conversation helps us to understand, later in the play, that he probably is “squiffy” as Sheila suggests, though it is not until much later that his alcohol problem will come to light. Priestley carefully structures the play so that the careful listener or reader will hear these ambiguous possibilities of trouble.

The centerpiece of this first part of the play, though, is the self-satisfied attitude of Arthur Birling. He is indeed, as he puts it, every inch the “hard-headed man of business.” Smug and sure of himself, he launches into a series of assertions which Priestley’s 1946 audience would have known only too well to be false. Birling asserts that there will not be another war, yet, two years after this utterance (the play is set in 1912) the First World War was to begin. Moreover, the 1946 audience would have only just managed to live through the Second World

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War of 1939 to 1945. Birling also asserts that the *Titanic*, which sets sail “next week,” is “unsinkable,” yet the audience knows that the ship sank only a little later in 1912. Priestley’s original audience probably would have found Birling’s reference to the *Titanic* more distressing than a modern audience because some of them may have known people who died in the disaster. Priestley’s dramatic irony, then, is poignant, not merely coy and comfortable, for the audience.

Birling’s politics of self-reliance and personal responsibility are staunchly and unashamedly capitalist, perhaps even right-wing. He believes in “low wages, high prices,” is absolutely dismissive of Eva’s strike, and, even at the close of the Inspector’s inquiry, can only limply claim that he would “give thousands” to make things better. Money, indeed, dominates the way he thinks, even to the extent that, Priestley subtly illustrates, he sees his daughter’s engagement to Gerald Croft as a financial move and potentially the first step towards a merger between the Birling and Croft businesses. Birling represents the political point of view opposite to Priestley’s own. Birling even makes himself out to be the antithesis of left-leaning writers and intellectuals generally, namely George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, both very famously left-wing voices.

Birling, moreover, represents “Middle England.” This term is used generally to describe the right-leaning majority of the British public. Though it is a modern-day term, it could just as well apply to the middle-class, right-leaning majority of Priestley’s Britain.

Yet, although Birling and his wife are indeed middle-class, Priestley tells us in one of his stage directions (though it is never explicitly referred to in the play itself) that Sybil is “a rather cold woman and her husband’s social superior.” Birling is throughout the play ticked down by his wife: early in this act, for instance, for complimenting the servants on the meal in front of a guest. Sybil, presumably from a better social background than Birling, seems to be, in an imperious, passive way, the one in control of the marriage—and of her husband. Birling himself seems to have worked his way up to the middle classes (he is “provincial in his speech,” Priestley tells us in another stage direction, which might be another clue to his background) and, as he explains to Gerald, he is currently trying to see his way to a knighthood and therefore greatly improving his social position. In short, the Birlings have ambitions to move up the social scale.

Gerald’s parents, for their part, “Sir George and Lady Croft,” already have their knighthood, and their business is considerably older and more successful than Birling’s. They, we presume, are an upper-class family, and although we never meet them, Gerald’s mother (like Sybil) seems to have a real eye on social status, feeling that Gerald “might have done better for [himself] socially.” Is this, we might suggest, the reason for their not being at the Birlings’ little celebratory dinner—do they disapprove that much? The initial lack of interest of the Birlings and people like them towards the fate of Eva Smith, in turn, is part of the overall class structure in England at this time, and Priestley, even this early in the play, draws our attention to the way that Lady Croft looks down on Birling just as he looks down on Eva.

It is interesting to examine who is control in each part of the play, and interesting too that the visiting police inspector (a staple, in fact, of drama in plays like *Dial M for Murder*) begins not as an avenging angel, but as a

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rather unremarkable character. Birling dominates their first conversation, boasting about his status as a former Lord Mayor and a magistrate. Yet Priestley still leaves us interesting clues. From what we know about the Inspector's later (seemingly supernatural) abilities, his statement "I've only recently transferred" carries tantalizingly ambiguous double meanings. How and from where (what town? what planet? what time?) has he "transferred?"

The Inspector's power and insight into the situation is only really glimpsed, in this first act, by Sheila, who ominously predicts to Gerald as the curtain goes down that everyone will come to see that the Inspector knows far more than anyone realizes. Yet Priestley, in the first act, gives the Inspector no explicit moment of surprising the family by knowing more than they do. The level of tension in the play starts extremely low, builds gradually as the Inspector enters, and builds more as the characters come to understand the fate of Eva and their roles.

Indeed, at the end of Act One, structured by Priestley so as to end on a point of tension, we discover that it is not just Birling and Sheila, but also Gerald, who is involved in Eva Smith's demise. The comfortable, warm atmosphere of the opening has been largely destroyed by the time the curtain comes down at the end of the act, with three people so far responsible for Eva's fate, all responding differently. Significantly, we have little indication of where the play might go next, but the audience might predict that more family members will prove responsible for Eva's fate as we learn what else happened to her.

## Summary and Analysis of Act Two

The acts continue as if no time has passed, so as the curtain rises, the Inspector is still standing at the door, having happened upon a conversation between Sheila and Gerald. Gerald attempts to have Sheila excused from any more questioning, and, when the Inspector agrees that she may leave, Sheila—on hearing that there is to be more questioning—decides to stay. Gerald, in encouraging her to leave, makes the suggestion, “You’ve been through it—and now you want to see somebody else put through it.” Sheila is angry that Gerald seems not to believe in her motive for staying; this is, she says “just the wrong time not to believe me.” A gap has opened between them.

The Inspector, not Gerald, is the one to put Sheila’s feeling into words; she needs to hear the whole story in order to come to terms with her part of the responsibility. “If there’s nothing else,” the Inspector concludes, “we’ll have to share our guilt.” Sheila wonders and comments that she doesn’t understand about the Inspector, but he merely replies, “there’s no reason why you should.”

Mrs. Birling enters, “briskly ... quite out of key with the little scene that has just passed,” and attempts to send Sheila to bed. Mrs. Birling says that she cannot see how they could understand why Eva Smith committed suicide. She is urgently interrupted by Sheila just as she generalizing about “Girls of that class.” Sheila tells her mother that she must not try to build up “a kind of wall” between the Birlings and the girl, for the Inspector will only break it down.

Mrs. Birling continues firmly forward, trying to establish control over the situation by being imperiously cold toward the Inspector, and reminding him that Birling “was Lord Mayor only two years ago and that he’s still a magistrate.” Sheila then reveals that Eric drinks far too much, in response to a question from the Inspector, which provokes Mrs. Birling’s surprise and reproof. Eric, Sheila explains, has been “steadily drinking too much for the last two years.” Birling enters, having tried and failed to persuade Eric to go to bed; the Inspector has told him to stay up. When Birling objects, the Inspector cuts in, “with authority,” to tell Birling that Eric “must wait his turn.”

The Inspector continues to explain what happened to Eva Smith. He repeats that she changed her name to Daisy Renton. He then asks a direct question: “Mr Croft, when did you first get to know her?”

To the horror of Mr. and Mrs. Birling, Gerald confesses that he met her in the music hall in Brumley. He had dropped in after a long day, since the bar at the music hall was “a favorite haunt of women of the town.” He describes Eva as being “very pretty—soft brown hair and big dark eyes.” She was trapped in a corner by Alderman Joe Meggarty, “half-drunk and goggle-eyed,” and Gerald rescued her from that conversation. At the mention of Meggarty’s name, the truth starts spilling out. Mrs. Birling is shocked to hear that Meggarty is “a notorious womanizer as well as ... one of the worst sots and rogues in Brumley.”

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Gerald says he took Eva out of the bar, and she told him her story—though under the name Daisy Renton. She never mentioned the name “Eva Smith.” He bought her some dinner, since she was hungry and had no money to buy herself food. He also gave her the keys to some rooms he was keeping an eye on for a friend, and he gave her some money. “I want you to understand I didn’t install her there so that I could make love to her,” Gerald explains, though “Daisy Renton” indeed did become his mistress.

Mr. and Mrs. Birling interject, trying again to stop the Inspector’s questioning. Sheila asks Gerald directly whether he was in love with “Daisy.” He replies that “it’s hard to say,” but that she cared more for him than he did for her. It was Gerald himself who broke the affair off, early in September. The girl took it very well, he thought, and she did not blame him at all. He gave her enough money to see her through until the end of the year, as a parting gift.

The Inspector continues the story, revealing that Eva then went away to “some seaside place” for about two months, to reflect on what had happened between her and Gerald. She chose to “remember ‘just to make it last longer.’” Gerald asks to leave and go for a walk, and he promises he will come back. The Inspector allows this, but, as he leaves, Sheila gives him back the engagement ring she had been given in Act One. Sheila tells Gerald she does not dislike him, and she is relieved in a strange way to know the truth about what happened last summer. However, she tells him, “this has made a difference ... We’d have to start all over again.”

Gerald leaves, and Sheila remarks to the Inspector that he did not show Gerald the photograph of the dead girl. He replies that it was not necessary. Mrs. Birling then asks to see the photograph, and she claims not to recognize the girl. The Inspector tells Mrs. Birling that she is not telling the truth, which prompts Birling to angrily insist on an apology—he is a public man, he says. “Public men,” replies the Inspector, “have responsibilities as well as privileges.” The door slams, and Birling leaves to find out if Eric has just gone out.

The Inspector continues to interrogate Mrs. Birling. She, he says, is a prominent member of the Brumley Women’s Charity Organization, to which, it seems, Eva Smith turned for help only two weeks ago. The girl assumed the name “Mrs. Birling” at the meeting, to which Sybil Birling took immediate offense. The girl, who (the Inspector reveals) was pregnant, was desperate and asking the charity for help. Mrs. Birling used her influence over the committee, however, to have her appeal denied. “She came to you for help,” the Inspector continues, “at a time when no woman could have needed it more ... alone, friendless, almost penniless, desperate. She needed not only money, but advice, sympathy, friendliness ... And you slammed the door in her face.”

Mrs. Birling remains imperiously unmoved by the Inspector. “I’ll tell you what I told her,” she says. “Go and look for the father of the child. It’s his responsibility.” Tension builds as the Inspector continues to press, with increasing sternness, for information, and Mrs. Birling tries her best not to give it. Eva did not want to take more money from the father of her child, Mrs. Birling reveals, since Eva thought the money was stolen. Mrs. Birling then firmly restates that the father of the child must be held responsible for the girl’s death, and she tells the Inspector to do his duty.

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“Don’t worry, Mrs. Birling. I shall do my duty,” the Inspector replies, and looks at his watch. It gradually dawns on the family—Sheila, naturally, figures it out before her parents do—that Eric Birling was the father of the child. Mrs. Birling, unwittingly, has just pronounced a harsh sentence against her own son. The Inspector raises a hand to silence the clamor as Eric enters, “looking extremely pale and distressed,” and as the curtain falls.

## Analysis

The development of Sheila, one of the central characters of the second act, is very important to the play. She starts, in Act One, as “a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited,” and her excited reaction to Gerald’s engagement ring suggests she is comfortably settled in the economic and cultural traditions of her father. At the start of the play, she was suspicious of Gerald’s absence last summer, but showed no desire to investigate it further. Yet, by the end of the first act, she was openly mocking Gerald’s desire to keep his involvement in Eva’s life from the Inspector. We were prepared to see how her relationship with her fiancé was about to break down. Throughout the play, Sheila realizes faster than anyone else that it is better if the Inspector is directly told the truth. When she, much to her mother’s chagrin, reveals to the Inspector openly that Eric has been drinking heavily for two years, Priestley is showing us a girl becoming aware that integrity demands that she be honest and truthful. One owns up to one’s faults and takes responsibility.

Sheila clearly has begun to change. She is owning up to her responsibility for Eva’s death, maturing as she does so. Notably, she stands in stark contrast to her mother, who refuses to change at all and (so far) refuses to drop her mask of icy, upper-class politeness. Priestley is interested in the well-worn idea that the young have the capacity to change, accept new ideas and move forwards while their parents and the older generations often fail to do so.

Shortly before his exit, we see that Sheila similarly has the maturity to, without tears, accept that things are now different between her and Gerald, even unemotionally offering the symbolic gesture of the return of his ring. Maturely, she accepts her part of the responsibility for Eva’s death, noting that it is better that “at least [Gerald has] been honest.” Moreover, as she points out to him, “this has made a difference,” and the engagement will not be able to continue without serious reconsideration.

The moment when Sheila returns Gerald’s ring perhaps symbolizes the distance the play itself has come: its comfortable “engagement party” opening has been entirely turned on its head. In addition, the man who was assumed (by Birling) to be just a local, Brumley police inspector has turned out to be something quite different. Sheila has been the first to realize the strangeness of the Inspector. “I don’t understand about you,” she says to him, while Priestley’s double adverbs (in his stage direction) to direct the actor are “wonderingly and dubiously.” It is Sheila who first suggests, later in the play, that the Inspector might not have been an Inspector, and here she is already beginning to suspect that there is something unusual about him. Sheila, moreover, is aware of the fact that the Inspector is now going to control events until he leaves, regardless of what either of her parents tries to do to oppose him.



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The Inspector himself is a fascinating character. As the title character, in many ways he is the most important character to any interpretation of the play. Priestley describes the Inspector on his first entrance as creating “at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness.” He is in his fifties and has “a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking.” The Inspector elliptically comments that he does not “see much of” the Chief Constable in Act One, which is unsurprising, given that he is not (as we find out in Act Three) actually a police officer. One of the key questions of the play is the precise nature of the Inspector’s identity.

It is possible, of course, that the Inspector is perfectly human and unremarkable, as Birling says: a clever hoaxer, making the most of some information from the girl’s diary. Yet, this would not explain the arrival of the police inspector at the end of the play! Moreover, the Inspector himself seems to run out of time as the play goes on, increasingly pressing the person he’s questioning to hurry up (note, particularly, that Eric’s interrogation is the shortest and the last).

Critics arguing for the supernatural power of the Inspector tend to focus on his name. “Goole,” of course, spelled another way, becomes “ghoul”: a haunting spirit closely associated with corpses and the dead. Is the Inspector some kind of ghostly incarnation of Eva Smith, determined to return to her killers to make them realize the error of their ways? Can the Inspector really be said to be a ghost who knows the future? At this point in the play, the Inspector’s role is hugely ambiguous, yet his power over the family is growing. He silences Birling on more than one occasion and even manages to break the composure of Mrs. Birling by allowing her to trap her own son. He seems to have known already that Gerald, Eric, and Mrs. Birling were also involved.

Some critics have argued that “Goole” is in fact a reference to a fishing village not far from Priestley’s native Bradford and that the Inspector is simply to be read as “fishing” for information and hooking in the Birlings. Whether a ghoul or simply Goole, the Inspector, by the end of the second act, has become a compellingly authoritative figure.

Priestley’s socialist message—that everyone must look out for each other—is extended further in the Inspector’s damning comment that the public people “have responsibilities as well as privileges.” Though the three younger characters, Gerald, Eric and Sheila, all are partly to blame in Eva’s death, it is with the two elder Birlings that the main point of blame rests. Birling, as a public man, had a responsibility to do the right thing, and (particularly as an ex-Lord Mayor) should have been aware of the plight of girls like Eva. Mrs. Birling, as the Inspector points out, even managed to avoid giving help and support to Eva while sitting as the chairperson of a committee expressly designed for that purpose. It is not simply a personal misdemeanor, but a public, professional one: both of them symbolize the usual indifference of social organizations toward people in Eva’s position.

## Summary and Analysis of Act Three

Again, no time has passed between acts. Eric stands looking at the assembled company as before. Before he starts his interrogation, Eric asks for a drink—a request to which the Inspector agrees—and which Birling denies. Eric’s heavy drinking is now no secret, and the Inspector explains to Birling that Eric “needs a drink now just to see him through.”

The Inspector, more quickly than before, sets about interrogating Eric. Eric reveals that he first met Eva Smith in the Palace bar last November. Eva was at the bar because “there was some woman who wanted her to go there.” Eric bought her a few drinks, took her back to her lodgings, made a ruckus (he was quite drunk), and made her let him in. Mrs. Birling is horrified to hear it, and Birling tells Sheila to take her to the drawing room. The two women exit.

The next time Eric met her, it was about a fortnight afterwards at the same bar. He bought her more drinks and took her home again. The two made love again, although this time they talked a little. It was not until the next time, however—or the time after that—that Eva revealed to Eric she was going to have a baby. Eva, Eric says, did not want him to marry her; she told him that he did not love her. Eric gave her money to keep her going—until she refused to take any more money.

The Inspector asks Eric how much he gave her, and he replies that it was about fifty pounds. Birling, startled, asks where it came from, and Eric reveals that he stole it from Birling’s office. Eric was working there at the time, and he asked for cash in payment for a few small accounts. Birling becomes furious and immediately asks for a list of the accounts: “I’ve got to cover this up as soon as I can.”

“Why didn’t you come to me ...?” Birling asks his son, only to receive the damning reply that he is “not the kind of father a chap could go to when he’s in trouble.” The two are about to launch into an argument, but the Inspector cuts them off, reminding them he does not have much time.

The Inspector explains that the girl discovered that the money Eric was giving her was stolen, and she broke off the relationship. Eric is puzzled about how the Inspector could know this. “She told me nothing. I never spoke to her,” he replies. But Sheila drops the bombshell: “She told mother.” As Eric realizes what his mother did to the girl, he is “nearly at breaking point” and, with Eric moving towards his mother and Birling furiously threatening his son, it looks for a moment as if the Birlings are going to descend into outright anarchy.

Instead the Inspector silences them. He reminds them that they are all responsible for the girl’s death, and he tells them not to forget it. He addresses each member of the family in turn and reminds each one of their part in Eva Smith’s death. Birling, significantly, says he would give thousands, but he is cut off by the Inspector, who tells him he is offering the money “at the wrong time.” Then, in his famous final speech, the Inspector broadens his argument.

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“One Eva Smith has gone—but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us ... We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.”

With those final words, the Inspector leaves. Sheila is crying, Mrs. Birling has collapsed into a chair, Eric is brooding, and Birling pours himself a drink. Birling tells Eric that he is to blame for everything, and he laments that he might not receive his knighthood. “There’s every excuse for what your mother and I did,” Birling says, before Sheila stops him, telling him he cannot begin to pretend that nothing much has happened. Birling counters that he will suffer the most from a public scandal, provoking Sheila to comment that he does not seem to have learned anything.

Eric bitterly reminds Birling of his “every man for himself” speech, which he was midway through as the Inspector arrived. Sheila is suddenly listening sharply, and she puts forward the suggestion that the Inspector might not really have been a police inspector at all. Mr. and Mrs. Birling are immediately enlivened by the idea despite Sheila’s protestations that “it doesn’t much matter.” The Inspector, she and Eric conclude, “was our police inspector all right,” even if not an actual police inspector.

Mr. and Mrs. Birling note that the Inspector’s manner was odd—particularly the way he talked to Birling. They start to piece together how a fake Inspector might have pulled off the interrogation. “He had a bit of information, left by the girl, and made a few smart guesses,” Birling suggests. Just as they are warming to their theme, the doorbell rings.

Gerald returns. Down the road he met a police sergeant he knew, and the man swore that there “wasn’t any Inspector Goole or anybody like him on the force here.” Birling immediately rings up the Chief Constable, Colonel Roberts. He describes the Inspector, spells his name, and is told by Roberts that there is no Inspector Goole on the police force. “We’ve been had,” he concludes, triumphantly, before adding that this “makes *all* the difference.”

“I suppose we’re all nice people now,” says Sheila, and Eric agrees. Their guilt and responsibility, though, are ignored by Birling, delighted to discover that “that fellow was a fraud.” Eric argues that everyone’s bad deeds are still the same, whether or not the Inspector was a police inspector. Birling begins to get annoyed, telling Eric he will have to pay back the money he stole. At that, Sheila interjects that it “won’t bring Eva Smith back to life,” and Eric adds that “we all helped to kill her,” quoting the Inspector.

Gerald, though, pushes the logic further, questioning whether there really was an Eva Smith who committed suicide. Though everyone has admitted something to do with *a* girl, Gerald goes on, there’s no evidence that it is the *same* girl in each instance. The Inspector could, Gerald continues, have shown everyone different photographs, and “Daisy Renton” and “Eva Smith” could be entirely separate people. Birling is hugely relieved, even mocking the Inspector’s voice (“A girl has just died in the Infirmary. She drank some strong

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disinfectant”)—feeling convinced that the whole thing was a hoax. To make the final proof, Gerald rings the Infirmary to check. They tell him that nobody was brought in after drinking disinfectant. “They haven’t had a suicide for months.”

Birling, Mrs. Birling and Gerald are triumphantly relieved, pouring drinks and patting each other on the back. Birling tells Sheila to ask for her ring back from Gerald. He is, as Sheila then points out, “pretending everything’s just as it was before.” The Inspector’s promise of “fire and blood and anguish” still scares Sheila, and she cannot just cast it aside.

In the morning, Mrs. Birling jovially comments, Sheila and Eric will be as amused as she and her husband are. Gerald holds up the ring for Sheila to take back. Sheila rejects it, saying that she must think. Birling is making another sweeping generalization about “the famous younger generation who ... can’t even take a joke” when the phone rings. Birling answers it, listens, and puts the phone down. Looking at the others, panic-stricken, he utters the play’s final lines:

“That was the police. A girl has just died—on her way to the Infirmary—after swallowing some disinfectant. And a police inspector is on his way here—to ask some—questions—”

With that, the curtain falls.

## Analysis

The interrogation of Eric, which begins this act, is the last in a chain of interrogations which have structured the play since the Inspector’s arrival (in order: Birling, Sheila, Gerald, Mrs. Birling, Eric). Each of the Birlings has played a part in Eva Smith’s death, and each of them must take part of the responsibility for what happened to her and for her final, sad choice. This motif, as well as the structure of the play and of Eva Smith’s life (though, to get the order of events right, Mrs. Birling was the last, not the penultimate, character to affect Eva in reality), points to two of Priestley’s key themes: the interrelationship of cause and effect and, more generally, the nature of time.

The “chain of events” that the Inspector outlined as leading to Eva Smith’s death in Act One is a key idea in the play. The chain of personal and social events is not simply a metaphor for the way the class system holds people like “Eva Smiths and John Smiths” firmly in their subservient positions in society, but it is also a neat encapsulation of the Inspector’s key moral: that everyone, contrary to what Birling explains, is indeed bound up with everyone else “like bees in a hive.” As much as we like to think of ourselves as individuals, we are also social beings.

The Birlings and Gerald Croft are chained together by Eva Smith’s death. Birling sets off the chain which makes possible Sheila’s bad deed against Eva, which in turn throws Eva into the path of Gerald and then Eric and, finally, in front of Mrs. Birling’s committee. Each deed is tied to the deed before it and the deed after it.

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The individual deeds, linked together, make Eva's downfall so severe that she chooses suicide—effectively causing this choice. This is the “cause and effect” idea of succession that Priestley explores: the way in which time can indeed make us all responsible for each other.

Both of these themes are present elsewhere in Priestley's work, particularly in *Time and the Conways* and [I Have Been Here Before]. *Time and the Conways*, in particular, is interested in the notion of time as a series of interlocking dimensions: a series of parallel universes. He famously quoted the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle: “if there were more heavens than one, the movement of any of them equally would be time, so that there would be many times at the same time.” Even if, therefore, the chain of events that led to Eva Smith's death was not in fact a chain, but separate events all involving different girls, Priestley's theory of time suggests that they might still be seen as part of the same whole.

Consider this passage from Priestley's “Man and Time”: “We invent Time to explain change and succession. We try to account for it out there in the world we are observing, but soon run into trouble because it is not out there at all. It comes with the travelling searchlight, the moving slit.” Might we see the Inspector as just such a “moving slit,” a function of time who can send the searchlight through to each person's experiences? Is his role, perhaps, to bring together a series of separate deeds so as to make the Birlings and Gerald Croft realize their collective and individual responsibilities? Perhaps: Priestley leaves the Inspector's role open to such an interpretation. It is also fascinating to consider that (as is explored in the Stephen Daldry production) the Inspector might indeed come from the future. Is he the “Ghoul” of Eva Smith (or even of her dead baby, somehow) come back to haunt her murderers?

It is important to analyze the Inspector's promise, later repeated by Sheila, of “fire and blood and anguish” if men will not learn that they are responsible for each other. It seems very likely that Priestley intends the resonance of not just the Second World War but also the First World War, a catastrophically major event in British history that significantly changed the social structure of the country—and led to horrors, particularly in trench warfare, the likes of which had never been seen in living memory. Moreover, to Priestley's 1946 audience, it would have been an uncomfortably close reminder of the Second World War, which had just concluded.

Explaining Dunne's theory of time, Priestley noted, “Each of us is a series of observers existing in a series of Times.” The Inspector, it seems, might be just such an observer, who can see beyond the play's 1912 setting to its 1946 performance date—and who, perhaps, with the promised reappearance of a police inspector at the end of the play (we never learn whether this Inspector is indeed Goole again) can move through time. What are we to take from the play's ending? The play is over after Birling announces his news, perhaps indicating that the play has gone back to the point at which the Inspector arrived, just to continue again once the curtain falls. Perhaps Eva Smith had not yet died and the Inspector was investigating an event which had not yet happened. However one chooses to interpret the play, one must face the play's use of the concepts of time that so fascinated Priestley.

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After the Inspector's exit, the focus of the play shifts away from Eva Smith's story, now complete, as the characters unpack and examine more closely what has just happened. What we see, for the first time, is how the Birlings (and Gerald) are going to, in the Inspector's words, "adjust their family relationships." Immediately, the key alliance is formed between Mr. and Mrs. Birling, who are keen to judge Eric as harshly as possible, while sweeping their own moral misdemeanors under the carpet. We also see, when Sheila steps in to defend Eric, that the two Birling siblings have formed another contrasting alliance in line with the Inspector's message about responsibility and maturity.

Birling himself does not really seem to have changed at all since the first act. His offer of money (could "thousands" really make amends for a girl's death?) is almost comically inappropriate. Almost as soon as the Inspector leaves, he is primarily considering the potential damage to his chances of getting a knighthood.

It is his wife, though, who seems to remain more ominously unchanged. She alone stands her ground in the face of the Inspector, icily dismissive of "girls of that class," and though she is shocked by Eric's behavior and the subsequent revelations, moments after the Inspector's exit she "comes to life" to tell Eric how "absolutely ashamed" of him she is. Birling throughout is something of a comic buffoon, but it is Sybil Birling, perhaps, who genuinely embodies the disdain for the lower classes, the extreme self-centeredness which Priestley is primarily arguing against.

The other character who interestingly comes into focus in this final act is Gerald Croft. He is not a social equal of his fiancé, and we do not find out a great deal about him—other than, of course, his dealings with Eva. Eric's naive comment about Eva in the Palace bar (which itself, Priestley makes quite clear, is a meeting place for prostitutes and their clients), about the "woman who wanted her to go there," seems to suggest that Eva is so desperate that she is working as a prostitute and that this woman is the madam. Yet what is interesting is that Eric, despite his drinking problem, genuinely seems not to understand the implications of it. Gerald could easily have been at the Palace bar looking for a prostitute, and the fact he knows that it is a "favourite haunt of women of the town" proves that he is far more streetwise than Eric Birling. We know, too, from his encounter with Eva that he is quite happy to undertake a sexual relationship without being in love.

Yet we never suspect, when Gerald leaves, that part of his motivation for going might be some interrogation of his own; when he returns, that is precisely what he has been doing. Gerald is even absent from the Inspector's final speech. We would not suspect, from his behavior at the beginning of the play, that he has been unfaithful to his fiancé. It is Gerald, moreover, who leads the way to unraveling the Inspector's case and who, in the closing minutes of the play, directly phones the infirmary to find out whether a girl has committed suicide.

Birling, naturally, is delighted. He tells Gerald that the Inspector "didn't keep you on the run as he did the rest of us." Yet one can never quite trust Gerald Croft. Ominously, the way he casts aside his own responsibility in favor of trying to prove that the Inspector was a hoaxer actually suggests that he is another Arthur Birling (or worse) in the making.

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Priestley makes a fascinating psychological point regarding the ways people react to guilt and responsibility in this last act. The heady, breathless glee with which Mr. and Mrs. Birling react is incredibly well-observed. As more and more pieces of evidence fall into place, Birling, in particular, is so overjoyed and relieved that he even dares to imitate the Inspector's final speech. The point, clearly, is that some people are always unwilling to accept responsibility, no matter how clearly it is explained to them. In their own heads, they will find ways out of it. Here, all it takes is to know that they are not going to be held legally responsible in order to stop worrying about their moral responsibility. It will, as the Inspector warns the Birlings at the end, take more than simply being told; they will need to be taught the moral lessons at issue here.

Priestley's warning about responsibility has resonated through almost a century of constant international revival in the theatre. In any age it is performed, the apocalyptic, *Revelation*-style warning of "fire and blood and anguish" looks ominously forward to military conflict. The sociological point is this unusually portentous. If man will not learn to look out for his fellow man in small ways, Priestley seems to argue, then man will destroy man on battlefields, with bombs, with guns, with "fire and blood and anguish."

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## Related Links

<http://www.aninspectorcalls.com>

An Inspector Calls Website for the major international touring production first directed by Stephen Daldry for the National Theatre (UK) in 1992. Includes excellent education resources and an interesting trailer video.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english\\_literature/dramainspectorcalls/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/dramainspectorcalls/)

BBC Bitesize: An Inspector Calls The BBC's resources regarding the play for the sake of high school students studying the play for exams, featuring excellent quizzes and videos.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047119/>

An Inspector Calls Information on the 1954 film version of the play, featuring a renamed "Inspector Poole."

<http://www.jbpriestley-society.com/>

The J.B. Priestley Society Information about the writer and his works. See especially the material under "Education," which stresses Priestley's moral mission and his themes of responsibility and time. Naturally, the Society appears to agree with Priestley's leftist morality and contrasts it morally with Margaret Thatcher's individualism.



## Suggested Essay Questions

**Trace the different levels of tension throughout the play. How does Priestley create tension?**

To answer this question, you might want to consider some factors associated with tension: twists, pace, momentum, and so on. It is important to consider what the audience knows and does not know at any given point, as well as the clues that Priestley drops. Note that some tension can be found within a character and that some can be found between characters. You can consider tension similarly to the way you consider conflict, but do not just name the conflicts; this question asks you to examine the different levels or magnitudes of tension and how Priestley produces tension for the characters and for the audience.

**The Inspector is nothing more than a perfectly human hoaxer, and Priestley makes it clear. Do you agree?**

This question asks you to focus on the role of the Inspector. You might begin by explaining how you might justify the premise in the question, noting the evidence that suggests he is a human hoaxer, then opening your answer out to take in some other points of view. Consider that Priestley might have left the Inspector's identity ambiguous on purpose.

**How are Birling and the Inspector coming from "opposite ideological points of view"?**

This question asks you to focus on two characters and how their political and social views differ. Use a lot of quotations from the play to develop an understanding of the different standpoints of each character. Consider what each one seems to believe about the role of an individual in society, and use the theme of responsibility as a major guide. It might also be helpful to consider a few similarities.

**Delineate the "chain of events" that allegedly led to Eva Smith's death.**

This question simply asks you to explain the chain of events that led to Eva Smith's death, from the point of view of the Inspector. A good answer to this question might go further and look at the idea of the "chain of events" itself, who believes in it, and its relevance as a metaphor.

**Write a character analysis of Gerald Croft.**

Outline his characteristics based on what he says and what he does, both during the play and before it begins. Try to assess both the good and the bad things about him before drawing a conclusion.

**Why is time an important theme in Priestley's play?**

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Focus not only on time as a concept (consider what Priestley thought and wrote about time) but also on the peculiarities of time as it applies to this play in particular. Think about how the Inspector in particular has to do with this theme, and consider how the past actions of individual characters build the scenario of Eva's death, the interrogations and judgments of the present, and the Inspector's warning about the future.

**J.L. Styan has written that the play's final twist gives a "spurious emphasis irrelevant to the substance of the play." Might he be wrong?**

This question asks you to engage with a critical opinion regarding the final twist of the play. First, outline your view of the final moments of the play, focusing on the strange news and the themes involved. Do these themes intensify or distract from the play thus far and the play as a whole? Does the news put a kind of bracket around the rest of the play that gives the whole episode with the Inspector a new meaning? If so, does this put us in the place of Mr. Birling, such that the theme of responsibility no longer has as much weight if it was all a hoax or a weird supernatural event--or does the prospect of it having been a supernatural event invest the idea of responsibility with even greater import?

**Make the case for Edna being the play's most important character.**

This question asks you to look at the role of Edna and consider how she, perhaps more than anyone else, might be central to the play and its themes. If Edna represents the living objects of all of the characters' present social responsibilities, she may be even more important than the deceased Eva. If in some sense the rich have a social responsibility toward the poor, then perhaps Edna embodies the central message of the play regarding the need to look out for one another. A good essay also will examine the counter-evidence: perhaps at best she is a symbol of the play's message and in that sense only a minor character. And isn't social responsibility really about each person's responsibility to all others, rather than the one-sided class-based responsibility, drawing on old notions of a social elite, that would narrowly see the class issue as central to the play?

**Compare *An Inspector Calls* to another play by Priestley that you have read.**

This play asks you to look at *An Inspector Calls* against another play by Priestley. *Time and the Conways* or *I Have Been Here Before* might be good choices. Consider the similarities and differences in the plays' plots, characters and, of course, dominant or important themes and apparent messages. Also consider the historical context of the plays.

**To what extent is Birling essentially a comic character, lacking a serious or ominous side?**

This question puts forward quite a provocative view of Birling. Most readers will disagree with the idea that there is no serious dimension to Birling's actions and words or that there is nothing ominous presented about his allegedly selfish views and politics. Yet, keen readers will notice the moments at which an audience might find Priestley's presentation of him and his views comic, especially for the sake of making his views seem ludicrous.

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Weigh both sides of the issue before drawing a conclusion for your essay.



## The Play's Unique Place in Drama

In her biography of J.B. Priestley, Maggie Barbara Gale calls *An Inspector Calls* "a deceptively conservative one-set, well-made play, where the action all takes place over one evening." Another way of saying this might be to argue that Priestley follows Aristotle's classic unities of time, place, and action. Priestley's play does flirt with theatrical conventions and, of course, follows many of them, to a point, but ultimately challenges many of them.

Why "deceptively conservative"? It is not just because the unities are not really so neat. To be sure, the interesting actions leading to Eva's death happened in times and places other than the evening covered by the play. As for the unity of action, it takes the Inspector to weave the different prior actions together into a coherent narrative, but this narrative is challenged when it is thought that the story might involve different women after all--and the whole existence of the Inspector and the suicide are put into question by the end of the play.

Even more than that, Priestley's play begins as a drawing-room drama but evolves into something that looks more like a murder mystery or a thriller. Nevertheless, neither of those genres has a history of emphasizing the political or sociological messages that Priestley eventually delivers through the character of the Inspector. These other genres focus, naturally, on the death and the investigation, but Priestley is interested in the personal and social conditions that led to the various choices that his characters make.

To understand the precise nature of this comparison with those genres, it might be interesting to look up other plays from those genres from the same period. Consider these:

- *Dial M for Murder* by Frederick Knott
- *The Hollow* by Agatha Christie
- *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie (a play in which the policeman makes for an interesting counterpoint to the Inspector)

Here are some key questions:

- What are the key points and messages of the play? Are they central to the plot or peripheral to it?
- Does the play even have an explicit message for the audience? Does the investigator or the wisest character share a wise message, or is the murderer the one with the most interesting thoughts?

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- Does the play contain instances of wrongdoing? If so, how many characters are "guilty," and who takes charge of justice?
- What role does authority (in the laws, or embodied by the police or others with power) play in the play's projected morality?

You are likely to find that *An Inspector Calls* does not have a great deal in common with murder mysteries or thrillers after all. Yet, it is no comedy and does not very well fit the traditional model of a tragedy. Indeed, the Inspector is a kind of truth-teller who provides what a couple of the characters need to reach their moral epiphany and see their social responsibility, yet the presumed leaders of the family, the older generation, suffer no downfall and are quite happy when they find excuses to avoid such an epiphany.

To some degree, perhaps, this somewhat naturalistic, somewhat expressionist play also reminds one of the early twentieth-century trend of the psychological novel, where the interesting things are the conversations and people's nuanced thoughts and reactions to their experiences. Most of all, however, the play fits in the tradition of the novel or play that is written in large part to engage an audience with a social problem. Still, rather than try to figure out where the play might belong in literary history, perhaps readers are served best by reviewing the play on its own merits.

## A Stage History of the Play

The best way to experience any play--at least, one that is meant to be performed--is to see it on stage. Remember that reading a play on the page is like looking at sheet music without an instrument to play it on. One's study of the play will be hugely helped by seeing a live production with a live audience.

There is also much to be gained from viewing different treatments of Priestley's play on film. In particular, the 1954 film (directed by Guy Hamilton), which stars Alastair Sim as the Inspector, offers an interpretation radically different from the internationally successful touring theatre production directed by Stephen Daldry.

Sim's characterization of the Inspector is sparkling, though not particularly ominous and, as one might expect, key changes are made to the plot of the play. In particular, the Inspector is locked in a room by the Birlings as they discover what is going on, but when they return to the room to confront him with what they have discovered, he has vanished. There also is a more comic feel to the tone of the film: the Inspector is far from ominous or ghoulish, and the family members are not particularly unpleasant or dislikable.

The first production of the play was in Moscow in 1945, though the first major production in English was in London in 1946. Ralph Richardson, who played the Inspector, had already appeared in a play of Priestley's, *Eden End*, in 1934. Priestley wrote of Richardson that "[h]e can be a bank clerk, an insurance agent, a dentist, but very soon mysterious lights and shadows, tones of anguish and ecstasy, are discovered in banking, insurance and dentistry."

Priestley did not want the play to be set on a realistic "box set" (i.e., showing a realistic, fully furnished room with the fourth wall [facing the audience] missing). In his opening stage direction, he tells directors that they might be "well advised to dispense with an ordinary realistic set." Unfortunately, Basil Dean, who directed, gave him a realistic box set, but lit it in bright green. After the dress rehearsal, Ralph Richardson fired the director and had the lighting entirely changed!

The reviews of this first production gave no indication of the international success that the play would meet. The *Daily Mail's* reviewer commented that this "moralising play had no theatrical ethics," implying that the play was all message and no dramatic excitement. J.C. Trewin, writing in *The Observer*, wrote that the play could have "been stripped to half its length ... the Birlings are hardly worth this prolonged clatter of skeletons." There were some positives, though: the *New Statesman* praised the "beautiful craftsmanship" of the play and argued that the ending was the "coup de théâtre of the year."

The play saw many small-scale revivals following its original production up and down the country and internationally, though it was not until 1992 that Stephen Daldry rediscovered the play in an expressionist production at the National Theatre and thus afforded it a more significant revival.

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Daldry asked for operatic, non-realistic, "high definition" performances from his actors, and he set the play in an entirely different environment designed by Ian MacNeil. An old-fashioned curtain lifted to reveal an Edwardian house, looking like it had suffered damage in the Second World War and standing stage left with its foundations exposed. At one moment, late in the play, it was as if the "fire and blood and anguish" had already arrived: the house tilted violently forwards with the crockery pouring off the dining table to smash on the cobbles. Rain poured down at various moments in the play.

Daldry's production, still on tour into the 2010s, radically reimagined Priestley's message for a modern audience. Daldry was famously opposing Margaret Thatcher's statement that there was "no such thing as society" (just a collection of individuals and families), and Priestley's play seemed continuously relevant to the modern day, given its fundamental critique of the social order in favor of a more socialist politics. "I think Priestley would have been outraged now to see people on the streets," Daldry said.

Daldry also played with Priestley's idea of time, dressing the Inspector in clothes from 1945 but everyone else in clothes from 1912. This Inspector, indeed, really had seen the "fire and blood and anguish" of Second World War. This "political parable" was, despite some initially ambivalent critical reactions, a tremendous success, running for over fifteen years around the world, and reclaiming the idea of *An Inspector Calls* as a relevant, modern play that has not lost the power to shock.



## Author of ClassicNote and Sources

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## Essay: How J.B. Priestley Creates Sympathy for Eva Smith in "An Inspector Calls"

by Judith  
April 05, 2004

In "An Inspector Calls", J.B. Priestley uses the characters and attitudes of the Birling family, especially Mr. Birling, to make the audience feel sympathy for Eva Smith. The family is "prosperous" and "comfortable", and Mr. Birling's ostentatious posturing emphasizes their good fortune. In the opening lines of the play, he is found discussing port with Gerald, immediately giving the audience a sense of the family's financial security. When Mr. Birling tells Gerald and Eric that a man should "look after his own", and not listen to the "cranks" who talk about "community and all that nonsense", it becomes obvious that he has no interest in the welfare of people like Eva Smith. By making Mr. Birling so arrogant and pompous, JB Priestley renders his character deeply unattractive and encourages the reader to sympathize with his oppressed workforce.

The entry of the Inspector causes a dramatic shift in the play's atmosphere, drawing attention to his shocking news. He almost immediately announces that Eva Smith has "died in the infirmary" after swallowing "strong disinfectant" that "burnt her inside out". This language provides a striking contrast to the family's previous conversation, where things were implied, but never directly stated. The Inspector does not use euphemisms to shield the family from the unpleasant images, but says that Eva died in "great agony". Especially in juxtaposition with the comfortable atmosphere and obvious wealth displayed earlier in the play, the Inspector's vivid description of Eva Smith's suffering captures the attention and pity of the audience.

Mr. and Mrs. Birling's uncooperative responses to the Inspector's questioning increase both the audience's feelings of distaste towards the Birlings and their sympathy for Eva Smith. Mr. Birling's initial response to Eva's death is an impatient "yes, yes. Horrid business", and even that is said more out of social convention than any real dismay. He sees the Inspector's questioning as a rude intrusion on his personal time, and is convinced that there is nothing "scandalous about this business", as far as he "is concerned". He seems to think that he is above the law, telling the Inspector that he "doesn't like" his "tone". He also repeatedly tells the Inspector that he doesn't think these events are "any concern" of his. Mr. Birling tries to intimidate the Inspector by telling him about the "close" friendship he shares with the chief constable, and then to "settle it sensibly" - in other words, to try to solve the problem with money. Mrs. Birling also tries to intimidate the Inspector, albeit in a more subtle manner than her husband. Mrs. Birling calls his investigation "absurd", and says that he is "conducting it in a rather peculiar and offensive manner". She reminds him of her husband's powerful position in society, as if this absolves the family from any need to cooperate with the Inspector. Mr and Mrs. Birling's attitude towards the investigation only increases the audience's sympathy for Eva Smith. It turns the play into a struggle between their viewpoint, and that of the Inspector. This conflict encourages the audience to side with Eva Smith, and with the working classes in general. The Birling family's refusal to accept responsibility also gives the audience

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a glimpse of the abuse that Eva suffered at the hands of those in positions of power.

The story of exactly what happened to Eva Smith unfolds throughout Act One, as the audience learns that each of the Birlings has hurt her in a different way. First, the audience learns that eighteen months before her suicide, Mr. Birling dismissed her from her job because she'd had "far too much" to say on the subject of her unfair wages. Later, it emerges that Sheila had her sacked from Milwards, mainly because she was in a "furious temper" and "jealous" of Eva. Eva is described as "a lively good-looking girl, country bred", and "a good worker", and by Sheila as someone who looked like she could "take care of herself". These personal details show the audience that Eva's death was a tragic waste. While questioning the Birlings, the Inspector repeatedly reminds them of her gruesome death, saying that "she wasn't very pretty when I saw her today". The contrast between the Birlings' description of Eva and the Inspector's account of "what was left" of her in the infirmary emphasizes how thoroughly the Birlings have destroyed her life.

One detail in particular rouses the audience's sympathy towards Eva Smith: the fact she had to change her name. The Birlings use their family name as well as Gerald Croft's to try to intimidate the Inspector. To them, these names guarantee wealth, respect, and a place in upper-class society. Eva's situation starkly contrasts with this: the fact that she can so easily change her name shows that she possesses nothing, and has nobody to help her. To people like the Birlings, she is just one of "so many girls" that "keep on changing", and her name is irrelevant.

Another way that Priestley reveals the misery of Eva Smith's short life is by contrasting it with the happy, protected existence of Sheila Birling, who is about the same age as Eva. Sheila is shallow, childish, and naive. She calls her dad "mean" for sacking Eva Smith, and exclaims that girls like Eva are "people", as if she has never really thought about such things before. These characteristics are intended to show what a sheltered life Sheila has led. While Sheila is poised to marry a rich and respected young "man about town" and will never be expected to work a day in her life, at the time of her death Eva had already been sacked from two jobs, and had fended for herself for several years. At several points throughout the play, Sheila's parents try to send her away so that she will not be shocked by the details of the investigation. This only clarifies the double standard present in this situation: the Birlings expect working-class girls to experience things that they do not want their daughter to even hear about. By drawing attention to Sheila's privileged lifestyle, Eva's life is made to seem even more pitiful.

## Quiz 1

1. **Where did Eric meet Eva Smith?**
  - A. In Gerald's rooms
  - B. On the streets
  - C. The Palace bar
  - D. In a swimming pool
  
2. **Who says "girls of that class"?**
  - A. Mrs. Birling
  - B. Mr. Birling
  - C. Eric
  - D. Sheila
  
3. **What does Eric ask for before he is interrogated?**
  - A. A biscuit
  - B. A glass of water
  - C. Forgiveness
  - D. A drink
  
4. **What does "squiffy" mean?**
  - A. Sleepy
  - B. Angry
  - C. Drunk
  - D. Silly
  
5. **Whose trouble is not having much time?**
  - A. Mrs. Birling
  - B. Birling
  - C. Inspector
  - D. Eric
  
6. **From where did Eric steal money?**
  - A. Gerald's works
  - B. His mother
  - C. Birling's works
  - D. Eva Smith

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7. **How did Eric steal money?**
  - A. Out of Eva's handbag
  - B. Stole from a drawer
  - C. Got some small accounts paid in cash
  - D. Emptied Birling's wallet
  
8. **Who offers "thousands - yes, thousands"?**
  - A. Birling
  - B. Inspector
  - C. Eric
  - D. Gerald
  
9. **How many Eva Smiths and John Smiths are still left with us, according to the Inspector?**
  - A. fifteen billion and many, many more
  - B. thousands and thousands and thousands
  - C. scores and scores and scores
  - D. millions and millions and millions
  
10. **How will men be taught the Inspector's lesson, if they will not learn it?**
  - A. Fire and blood and anguish
  - B. Lions and tigers and bears
  - C. Guns and wars and shrapnel
  - D. Screaming and shouting and silence
  
11. **Who, according to Birling, is to blame for everything?**
  - A. The Inspector
  - B. Eric
  - C. Gerald
  - D. Sheila
  
12. **Who first suggests that the Inspector might not have been a real police inspector?**
  - A. Birling
  - B. Eric
  - C. Gerald
  - D. Sheila

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13. **Why is Birling worried about a public scandal?**
- A. He doesn't want any trouble for Eric
  - B. He feels guilty about what he has done
  - C. He has already been arrested twice this year
  - D. He might lose his knighthood
14. **Who tells Gerald that Goole was not a real police inspector?**
- A. A policeman friend
  - B. Colonel Roberts
  - C. Birling
  - D. Eric
15. **Whom does Birling phone to find out about the Inspector?**
- A. Colonel Roberts
  - B. The infirmary
  - C. A man on the street
  - D. Gerald
16. **Who, once they think the Inspector was a hoaxer, no longer feel guilty?**
- A. Sheila and Eric
  - B. Sheila and Gerald
  - C. Mr. and Mrs. Birling
  - D. Mr. and Mrs. Birling and Gerald
17. **Who believe(s) the Inspector "was our police inspector all right"?**
- A. Sheila and Eric
  - B. Mr. and Mrs. Birling
  - C. Eric
  - D. Sheila
18. **Whom does Gerald phone to confirm the hoax?**
- A. Colonel Roberts
  - B. The infirmary
  - C. His father
  - D. Birling and Company

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19. **What does Gerald find out from the Infirmary?**
- A. Eva Smith really is dead
  - B. No dead girl has been brought in that night
  - C. His father is furious with him
  - D. Another police inspector is coming
20. **What does Birling tell Sheila to do, right at the end of the play?**
- A. Stop stammering at him
  - B. Go to bed and shut up
  - C. Ask for her ring back
  - D. Pour him a drink
21. **Who, at the end of the play, does Sheila say is pretending that everything is as it was before?**
- A. the Inspector
  - B. Birling
  - C. Eric
  - D. Gerald
22. **Who quotes, "fire and blood and anguish" at the end of the play?**
- A. Birling
  - B. Eric
  - C. Gerald
  - D. Sheila
23. **Who, according to Birling, can't take a joke?**
- A. the Inspector
  - B. Gerald Croft
  - C. his wife
  - D. the younger generation
24. **Who phones Birling at the very end of the play?**
- A. Colonel Roberts
  - B. the infirmary
  - C. Gerald's father
  - D. the police

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25. **What is the play's final twist?**

- A. a girl has just died, and an inspector is on the way to ask some questions
- B. the Inspector vanishes mysteriously
- C. Gerald's father turns out to be the Inspector
- D. Gerald dies as a result of his epiphany

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## Quiz 1 Answer Key

1. (C) The Palace bar
2. (A) Mrs. Birling
3. (D) A drink
4. (C) Drunk
5. (C) Inspector
6. (C) Birling's works
7. (C) Got some small accounts paid in cash
8. (A) Birling
9. (D) millions and millions and millions
10. (A) Fire and blood and anguish
11. (B) Eric
12. (D) Sheila
13. (D) He might lose his knighthood
14. (A) A policeman friend
15. (A) Colonel Roberts
16. (D) Mr. and Mrs. Birling and Gerald
17. (A) Sheila and Eric
18. (B) The infirmary
19. (B) No dead girl has been brought in that night
20. (C) Ask for her ring back
21. (B) Birling
22. (D) Sheila
23. (D) the younger generation
24. (D) the police
25. (A) a girl has just died, and an inspector is on the way to ask some questions



## Quiz 2

- 1. Who wrote I[An Inspector Calls]?**
  - A. J.W. Dunne
  - B. J.B. Priestley
  - C. Terence Rattigan
  - D. Noel Coward
- 2. When was the first performance of the play?**
  - A. 1943
  - B. 1944
  - C. 1945
  - D. 1955
- 3. Where was the first performance of the play?**
  - A. Moscow
  - B. New York
  - C. Paris
  - D. London
- 4. Where was the second major performance of the play?**
  - A. Moscow
  - B. New York
  - C. Brumley
  - D. London
- 5. Who was the first major English actor to play the Inspector?**
  - A. Basil Dean
  - B. John Gielgud
  - C. Ralph Richardson
  - D. Laurence Olivier
- 6. What sort of set did Priestley want the play to be performed in?**
  - A. A box set
  - B. A site-specific one
  - C. A non-realistic one
  - D. A circular one

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7. **What is happening as the curtain goes up on Act One?**

- A. The Birlings are arguing
- B. The Birlings are singing a song as a family
- C. The Birlings are having dinner
- D. The Birlings are being served port after dinner

8. **What is the name of the Birlings' maid?**

- A. Eva
- B. Daisy
- C. Edna
- D. Sheila

9. **What is Mr. Birling's first name?**

- A. Goole
- B. Eric
- C. Sheila
- D. Arthur

10. **What is Mrs. Birling's first name?**

- A. Eva
- B. Sybil
- C. Edna
- D. Sheila

11. **Who is the Birlings' son?**

- A. Onion
- B. Gerald
- C. Eric
- D. Arthur

12. **Who is the Birlings' daughter?**

- A. Eva
- B. Sybil
- C. Edna
- D. Sheila

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13. **Who is marrying Sheila?**

- A. Gerald
- B. Eric
- C. Inspector Goole
- D. Arthur

14. **How does Priestley describe the lighting until the Inspector arrives?**

- A. Yellow
- B. Pink and intimate
- C. White
- D. Green and epic

15. **How are the men dressed as the curtain rises on Act One?**

- A. Dinner jackets
- B. Cocktail dresses
- C. Plain, dark suits of the period
- D. White tie and tails

16. **How old is Sheila?**

- A. 14
- B. 16
- C. early thirties
- D. early twenties

17. **How old is Eric?**

- A. 14
- B. 16
- C. Early thirties
- D. Early twenties

18. **Who are Gerald's parents?**

- A. Sir George and Lady Croft
- B. Arthur and Sybil Birling
- C. Doctor and Mrs. Croft
- D. Inspector and Mrs. Goole

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19. **How does Birling describe the evening in Act One?**
- A. "the best night of my life"
  - B. "one of the happiest nights of my life"
  - C. "not a bad night at all"
  - D. "the worst night of my life"
20. **What seems to be Birling's ulterior motive for marrying Sheila to Gerald?**
- A. He wants Gerald to confess his guilt
  - B. He wants Crofts Limited and Birling and Company to merge
  - C. He hates Sheila
  - D. He is in love with Gerald's mother
21. **How does Birling describe the Titanic?**
- A. a tragedy
  - B. unattainable
  - C. unsinkable
  - D. completely booked
22. **Who are the only people, according to Birling, who want war?**
- A. some half-civilized folks in the Balkans
  - B. some half-literate folks in Italy
  - C. the English
  - D. the Germans
23. **How does Birling describe himself?**
- A. a rather silly man
  - B. a hard-headed business man
  - C. fire and blood and anguish
  - D. a bulldog
24. **What does Gerald give Sheila in Act One?**
- A. engagement ring
  - B. cigarette
  - C. mobile phone
  - D. glass of port

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25. How heavy is the Titanic, according to Birling?

- A. 50,000 tons
- B. 15,000 tons
- C. 46,800 tons
- D. 48,600 tons

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## Quiz 2 Answer Key

1. (B) J.B. Priestley
2. (C) 1945
3. (A) Moscow
4. (D) London
5. (C) Ralph Richardson
6. (C) A non-realistic one
7. (D) The Birlings are being served port after dinner
8. (C) Edna
9. (D) Arthur
10. (B) Sybil
11. (C) Eric
12. (D) Sheila
13. (A) Gerald
14. (B) Pink and intimate
15. (D) White tie and tails
16. (D) early twenties
17. (D) Early twenties
18. (A) Sir George and Lady Croft
19. (B) "one of the happiest nights of my life"
20. (B) He wants Crofts Limited and Birling and Company to merge
21. (C) unsinkable
22. (A) some half-civilized folks in the Balkans
23. (B) a hard-headed business man
24. (A) engagement ring
25. (C) 46,800 tons

## Quiz 3

1. **Who, according to Birling, can't be allowed to do all the talking?**
  - A. these left-wing bastards
  - B. these Bernard Shaws and H.G. Wellses
  - C. these journalists and papery-writers
  - D. these Bernard Shaws and J.B. Priestleys
  
2. **How does Birling describe "community"?**
  - A. "all that nonsense"
  - B. "civic duty and so forth"
  - C. "brilliant"
  - D. "a lot of poppycock"
  
3. **What is Birling saying as the doorbell rings?**
  - A. "all mixed up together like bees in a hive"
  - B. "I blame you for this, Gerald"
  - C. "might have done better for yourself socially"
  - D. "a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own"
  
4. **What is the Inspector's name?**
  - A. Ghoulie
  - B. Ghore
  - C. Goole
  - D. Ghoul
  
5. **Birling, two years ago, was what?**
  - A. Lord Mayor
  - B. Sir Arthur
  - C. Chief Constable
  - D. A woman
  
6. **How old is the Inspector?**
  - A. fifties
  - B. forties
  - C. sixties
  - D. over four thousand

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7. **How is the Inspector dressed?**
  - A. traditional police officer's uniform
  - B. a plain darkish suit of the period
  - C. white tie and tails
  - D. a plain blue suit
  
8. **What civic role other than Lord Mayor has Birling fulfilled?**
  - A. Chief Constable
  - B. Knight of the Realm
  - C. Lady Mayoress
  - D. alderman
  
9. **How does Eva Smith kill herself?**
  - A. poison
  - B. shooting herself
  - C. overdose on pills
  - D. swallowing disinfectant
  
10. **Where did Eva Smith die?**
  - A. on the streets
  - B. Birling's works
  - C. the Infirmary
  - D. Milwards
  
11. **What had Eva Smith left at the room she had?**
  - A. the Birlings' address
  - B. a letter and a sort of diary
  - C. her hat
  - D. a full account of what had happened
  
12. **Who is the first person to be shown the photograph of the dead girl?**
  - A. Birling
  - B. Mrs. Birling
  - C. Gerald
  - D. Eric



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13. **Who employed Eva Smith first?**
- A. Mr. Birling
  - B. Eva
  - C. Sybil
  - D. Eric
14. **When did Eva Smith leave Birling's employment?**
- A. September 1910
  - B. October 1911
  - C. November 1909
  - D. Spring 1912
15. **Gerald's father's company is called what?**
- A. Crofts Limited
  - B. Daisy Renton Enterprises
  - C. Geraldio
  - D. Birling and Company
16. **Eva got sacked by Birling because she helped to lead what?**
- A. a strike
  - B. a rebellion against his leadership
  - C. a series of offensive advertisements
  - D. an army
17. **How does Birling describe the wage he was paying Eva?**
- A. "more than she deserved"
  - B. "a very competitive rate of pay"
  - C. "an excellent wage considering her class"
  - D. "neither more or less than is generally paid"
18. **Where is the play set?**
- A. New York
  - B. Brumley
  - C. Bradford
  - D. London

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**19. Is Brumley a real town?**

- A. Yes, but Priestley reimagines it
- B. No; it was invented by Priestley
- C. It wasn't a real town in 1946, but it is now
- D. Yes, but it is not in the North Midlands

**20. Who is the Chief Constable?**

- A. Gerald Croft
- B. Arthur Birling
- C. Colonel Roberts
- D. Inspector Goole

**21. Which golf course does Birling play at?**

- A. East Brumley
- B. West Brumley
- C. North Brumley
- D. South Brumley

**22. Which sport doesn't the Inspector play?**

- A. Rugby
- B. Football
- C. Golf
- D. Tennis

**23. How old was Eva Smith when she died?**

- A. 21
- B. 22
- C. 23
- D. 24

**24. In which shop did Sheila encounter Eva Smith?**

- A. Debenhams
- B. Milwards
- C. Crofts
- D. Birling and Company

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25. **When did Sheila encounter Eva Smith?**

- A. End of January 1911
- B. End of January 1912
- C. End of February 1911
- D. End of February 1912

## Quiz 3 Answer Key

1. (B) these Bernard Shaws and H.G. Wellses
2. (A) "all that nonsense"
3. (D) "a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own"
4. (C) Goole
5. (A) Lord Mayor
6. (A) fifties
7. (B) a plain darkish suit of the period
8. (D) alderman
9. (D) swallowing disinfectant
10. (C) the Infirmary
11. (B) a letter and a sort of diary
12. (A) Birling
13. (A) Mr. Birling
14. (A) September 1910
15. (A) Crofts Limited
16. (A) a strike
17. (D) "neither more or less than is generally paid"
18. (B) Brumley
19. (B) No; it was invented by Priestley
20. (C) Colonel Roberts
21. (B) West Brumley
22. (C) Golf
23. (D) 24
24. (B) Milwards
25. (A) End of January 1911

## Quiz 4

1. **Why did Sheila complain about Eva Smith?**
  - A. Eva punched her
  - B. Eva made a comment about her
  - C. Eva smiled as Sheila tried on a dress
  - D. Eva tried Sheila's dress on
  
2. **To what did Eva Smith change her name?**
  - A. Jennifer Wilding
  - B. Katy Price
  - C. Katy Ambrose
  - D. Daisy Renton
  
3. **Complete the quote: "If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our ..."**
  - A. responsibility
  - B. cakes
  - C. anger
  - D. guilt
  
4. **Which member of the family has a drinking problem?**
  - A. Mr. Birling
  - B. Gerald
  - C. Mrs. Birling
  - D. Eric
  
5. **Who says, "he's giving us rope - so that we'll hang ourselves"?**
  - A. Mr. Birling
  - B. Mrs. Birling
  - C. Sheila
  - D. The Inspector
  
6. **Where did Gerald meet Eva Smith first?**
  - A. Palace Arms Pub
  - B. Buckingham Palace
  - C. The bar of the Palace music hall
  - D. Kensington Palace

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7. **Who, when Gerald first met Eva Smith, was pressing her into a corner?**
  - A. Eric Birling
  - B. Joe Meggarty
  - C. Arthur Birling
  - D. John Boynton
  
8. **What civic role does Joe Meggarty hold?**
  - A. Lord Mayor
  - B. Chief Constable
  - C. Alderman
  - D. Doctor
  
9. **Of whom is the Palace bar a "favourite haunt"?**
  - A. actors
  - B. "women of the town"
  - C. dancers
  - D. variety hall performers
  
10. **How does Gerald describe Alderman Meggarty?**
  - A. "I've never met the rascal"
  - B. "notorious womanizer as well as ... one of the worst sots and rogues in Brumley"
  - C. "one of the worst men in Brumley"
  - D. "one of the most responsible, nicest men in Brumley"
  
11. **Which friend of Gerald's gave him some rooms to look after?**
  - A. Eric Birling
  - B. John Gielgud
  - C. Ralph Richardson
  - D. Charlie Brunswick
  
12. **Where did Gerald get Eva to live?**
  - A. In some rooms he was looking after
  - B. In a church
  - C. In Crofts Limited warehouse
  - D. In the Birlings' house

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13. **Where were the rooms Gerald was looking after?**
- A. Morgan Terrace
  - B. Willesden Road
  - C. Uxbridge Road
  - D. Priestley Terrace
14. **Who ended the relationship between Gerald and Eva?**
- A. Eva
  - B. Birling
  - C. Gerald
  - D. Sheila
15. **What did Eva do after the relationship between her and Gerald ended?**
- A. Went away on holiday
  - B. Begged him to take her back
  - C. Applied for jobs
  - D. Committed suicide
16. **What was Gerald's parting gift to Eva?**
- A. Bread
  - B. A ring
  - C. The rooms he was looking after
  - D. Enough money to see her through to the end of the year
17. **For how long did Eva go away?**
- A. Two weeks
  - B. About two months
  - C. Three months
  - D. One month
18. **Who leaves the house shortly after his interrogation?**
- A. Birling
  - B. Gerald
  - C. Eric
  - D. The Inspector

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19. **Who is NOT present for the Inspector's final speech?**
- A. Birling
  - B. Inspector
  - C. Gerald
  - D. Eric
20. **Which Birling sits on the committee of a charity?**
- A. Mr. Birling
  - B. Mrs. Birling
  - C. Eric
  - D. Sheila
21. **What is the name of the charity?**
- A. BW Charity Commission
  - B. Birling and Company
  - C. Brumley Women's Charity Organisation
  - D. The Bill and Melinda Birling Trust
22. **How long ago did Mrs. Birling see Eva Smith?**
- A. Two weeks
  - B. Four months
  - C. Six months
  - D. Three weeks
23. **What did the dead girl call herself at the charity organization meeting?.**
- A. Sheila Birling
  - B. Daisy Renton
  - C. Eva Smith
  - D. Mrs. Birling
24. **Who was the father of Eva Smith's child?**
- A. We never find out
  - B. Mr. Birling
  - C. Gerald
  - D. Eric



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25. To whom does the Inspector say, "don't stammer and yammer at me"?
- A. Birling
  - B. Gerald
  - C. Mrs. Birling
  - D. Eric

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## Quiz 4 Answer Key

1. (C) Eva smiled as Sheila tried on a dress
2. (D) Daisy Renton
3. (D) guilt
4. (D) Eric
5. (C) Sheila
6. (C) The bar of the Palace music hall
7. (B) Joe Meggarty
8. (C) Alderman
9. (B) "women of the town"
10. (B) "notorious womanizer as well as ... one of the worst sots and rogues in Brumley"
11. (D) Charlie Brunswick
12. (A) In some rooms he was looking after
13. (A) Morgan Terrace
14. (C) Gerald
15. (A) Went away on holiday
16. (D) Enough money to see her through to the end of the year
17. (B) About two months
18. (B) Gerald
19. (C) Gerald
20. (B) Mrs. Birling
21. (C) Brumley Women's Charity Organisation
22. (A) Two weeks
23. (D) Mrs. Birling
24. (D) Eric
25. (A) Birling

## Quiz 5

- 1. Why did Eva stop taking money from Eric?**
  - A. She didn't love him any more
  - B. She had started an affair with Gerald
  - C. He didn't love her any more
  - D. She found out he was stealing it
- 2. Where did Eric meet Eva Smith?**
  - A. In a swimming pool
  - B. The Palace bar
  - C. In Gerald's rooms
  - D. On the streets
- 3. Who says "girls of that class"?**
  - A. Sheila
  - B. Mr. Birling
  - C. Eric
  - D. Mrs. Birling
- 4. What does Eric ask for before he is interrogated?**
  - A. A biscuit
  - B. A glass of water
  - C. A drink
  - D. Forgiveness
- 5. What does "squiffy" mean?**
  - A. Silly
  - B. Sleepy
  - C. Angry
  - D. Drunk
- 6. Whose trouble is not having much time?**
  - A. Eric
  - B. Inspector
  - C. Birling
  - D. Mrs. Birling

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7. **From where did Eric steal money?**
  - A. Eva Smith
  - B. Birling's works
  - C. His mother
  - D. Gerald's works
  
8. **How did Eric steal money?**
  - A. Got some small accounts paid in cash
  - B. Out of Eva's handbag
  - C. Emptied Birling's wallet
  - D. Stole from a drawer
  
9. **Who offers "thousands - yes, thousands"?**
  - A. Gerald
  - B. Eric
  - C. Inspector
  - D. Birling
  
10. **How many Eva Smiths and John Smiths are still left with us, according to the Inspector?**
  - A. millions and millions and millions
  - B. thousands and thousands and thousands
  - C. scores and scores and scores
  - D. fifteen billion and many, many more
  
11. **How will men be taught the Inspector's lesson, if they will not learn it?**
  - A. Guns and wars and shrapnel
  - B. Screaming and shouting and silence
  - C. Fire and blood and anguish
  - D. Lions and tigers and bears
  
12. **Who, according to Birling, is to blame for everything?**
  - A. Gerald
  - B. Sheila
  - C. Eric
  - D. The Inspector

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13. **Who first suggests that the Inspector might not have been a real police inspector?**
- A. Gerald
  - B. Sheila
  - C. Eric
  - D. Birling
14. **Why is Birling worried about a public scandal?**
- A. He has already been arrested twice this year
  - B. He feels guilty about what he has done
  - C. He might lose his knighthood
  - D. He doesn't want any trouble for Eric
15. **Who tells Gerald that Goole was not a real police inspector?**
- A. A policeman friend
  - B. Eric
  - C. Colonel Roberts
  - D. Birling
16. **Whom does Birling phone to find out about the Inspector?**
- A. A man on the street
  - B. Gerald
  - C. Colonel Roberts
  - D. The infirmary
17. **Who, once they think the Inspector was a hoaxer, no longer feel guilty?**
- A. Mr. and Mrs. Birling and Gerald
  - B. Sheila and Gerald
  - C. Mr. and Mrs. Birling
  - D. Sheila and Eric
18. **Who believe(s) the Inspector "was our police inspector all right"?**
- A. Sheila
  - B. Eric
  - C. Mr. and Mrs. Birling
  - D. Sheila and Eric

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19. **Whom does Gerald phone to confirm the hoax?**
- A. His father
  - B. Colonel Roberts
  - C. Birling and Company
  - D. The infirmary
20. **What does Gerald find out from the Infirmary?**
- A. No dead girl has been brought in that night
  - B. Another police inspector is coming
  - C. His father is furious with him
  - D. Eva Smith really is dead
21. **What does Birling tell Sheila to do, right at the end of the play?**
- A. Pour him a drink
  - B. Go to bed and shut up
  - C. Ask for her ring back
  - D. Stop stammering at him
22. **Who, at the end of the play, does Sheila say is pretending that everything is as it was before?**
- A. Gerald
  - B. Eric
  - C. Birling
  - D. the Inspector
23. **Who quotes, "fire and blood and anguish" at the end of the play?**
- A. Gerald
  - B. Sheila
  - C. Eric
  - D. Birling
24. **Who, according to Birling, can't take a joke?**
- A. Gerald Croft
  - B. the younger generation
  - C. his wife
  - D. the Inspector

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25. Who phones Birling at the very end of the play?
- A. the infirmary
  - B. Gerald's father
  - C. Colonel Roberts
  - D. the police

## Quiz 5 Answer Key

1. (D) She found out he was stealing it
2. (B) The Palace bar
3. (D) Mrs. Birling
4. (C) A drink
5. (D) Drunk
6. (B) Inspector
7. (B) Birling's works
8. (A) Got some small accounts paid in cash
9. (D) Birling
10. (A) millions and millions and millions
11. (C) Fire and blood and anguish
12. (C) Eric
13. (B) Sheila
14. (C) He might lose his knighthood
15. (A) A policeman friend
16. (C) Colonel Roberts
17. (A) Mr. and Mrs. Birling and Gerald
18. (D) Sheila and Eric
19. (D) The infirmary
20. (A) No dead girl has been brought in that night
21. (C) Ask for her ring back
22. (C) Birling
23. (B) Sheila
24. (B) the younger generation
25. (D) the police



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