

Study Guide to *An Inspector Calls*

Introduction

This guide is written for teachers and students who are studying J.B. Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls*. The guide is written specifically for students in the UK, but I hope it may be helpful to users from other parts of the world.

The play in performance

This is a play that has been very successful in performance: how might the way in which the play is performed draw the audience's attention to the main ideas in it?

To answer this you should consider such things as:

- acting - how the actors should play particular episodes
- casting - who would be suited to the various roles
- set - what kind of stage set would work best for this play
- lighting, sound and music - what effects (FX) of lighting, sound and music would help make the play's ideas more clear?

This task will work best if you are able to consider the play in at least one version that you have seen, as well as the 1954 film version, directed by Guy Hamilton.

Eva's letter

The Inspector tells Mr. Birling that Eva Smith/Daisy Renton 'left a letter...and a sort of diary'. The letter could be to her nearest relative or to Gerald Croft. Write - as you imagine Eva would have done - the letter and diary entries (between 1910 and 1912) for the key events in her life, from her starting to work for Birling & Co. to her suicide.

Year and month	What happens
September 1910	Eva sacked by Birling & Co.
December 1910	Eva employed by Milwards
Late January 1911	Eva sacked by Milwards
March 1911	Eva becomes Gerald's mistress
Early September 1911	Gerald breaks off the affair Eva leaves Brumley for two months
November 1911	Eric meets Eva
December 1911/January 1912	Eva finds she is pregnant
Late March 1912	Mrs. Birling turns down Eva's application for help
Early April 1912	Eva's suicide/the Inspector calls*

(*Dated by Titanic's maiden voyage.) The diary is also mentioned on pages 179 and 193 (Penguin edition).

Eva's life – the media version

Suppose that Eva's diary is discovered by a journalist who decides to present an item on her suicide for a Brumley newspaper, or for a local radio or TV broadcast (this is strictly anachronistic but could be done as a modern retrospective account). In a newspaper this could be a single report, or a series over several days (as comments are made by the Birlings, Gerald Croft and their solicitors). A broadcast account would perhaps take longer to prepare - but might still be inaccurate.

Remember that not all of the people involved would tell the truth (or the whole truth) about what happened. Try to obtain interviews/comments from some of the characters in the play and others, such as:

- Eva's work-mates at Birling & Co. or Milwards
- the 'woman' who wanted Eva to go to the Palace bar (clearly a kind of agent for Brumley's prostitutes)
- neighbours in her lodgings, and so on.

Who is to blame?

Who is to blame for Eva's death? Consider how each of the Birlings and Gerald Croft influences what happens to Eva - what part does each play in the chain of events leading to her death?

Give an account of this chain of events in the order in which each event occurs (see dates above).

- Say how far each character is at fault for what he or she has done to Eva.
- Then judge how far each is right or wrong in his or her attitude now to what was done - admitting or denying guilt.
- In conclusion, try to assess how responsible, and how ready to admit responsibility, each of the five is.
- Is there any connection between the age of each character and his or her readiness to accept blame?

Responsibility

The most important theme of the play, it could be argued, is responsibility. See how often the words 'responsible' and 'responsibility' appear, and in what senses.

At the beginning of the play Mr. Birling gives his (limited) view of responsibility in a long speech. Mr. Birling's definition of responsibility is immediately followed by the arrival of the Inspector. The Inspector gives his (very wide) explanation of responsibility immediately before he leaves. Comment on these speeches and compare them.

Consider how Mr. Birling's comments reveal his views:

- How do Mr. Birling's earlier comments on the unlikelihood of war, the probable success of capitalists in eliminating strikes and on the unsinkability of the Titanic affect our view of what he says on responsibility? (The play's audience, in 1946, would be aware of two world wars, the General Strike and the sinking of the Titanic).
- Is Mr. Birling a 'hard-headed' businessman, as he claims, or a 'hard-hearted' character?

In 1912 there was no welfare state in Britain. Poor people often depended on charity. But wealthy people, such as Mrs. Birling, in the play, usually controlled the charity.

- Does Mrs. Birling, in her work for the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation act out of a sense of responsibility or a desire to be seen to be charitable?
- Where does she claim the responsibility for Eva Smith and her unborn child lies?
- How is she shown to be wrong?

Show how the Inspector demonstrates by bringing out Eva's dealings with the Birlings and Gerald, that his view, not Birling's is right.

- What are the "fire and blood and anguish" he refers to in his final speech?
- What point is Priestley making by placing this line in a play published in 1946?

The Inspector's identity may affect how we view his comments.

- How is our view of the Inspector's statements affected by his apparently supernatural character?
- Comment on his claim that 'we are members of one body'.

After he leaves, says the Inspector, the Birlings and Gerald can divide responsibility among themselves.

- How do they apportion blame when he leaves?
- Is Birling concerned about the same things that worry Sheila and Eric?

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Sheila is worried earlier in the play by her mother's self-righteous denial of blame. After the Inspector goes she is worried by the attempt to dismiss his visit as a mere practical joke.

- Consider the idea that the Inspector, by his visit, gives the family a second chance which is lost by the failure of the majority to learn their lesson.
- How significant in determining the play's conclusion is Gerald's eventually siding with the view of the parents (The Inspector has foreseen a suicide about to happen. They may, by a change of heart, prevent it - but the chance is missed and the suicide occurs).

Who is the Inspector?

Who or what is the Inspector? In the text there are many clues. Examine each of these and try to interpret it. Write an essay, discussing how these clues and the Inspector's general behaviour contribute to the audience's idea of who he is and how correct his statements are.

The clues are:

- The timing of his entry (noted by Eric).
- His asking Birling why he refused Eva's request for a pay rise.
- His statement that it is his duty 'to ask questions'.
- His saying that he never takes offence.
- His statement that he does not see much of the chief constable.
- His failure to be alarmed by Birling's threats.
- His reply to Birling's question 'You sure of your facts?' 'Some of them – yes'. Not all, because not all have happened yet: Eva Smith has not yet killed herself, it would seem.
- His concern for moral law not for criminal law.
- His statement 'some things are left to me. Inquiries of this sort, for instance.'
- Sheila's recognition of his authority and supernatural knowledge - as shown in her warnings to Gerald and to her mother.
- His statement about the impression he has made on Sheila: 'We often do on the young ones.'
- His impatience to 'get on' with his questioning followed by his statement that he hasn't 'much time'. A police officer would take as much time as was needed. It is as if he needs to finish before the moment at which Eva will decide whether or not to end her life.
- His saying, 'I don't need to know any more', once he has shown the Birlings and Gerald what each has done.
- His final speech, which has nothing to do with criminal law, but which is a lecture on social responsibility and the perils of ignoring it.
- The Birlings' discovery that no such officer is on the local police force.
- The Inspector's telling Sheila there is 'no reason why' she should 'understand about' him.
- Eric's saying 'He was our police inspector all right' followed by Sheila's comment 'Well, he inspected us all right.'
- His foreknowledge of Eva's death.
- His intimate knowledge of Eva's life, despite the fact that he never spoke to her.
- His prediction of a massive social catastrophe ('fire and blood and anguish') which clearly refers (for the Birlings) to the First World War and (for the audience) to both World Wars.

In the 1954 film of *An Inspector Calls*, the Inspector does not leave the Birlings' house as in the play: he is left alone in Mr. Birling's study; Birling returns to ask him a question, and finds the room empty. Is this too blatant a way of suggesting that the Inspector is some kind of supernatural or angelic being? Some commentators on the play have suggested that his name contains a pun - it sounds like 'Ghoul'.

A 'ghoul' is an evil demon, which eats the flesh of the dead, or, metaphorically, a person obsessed by, or who profits by, another's death. After he has gone the Inspector is said by Birling to have exploited Eva's alleged death to frighten the 'victims' of his supposed practical joke. Is it more important to know who the Inspector is, or what he has to say? Should Priestley (the playwright) have made him more obviously spooky?

Write an essay discussing the character of the Inspector, his method of discovering the truth, the effect he has on each of the other characters, both while he is with them and after he has gone. Give your view of who (or what) he is, and why you think this.

What next?

At the end of the play there are many possibilities, and we cannot say with certainty what might happen.

- Will the Birlings try to persuade their children to conceal the truth from the real Inspector who is coming?
- Will Sheila and Eric insist on openness?
- Where will Gerald stand now? (After his clever theory has been disproved - will he realise that Daisy Renton told him of her two sackings? He knew that at least Mr. Birling, Sheila and himself had all influenced the same girl!)

Continue the story either as a play-script or as a third-person narrative with conversation. You may, if you wish, continue beyond the arrival of the real police officer. He or she, of course, is not likely to exert the same power over the Birlings and Gerald as the Inspector of the play has.

1912 and 1946

This task is suitable for treatment as a written or spoken response. You should consider the question of why a play first performed in 1946 should be set in 1912. Why does Priestley choose this particular time?

In order to answer this you should consider the following points.

- The play opens with a scene of great luxury: a wealthy family is celebrating an engagement in a very lavish fashion. This will be obvious to an audience that has spent the years of the Second World War without the luxuries that the Birlings are so abundantly enjoying (rationing of many luxury - and basic - goods continued into the 1950s).
- Although Churchill (a Conservative) is seen as a war hero for leading the fight against Nazism (he led a coalition government of Labour, Conservative and Liberal elements) a Socialist government has won a landslide victory in the 1945 General Election. Priestley was a supporter of the Labour party, and made many broadcasts on radio in which he tried to persuade people of the merits of socialism.

In order to do this, Priestley sets the play in a time before there was a welfare state in the United Kingdom, and when employers had great power over their workers.

Lower costs and higher prices

- What is the playwright's view of Mr. Birling's enthusiasm for joining the two wealthy families of Croft and Birling, and his hope that they can work together for 'lower costs and higher prices'?
- Lower costs are mostly achieved by paying the workers less. Would the audience see this as a good thing?
- How would ordinary people feel about higher prices?

The Crofts and the Birlings

- Are the two families exactly alike? What differences can you find between Mr. Birling and the Crofts?
- Why are the Crofts not present at the celebration?
- Comment on the telegram that Sir George and Lady Croft have sent to the Birlings.

Mr. Birling's idea of progress

- What is Mr. Birling's view of the likely results of technological change (see his comments on cars and aeroplanes)?
- Is he right to link scientific advances with progress in politics and international relations? Why does he believe that there will be no war? How far do we trust his judgement? What do we know that he does not about the future? Consider his comment that the Titanic is unsinkable.

Being above the law (or playing golf with the Chief Constable)

- How does the time in which the play is set enable Priestley to portray Mr. Birling as a man who can use his influence to stop the Inspector from continuing with his investigation?
- How would an audience view the idea that the rules that apply to ordinary people do not apply to the Birlings of this world?
- Do you know of anyone like Mr. Birling (in your own world, in the past, or in fiction), who believes he or she is above the law?

Charity and the welfare state

Because this is 1912, there is no system of benefit payments for impoverished people; Eva has to approach a committee of which Mrs. Birling is the chairman, but is refused help.

- Show how Mrs. Birling exploits her position to make her feel self-important, while denying help to those who really need it.
- Do you think she does this for genuinely charitable reasons, or for other motives?
- What might these be?
- Mrs. Birling claims that her organisation has done a lot of good work in deserving cases. Is a deserving case, in her opinion, one of genuine need, or one where the applicant pleases her?

Young men and wild oats

This play depicts a common situation from the early years of the 20th century - young women from the middle classes would not be sexually active before marriage. This has nothing to do with virtue - but much to do with securing a good match. (After marrying, or even becoming widowed or divorced, middle-class and wealthy women could be more active if they chose.) But poorer women could sometimes be seduced in return for material rewards (that would not be so attractive to those with wealth of their own).

- How does Gerald's relationship with Eva reflect the moral attitudes of his class at this time?
- Do you think that it is right for Gerald to begin his affair with Eva, when he has no real commitment to her, and would not consider marrying her?
- Why can Gerald not marry Eva, and why is he quite ready to marry Sheila Birling, when it is obvious that he does not really love her?
- What do we learn from the various references in the play to the Palace Theatre, 'women of the town' and the woman who wanted Eva to go to the Theatre bar?
- How does Eric's relationship with Eva reinforce the idea that women of Eva's class can be used as playthings by the wealthy, and then discarded?

The customer is always right

Sheila is able to have Eva sacked from Millwards' shop by threatening the manager that her family will close its account there unless Eva goes.

- How does this reflect the class system of the time, by showing the enormous influence that a few wealthy people could exercise?
- Could the manager have refused?

Silver spoons and spoilt brats

Eric and Sheila have great faults, of which they become ashamed when the Inspector tells them of Eva's fate.

- How far are these faults not so much in the children's nature, as the result of the way they have been brought up?
- What do we learn about Eric's education, and why might this explain his lack of responsibility?

The honours system

At the start of the play, Mr. Birling hints to Gerald, that he will soon be knighted (become Sir Arthur Birling) in return for his work in the Conservative Party.

- What is the importance in the play of Mr. Birling's knighthood?
- Mr. Birling is concerned when he learns of Eva's death - is he more concerned for Eva's suffering or for his knighthood? What does this tell you?
- Do you think it right that Mr. Birling should be given a knighthood in return for his active support of a political party?

Conclusion

When you have looked at all of these ideas, you should consider the question in a more general sense.

- The Inspector, in his final speech, tries to show how both the First World War, and the Second, which had just ended when Priestley wrote the play, were the result of attitudes and behaviour such as those of powerful and wealthy families like the Birlings.
- This may explain why all the worst features of such families seem to be present in the Birlings: they represent the worst qualities of their class.
- Do you think Priestley has made the play's argument more convincing by the inclusion in it of such people, or are they too awful to be believable?
- This play is set in 1912. In what ways might you argue that it has a relevance, not only to the Britain of 1946, but also to the country as it is today?

Use of evidence

This is critical. Always give examples or refer to details in the story to support your comments. You may use quotation, too: lots of short quotation (where the point of quoting is obvious) is better than very lengthy quotations of less obvious relevance. When you quote, introduce with a comma or colon (, or :), and enclose what you quote in inverted commas.