

# 'An Inspector Calls'



Name .....

Teacher .....

# About the playwright - J.B. Priestley

John Boynton Priestley was born in Yorkshire in 1894. He knew early on that he wanted to become a writer, but decided against going to university as he thought he would get a better feel for the world around him away from education. Instead, he became a junior clerk with a local wool firm at the age of 16.

When the First World War broke out, Priestley joined the army and only just escaped death on a number of occasions.

After the war, he gained a degree from Cambridge University, then moved to London to work as a writer. He wrote successful articles and essays, then published the first of many novels, *The Good Companions* in 1929. He wrote his first play in 1932 and went on to write 50 more. Much of his writing was ground-breaking and controversial. He included new ideas about possible parallel universes and strong political messages. He continued to write into the 1970s, and died in 1984.

## Political Views

During the 1930's Priestley became very concerned about the consequences of social inequality in Britain. Priestley was influential in developing the idea of the Welfare State which began to be put into place at the end of the war. He believed that further world wars could only be avoided through cooperation and mutual respect between countries, and so became active in the early movement for a United Nations.



## Ideas that influenced Priestley

Priestley was influenced by the Russian mystic philosopher Peter Ouspensky (1878-1947). Ouspensky believed in the theory of eternal recurrence. This is a theory that holds to the concept that the universe has been recurring, and will continue to recur in a self-similar form an infinite number of times (everything happens again and again and again).

Ouspensky believed that our time on the planet was spent travelling along an ever-recurring spiral and that the aim of all individuals should be to change and improve this spiral and stop making the same old mistakes. In all our lives we are presented with opportunities to learn and change and therefore swing out in a new direction.

The Inspector comes back from the future or from some place outside time to offer the Birlings an opportunity to change – an opportunity they appear not to take. In the end they have learned nothing and so will have to go through it all over again.

# Plot Summary of 'An Inspector Calls'

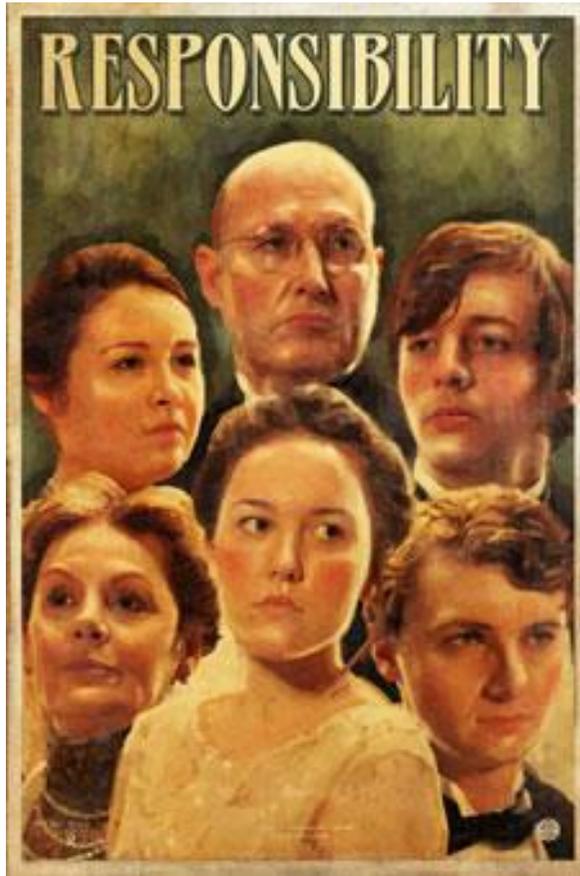
## Act One

On a spring evening in 1912, the prosperous Birling family celebrates the engagement of their daughter to a promising young businessman. They make a toast to the future and individual prosperity. However, an unexpected caller quickly turns their merriment to bewilderment with the news of a young woman's tragic death. The inspector's enquiry - who is responsible? As the evening unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that the innocence of everyone in the room is in question.

## Act Two

## Act Three

# Responsibility



In *An Inspector Calls*, the central theme is responsibility. Priestley is interested in our personal responsibility for our own actions and our collective responsibility to society. The play explores the effect of class, age and sex on people's attitudes to responsibility, and shows how prejudice can prevent people from acting responsibly.

The words *responsible* and *responsibility* are used by most characters in the play at some point. Each member of the family has a different attitude to responsibility. The Inspector wanted each member of the family to share the responsibility of Eva's death: he tells them, "each of you helped to kill her." However, his final speech is aimed not only at the characters on stage, but at the audience too:

"One Eva Smith has gone - but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do."

The Inspector is talking about a collective responsibility, everyone in society is linked, in the same way that the characters are linked to Eva Smith. Everyone is a part of "one body", the Inspector sees society as more important than individual interests. The views he is propounding are like those of Priestley who was a socialist. He adds a clear warning about what could happen if, like some members of the family, we ignore our responsibility:

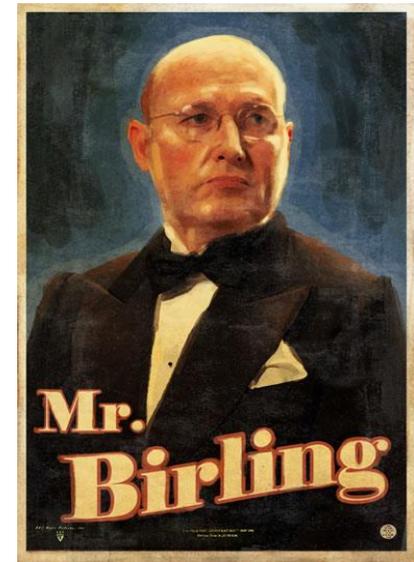
"And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, when they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish."

## Key words:

- Gender Stereotypes (how men and women were expected to behave)
- Social class (position in society)
- Victim
- Prejudice (treating someone unfairly because of race/class)
- Morality (doing the right thing)

# Mr. Arthur Birling

- He is described at the start as a "heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties but rather provincial in his speech."
- He has worked his way up in the world and is proud of his achievements. He boasts about having been Mayor and tries (and fails) to impress the Inspector with his local standing and his influential friends.
- However, he is aware of people who are his social superiors, which is why he shows off about the port to Gerald, "it's exactly the same port your father gets." He is proud that he is likely to be knighted, as that would move him even higher in social circles.
- He claims the party "is one of the happiest nights of my life." This is not only because Sheila will be happy, but because a merger with Crofts Limited will be good for his business.
- He is optimistic for the future and confident that there will not be a war. As the audience knows there will be a war, we begin to doubt Mr Birling's judgement. (If he is wrong about the war, what else will he be wrong about?)
- He is extremely selfish:
- He wants to protect himself and his family. He believes that socialist ideas that stress the importance of the community are "nonsense" and that "a man has to make his own way."
- He wants to protect Birling and Co. He cannot see that he did anything wrong when he fired Eva Smith - he was just looking after his business interests.
- He wants to protect his reputation. As the Inspector's investigations continue, his selfishness gets the better of him: he is worried about how the press will view the story in Act II, and accuses Sheila of disloyalty at the start of Act III. He wants to hide the fact that Eric stole money: "I've got to cover this up as soon as I can."
- At the end of the play, he knows he has lost the chance of his knighthood, his reputation in Brumley and the chance of Birling and Co. merging with their rivals. Yet he hasn't learnt the lesson of the play: he is unable to admit his responsibility for his part in Eva's death.



## Your Ideas Page for Mr. Birling

<i>Key quotations/stage directions</i>	<i>Links to themes or historical background</i>
<i>Vocabulary/literary techniques to use</i>	<i>Ideas for topic sentences</i>

# Mrs. Sybil Birling

- She is described at the start as "about fifty, a rather cold woman and her husband's social superior."
- She is a snob, very aware of the differences between social classes. She is irritated when Mr Birling makes the social gaffe of praising the cook in front of Gerald and later is very dismissive of Eva, saying "Girls of that class."
- She has the least respect for the Inspector of all the characters. She tries - unsuccessfully - to intimidate him and force him to leave, then lies to him when she claims that she does not recognise the photograph that he shows her.
- She sees Sheila and Eric still as "children" and speaks patronisingly to them.
- She tries to deny things that she doesn't want to believe: Eric's drinking, Gerald's affair with Eva, and the fact that a working class girl would refuse money even if it was stolen, claiming "She was giving herself ridiculous airs."
- She admits she was "prejudiced" against the girl who applied to her committee for help and saw it as her "duty" to refuse to help her. Her narrow sense of morality dictates that the father of a child should be responsible for its welfare, regardless of circumstances.
- At the end of the play, she has had to come to terms that her son is a heavy drinker who got a girl pregnant and stole money to support her, her daughter will not marry a good social 'catch' and that her own reputation within the town will be sullied. Yet, like her husband, she refuses to believe that she did anything wrong and doesn't accept responsibility for her part in Eva's death.



## THEME REMINDER!

### Age vs. Youth

The older generation and the younger generation take the Inspector's message in different ways. While Sheila and Eric accept their part in Eva's death and feel huge guilt about it, their parents are unable to admit that they did anything wrong.

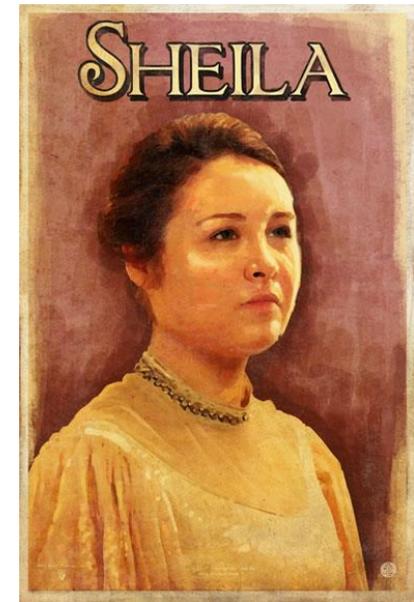
Gerald Croft is caught in the middle, being neither very young nor old. In the end he sides with the older generation, perhaps because his aristocratic roots influence him to want to keep the status quo and protect his own interests.

Ultimately, we can be optimistic that the young - those who will shape future society - are able to take on board the Inspector's message.

## Your Ideas Page for Mrs. Birling

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# Sheila Birling



- She is described at the start as "a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited."
- Even though she seems very playful at the opening, we know that she has had suspicions about Gerald when she mentions "last summer, when you never came near me." Does this suggest that she is not as naive and shallow as she first appears?
- Although she has probably never before considered the conditions of the workers, she shows her **compassion** immediately when she hears of her father's treatment of Eva Smith: "But these girls aren't cheap labour - they're **people.**" Already, she is starting to change.
- She is horrified by her own part in Eva's story. She feels **guilt** for her jealous actions and blames herself as "really responsible."
- She is very **perceptive**: she realises that Gerald knew Daisy Renton from his reaction, the moment the Inspector mentioned her name. At the end of Act II, she is the first to realise Eric's part in the story. Significantly, she is the first to wonder who the Inspector really is, saying to him, 'wonderingly', "I don't understand about you." She warns the others "he's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves" (Act II) and, near the end, is the first to consider whether the Inspector may not be real.
- She is **curious**. She genuinely wants to know about Gerald's part in the story. It's interesting that she is not angry with him when she hears about the affair: she says that she respects his honesty. She is becoming **more mature**.
- She is **angry** with her parents in Act 3 for trying to "pretend that nothing much has happened." Sheila says "It frightens me the way you talk:" she cannot understand how they cannot have learnt from the evening in the same way that she has. She is seeing her parents in a new, unfavourable light.
- At the end of the play, Sheila is much **wiser**. She can now judge her parents and Gerald from a new perspective, but the greatest change has been in herself: her social conscience has been awakened and she is aware of her responsibilities.

## THEME REMINDER!

### *Gender/Presentation of Women*

Because Eva was a woman - in the days before women were valued by society and had not yet been awarded the right to vote - she was in an even worse position than a lower class man. Even upper class women had few choices. For most, the best they could hope for was to impress a rich man and marry well - which could explain why Sheila spent so long in Milwards.

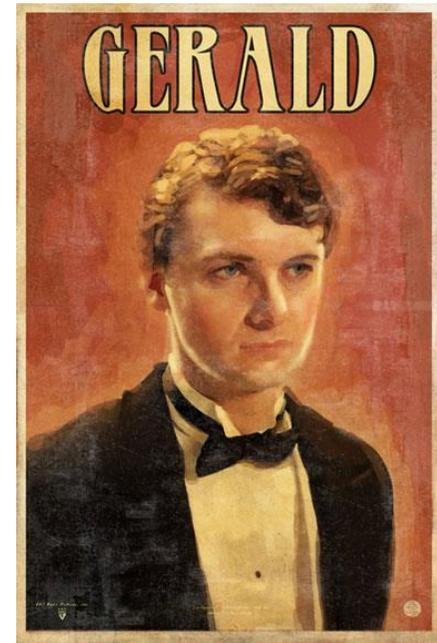
For working class women, a job was crucial. There was no social security at that time, so without a job they had no money. There were very few options open to women in that situation: many saw no alternative but to turn to prostitution.

## Your Ideas Page for Sheila

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# Gerald Croft

- He is described as "an attractive chap about thirty, rather too manly to be a dandy but very much the easy well-bred man-about-town."
- He is an aristocrat - the son of Lord and Lady Croft. We realise that they are not over-impressed by Gerald's engagement to Sheila because they declined the invitation to the dinner.
- He is not as willing as Sheila to admit his part in the girl's death to the Inspector and initially pretends that he never knew her. Is he a bit like Mr Birling, wanting to protect his own interests?
- He did have some genuine feeling for Daisy Renton, however: he is very moved when he hears of her death. He tells Inspector Goole that he arranged for her to live in his friend's flat "because I was sorry for her;" she became his mistress because "She was young and pretty and warm-hearted - and intensely grateful."
- Despite this, in Act 3 he tries to come up with as much evidence as possible to prove that the Inspector is a fake - because that would get him off the hook. It is Gerald who confirms that the local force has no officer by the name of Goole, he who realises it may not have been the same girl and he who finds out from the infirmary that there has not been a suicide case in months. He seems to throw his energies into "protecting" himself rather than "changing" himself (unlike Sheila).
- At the end of the play, he has not changed. He has not gained a new sense of social responsibility, which is why Sheila (who has) is unsure whether to take back the engagement ring.



## THEME REMINDER!

### Class

Apart from Edna the maid, the cast of the play does not include any lower class characters. We see only the rich, upwardly mobile Birlings and the upper class Gerald Croft. Yet we *learn* a lot about the lower class as we hear of each stage in Eva's life and we see the attitude the Birlings had for them.

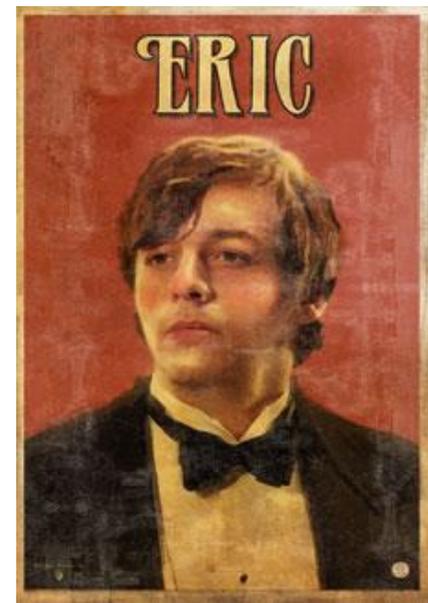
Priestley is trying to show that the upper classes are unaware that the easy lives they lead rest upon hard work of the lower classes.

## Your Ideas Page for Gerald

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# Eric Birling

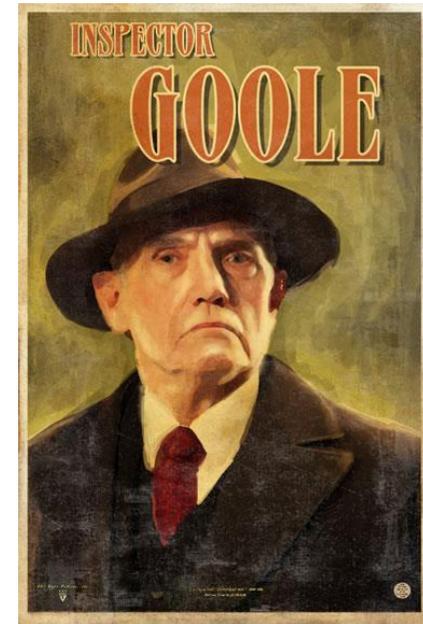
- He is described at the start as "in his early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive."
- Eric seems embarrassed and awkward right from the start. The first mention of him in the script is "Eric suddenly guffaws," and then he is unable to explain his laughter, as if he is nervous about something. (It is not until the final act that we realise this must be because of his having stolen some money.) There is another awkward moment when Gerald, Birling and Eric are chatting about women's love of clothes before the Inspector arrives. Do you feel that there is tension in Eric's relationship with his father?
- It soon becomes clear to us (although it takes his parents longer) that he is a hardened drinker. Gerald admits, "I have gathered that he does drink pretty hard."
- When he hears how his father sacked Eva Smith, he supports the worker's cause, like Sheila. "Why shouldn't they try for higher wages?"
- He feels guilt and frustration with himself over his relationship with the girl. He cries, "Oh - my God! - how stupid it all is!" as he tells his story. He is horrified that his thoughtless actions had such consequences.
- He had some innate sense of responsibility, though, because although he got a woman pregnant, he was concerned enough to give her money. He was obviously less worried about stealing (or 'borrowing' from his father's office) than he was about the girl's future. So, was Eric, initially, the most socially aware member of the Birling family?
- He is appalled by his parents' inability to admit their own responsibility. He tells them forcefully, "I'm ashamed of you." When Birling tries to threaten him in Act III, Eric is aggressive in return: "I don't give a damn now." Do you think Eric has ever stood up to his father in this way before?
- At the end of the play, like Sheila, he is fully aware of his social responsibility. He is not interested in his parents' efforts to cover everything up: as far as he is concerned, the important thing is that a girl is dead. "We did her in all right."



# Your Ideas Page for Eric

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# Inspector Goole



- He is described on his entrance as creating "an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness. He is a man in his fifties, dressed in a plain darkish suit. He speaks carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking."
- He works very systematically; he likes to deal with "one person and one line of enquiry at a time." His method is to confront a suspect with a piece of information and then make them talk - or, as Sheila puts it, "he's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves."
- He is a figure of authority. He deals with each member of the family very firmly and several times we see him "massively taking charge as disputes erupt between them." He is not impressed when he hears about Mr Birling's influential friends and he cuts through Mrs Birling's obstructiveness.
- He seems to know and understand an extraordinary amount: he knows the history of Eva Smith and the Birlings' involvement in it, even though she died only hours ago. Sheila tells Gerald, "Of course he knows."
- He knows things are going to happen - He says "I'm waiting... To do my duty" just before Eric's return, as if he expected Eric to reappear at exactly that moment
- He is obviously in a great hurry towards the end of the play: he stresses "I haven't much time." Does he know that the real inspector is shortly going to arrive?
- His final speech is like a sermon or a politician's. He leaves the family with the message "We are responsible for each other" and warns them of the "fire and blood and anguish" that will result if they do not pay attention to what he has taught them.
- All this mystery suggests that the Inspector is not a 'real' person. So, what is he?
  - ? Is he a ghost? Goole reminds us of 'ghoul'.
  - ? Is he the voice of Priestley?
  - ? Is he the voice of God?
  - ? Is he the voice of all our consciences?
  - ? Do you have any other suggestions?

# Your Ideas Page for Inspector Goole

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# Historical and Context

'An Inspector Calls' was written in 1945 just after the Second World War, a time of great change and opportunity. Throughout the play, J.B. Priestley encouraged his audiences to take the opportunities for progress available to them. He wanted the public to reject the values of early twentieth century Britain and build a new, more equal society out of the ruins of the second world war.

Priestley sets his play 33 years earlier in 1912, the era of the Titanic, just before World War One. This was before the days of the welfare state when Britain was a country of great social inequality and deeply divided by class.

## Socialism

- In theory, this system results in the divide between classes getting smaller, with the poorest of a nation's people getting better taken care of while the richest make sacrifices in terms of higher taxes and regulation of business
- Where people work together to gain a fair standard of living
- Traditional views of the labour party
- The views of Priestley, Bernard Shaw & H G Wells
- The view of living together and looking out for each other
- Thinks people should share their wealth
- Equal access to resources for all

## Capitalism

- Capitalism is an economic system where things are owned by people or an individual and where people have to work for money
- People may sell or lend their property, and other people may buy or borrow them. If one person wants to buy, and another person wants to sell to them, they do not need to get permission from higher power
- It has the view that if you work hard you will be rewarded
- Everyone should pay their own tax
- The poor should work harder to earn more