

SUBJECT: English

UNIT: GCSE English Literature *An Inspector Calls*

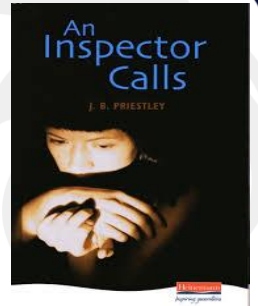


Overview and Context

A play written by J.B Priestley in 1945 and set in England in 1912.

1912 - Pre WW1-Britain had a strict social hierarchy in which the people who held the most power were wealthy white men. The social model was both patriarchal and Capitalist.

1945 - Post WW1 and WW2 had less defined class distinctions because the WWs had meant that people of all classes were forced to work together and suffer the same tribulations. Following WW2 and the social reforms that followed, the NHS was founded so that good healthcare should be available to all, regardless of wealth.



Plot Summary

Act 1: The Birling family and Gerald Croft are celebrating Sheila Birling's engagement to Gerald with a dinner. Mr Arthur Birling, Sheila's father, is particularly pleased since the marriage means closer links with Crofts Limited which is run by Gerald's father. When the women leave the room, Mr Birling lectures his son, Eric Birling, and Gerald about the importance of every man looking out for himself if he wants to get on in life. The doorbell rings unexpectedly during Mr Birling's speech to Eric and Gerald, they were not expecting a visitor. Edna Maid (the maid) announces that an inspector has arrived. Inspector Goole says that he is investigating the death of a young woman who committed suicide, Eva Smith. Mr Birling is shown a photograph of Eva, after initially denying recognising the woman in the photo, he remembers firing her in 1910 for organising a strike over workers' pay. Birling feels justified for his actions and does not believe he committed any wrongdoing. Inspector Goole moves the investigation over to Sheila. Sheila recalls also having Eva sacked about her manner when served by her in an upmarket department store (Eva smirked to another shop assistant about the dress Sheila tried). Sheila regrets her actions and feels hugely guilty and responsible for Eva's death. The Inspector reveals that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald acts guilty and Sheila notices his worry, she confronts Gerald when the Inspector leaves the room. Gerald reveals to Sheila he had an affair with Daisy Renton.

Act 2: Gerald explains to the Inspector that he had an affair with Daisy (Eva), but hasn't seen her since he ended their relationship back in Autumn 1911. Sheila gives her engagement ring back to Gerald. The Inspector turns his attention to Mrs Sybil Birling, she confesses that she also had contact with Eva, but Eva called herself Mrs Birling. Eva approached a charity chaired by Mrs Birling to ask for help. Eva was desperate and pregnant but help was refused by Mrs Birling because she was offended by the girl calling herself 'Mrs Birling'. She tells Eva that the baby's father should be made entirely responsible. She also tells Inspector Goole that the father should be held entirely responsible and should be made an example of.

Act 3: Eric is revealed as the father. He stole money from Mr Birling's office to provide money to Eva. Eric is angry at his mother when he learns that she has refused to help Eva. The Inspector tells them that they are all partly to blame for Eva's death and warns them of the consequences of people not being responsible for each other, "If men will not learn that lesson, when they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish". After Inspector Goole leaves, the family begin to suspect that he was not a genuine police inspector. A phone call to the Chief Constable confirms this. Next, they phone the infirmary to be informed that no suicide case has been brought in. Mr Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald congratulate themselves that it was all a hoax and they continue as before. This attitude upsets Sheila and Eric. The phone rings. Mr Birling announces to the family that a girl has just died on her way to the infirmary and a police inspector is coming to question them.

Key Vocabulary

Capitalism: an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state. Capitalism advocates the advance of the individual and the construction of social hierarchies based on wealth, status and power.

Socialism: a political and economic theory of social organisation which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole. The basis of Socialism are the ideas of collective responsibility, community and equality. Socialism advocates the advance of the collective.

Didactic: intended to teach, particularly in having moral instruction as an ulterior motive.

Omniscient: knowing everything; godlike.

Omnipotent: all powerful.

Allegorical: constituting or containing allegory (a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one).

Altruistic: showing a disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others; unselfish.

Hypocritical: behaving in a way that suggests one has higher standards or more noble beliefs than is the case.

Patriarchy: a society which is ruled by and for the benefit of males.