



An Inspector Calls Tour 2015 by Mark Douet (The Lowry, Salford on Flickr)

An Inspector Calls : Core Knowledge HOMEWORK

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How does Priestley present the difference in attitudes of the older and younger generations?

What contextual knowledge do I need to fully understand An Inspector Calls?

Class System 1912 - A class system is a way of dividing people into categories based upon their social, economic, or educational status.

Lower class : This class consisted of people that were perhaps homeless or unemployed.

Working class : This class of people were employed but often in poorly paid jobs.

Middle class : This class lived fairly comfortably and would usually have a job which offered some responsibility.

Upper class : This class of people were extremely wealthy and were often referred to as the bourgeoisie because of their materialistic wealth.

In 1912, the class system in Edwardian society was extremely rigid.

Those from the upper classes were forbidden to marry those from the lower classes. This sort of behaviour could destroy reputations.

The extent of your wealth and your family name would determine your class. Those in the lower classes often experienced many injustices. It was a society that was ruled by **capitalism**.

Capitalism is an economic and political system where trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.

Socialism is a political, economic and social system which states that all people are equal and should share equally in a country's wealth.

How were the lives of the rich and poor different?

- ✓ Industrialists gained most of the wealth. Laws favoured factory owners.
- ✓ Poorer people lived in overcrowded slums, were poorly paid and had poor working conditions.

What were the experiences of women in 1912?

- ✓ Women were fighting for their rights
- ✓ Women's wages were one third to one half of men's wages
- ✓ If women didn't have a job, they were expected to look after their home and husband.
- ✓ Women couldn't get a divorce. If they did, the children became the property of the husband.
- ✓ Women who had multiple partners were 'ruined'.
- ✓ Unmarried women with babies seen as shameful.
- ✓ No welfare state so unmarried mothers had to rely on charities for help.

How did the First World War affect British Society?

Class barriers started to be broken down because a whole generation of men had died and women had started to do more varied jobs.

- ✓ By 1946, the **class system** had started to become less rigid.
- ✓ During WW2, men from different classes had fought alongside each other in the trenches and this diluted class divisions.
- ✓ People wanted to work together to rebuild a new society and **socialism** was on the rise.
- ✓ By 1928, all men and women over the age of twenty-one were allowed to vote. This gave the lower classes more power in society.
- ✓ The Labour party won the General Election in **1945** by a huge majority.
- ✓ Labour aimed to improve the welfare system and build a fairer society.
- ✓ **Socialist** ideology was building momentum in British society but also in other places around the world, such as during **The Russian Revolution in 1917**, in which Communists overthrew the Tsar in Russia.

In 1912, the Liberal Party was in power in Britain. This political party supported laissez-faire economics. This type of economics meant that the government wouldn't intervene with the economy. Laissez-faire economics are ideal for **capitalism** as it gives power to the free market, enabling **capitalists** to make as much profit as possible despite the negative impact upon the lower and working classes.

The General Strike 1926: Britain saw the largest strike on record when over a million miners downed their tools. They were fighting for fairer wages and better working conditions. In solidarity, huge numbers from other industries joined the strike, such as dock workers and bus drivers.

Birling states in Act One that the conflict between the workers and their employers will amount to nothing. Priestley creates **dramatic irony** here as the audience of 1946 know how severe the strikes in 1926 were and so immediately view Birling as **foolish** and **naive**.

The Labour Party was elected into government in the 1945 and they aimed to bring about a more socialist society. This was a dramatic change of government, diluting the power of **capitalism** in Britain.

Who was JB Priestley?

- Born in Bradford in 1894.
- In 1910, Priestley started work in a textile mill and saw, first hand, the inequality and poor working conditions.

Joined the army and was badly injured in 1916 in a collapsed trench.

Broadcaster and author – promoted Socialist views. Priestley became an early advocate of **socialism** after partaking in discussions with his father's socialist friends. Not long after the outbreak of WW2, Priestley began broadcasting for the Sunday night proscribers on BBC radio; these broadcasts consisted of talks about the conditions of wartime and criticisms of the current government. Priestley's radio broadcasts were soon cancelled because they were seen to be too critical of the government. In 1942, Priestley became the co-founder of the **socialist** Common Wealth Party and this would influence much of his writing.

Priestley had previously joined the infantry in WW1 and had narrowly escaped death when a shell exploded near him. Therefore, Priestley has experienced human sacrifice first hand. He witnessed men and women of all classes beginning to work together during this time. In his play 'An Inspector Calls', Priestley uses the character of Mr Birling to make a mockery of the early 20th century attitudes towards war. Priestley uses **dramatic irony** to allow the 1946 audience to reflect upon the ignorant attitudes of 1912.

What was JB Priestley's intent when writing An Inspector Calls?

Why does Priestley set the play in 1912?

In his play *An Inspector Calls* Priestley criticises the **ignorance** and **greed** of the **upper classes** and he uses the play to call for change in the 1946 post-war society.

In 1912, there was a rigid class system which categorised the wealthy as **upper class** and the poor as **lower or working class**.

Priestley set the play in 1912 and this was during the second **Industrial Revolution** which lasted from the mid-19th century until the early **20th century**. Priestley deliberately set the play during this time because capitalism was at its height. Capitalists profited greatly from the **Industrial Revolution** as it allowed them to prosper without moral consequence. The **bourgeoisie** enjoyed luxury and wealth, whilst the lower and working classes were ruthlessly exploited and suffered greatly, working long hours with little reward.

Priestley creates the Birling family represent the upper classes in 1912. They are **caricatures of capitalists**: he exaggerates their **selfish, greedy** ways in order to make a mockery of them. They lack social responsibility, promote capitalism and are fixated upon power and material wealth. Priestley highlights the injustices and suffering felt by the working classes in the play.

The Birlings are a microcosm of the upper classes in Edwardian society:

Priestley uses the play to show that often the upper classes in Edwardian society viewed the lower and working classes as morally inferior. Priestley directly challenges this idea by showcasing the sin and lack of morality within the Birling family and amongst their upper-class associates.

The play opens with the celebration of Gerald and Sheila's engagement. We would expect this to be a joyful time; however, Priestley indicates early on in the play that there are underlying tensions between the couple. We discover that Sheila didn't see much of Gerald last summer and this begins to raise suspicions.

Priestley conveys the idea that the older generation have less chance of changing their prejudiced attitude, thereby using Mr and Mrs Birling to represent this ignorant demographic.

Priestley uses the Birling family as a representation of a middle-class family in Britain in the twentieth century. This is reflected in the very make-up of the family itself with the conventional image of the nuclear family seeking to reflect a stereotypical image of family in this era. Because of this, Priestley is able to use this family in order to convey a message and to direct this message to those whom he specifically wished to address: the middle class.

How does Priestley use stage direction, set design and props to explore his message about capitalism?

Set design

Priestley sets the action in the play in one room. On the surface this makes the Birling family appear to be close but the audience soon begin to see that Priestley sets the stage in this way to create an uncomfortable scene. Within this one setting, Priestley begins peel back the **facade** to reveal the Birling's **fractious** relationships and their sinful behaviour. The close proximity of the staging adds to this **tension** on stage.

In Stephen Daldry's production of the play in 1992, he chose to position the house on stilts, which symbolised the **unsteadiness** of the Birling's relationships. It also suggested that the Birling's high social status could easily plummet.

Lighting and props

In Priestley's initial stage directions, he sets a dinner scene which includes a **decanter of port, cigars, champagne and dessert plates**. These props are used to set a scene of gluttony and to showcase that the Birlings are obsessed by material wealth and social class.

Priestley focuses heavily upon the initial lighting on stage:

The lighting should be pink and intimate until the INSPECTOR arrives and then it should be brighter and harder

The initial pink lighting is in place to symbolise the Birling's ignorance and it creates the idea that the Birlings look at the world through 'rose tinted glasses', which once again highlights their selfishness
Patriarchal society:

How does Priestley use the character of Mr Birling to explore his criticism of Capitalism?

Priestley believed strongly in the need for social reform and therefore used the character of Mr Birling to make a mockery of **capitalism**. Birling's early speeches are important because they highlights his dangerous, **capitalist mindset**. Mr Birling is a **microcosm** of upper-class **capitalism** and so Priestley uses Birling's initial speeches to make a **mockery** of this ideology.

As the play develops, the audience witness the moral implications of Birling's attitude. Like many capitalists, Birling thinks that he can journey through life never caring about other people; his philosophy is that everybody should 'take care of themselves'. Priestley exploits this mindset showing that there are the **moral limitations** of such a philosophy and this will result in Mr Birling's downfall in the play and, as a wider perspective, the downfall of **capitalism** in 1946.

Priestley exposes the capitalist bourgeoisie of 1912 to be **repugnant, self-centered** and **ignorant** individuals. Mr Birling, being the patriarch of the family, seems to voice these **capitalist** views most vocally throughout Act One of the play.

How does Priestley employ the character of Inspector Goole as his *raisonneur*?

In 1942, Priestley became the co-founder of the Socialist Common Wealth Party and this would influence much of his writing. We can see a direct correlation with the character of the Inspector in the play, who also calls for a fairer society. The Inspector needed to be an **imposing, authoritative** character in order to drive Priestley's message home to the 1946 audience.

- ✓ Priestley changes the lighting to mark the Inspector's arrival. It is a **dramatic change** from a pink, cosy light to one which is intimidating and bright. Priestley does this to create an atmosphere of **interrogation** and to symbolise the Birling's **facade** being exposed for all to see.
- ✓ Priestley makes clear in his stage direction that the Inspector needed to be a character who was able to make an **imposing** entrance. He states that he 'creates an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness.'
- ✓ The Inspector's presence immediately appears to be **controversial** because during the Edwardian era the upper classes would have judged such an intrusion to be rude, disrespectful, and an insult to their **superior position** in society. This type of entrance was a deliberate decision by Priestley to disrupt the powers of the upper class **capitalists**.
- ✓ The Inspector arrives on stage in Act one and immediately conducts himself in a manner which the Birlings deem to be unsuitable. He takes moral stances throughout his interrogation, thereby challenging the Birlings on issues surrounding labour rights and social responsibility.
- ✓ The Inspector acts as a *raisonneur* for Priestley's own socialist views. He is authoritative and imposing and refuses to be intimidated by class or social status.
- ✓ Towards the end of the play, the Inspector delivers a prophetic message which encourages the 1946 audience to make changes for a better, more equal future.

How does Priestley use the character of Sheila to explore his message about Women and Capitalism?

Priestley presents the Birling family as a **microcosm** of the bourgeoisie in the Edwardian era. Priestley was a passionate **socialist** and therefore uses the play as a way of expressing his **socialist** views and persuading his 1946 audience to reject **capitalist ideology**:

Sheila is an upper class woman due to marry Gerald Croft. In the Edwardian era, it was only acceptable to marry within the same class. To marry beneath your class could cost you your **reputation** and **wealth**.

Young upper class women like Sheila Birling were often shielded from the **suffering** that existed in society. They were encouraged not to involve themselves in matters of business.

Sheila is initially presented as a typical upper class woman of the Edwardian era. She is extremely materialistic and oblivious to the world that exists outside of the Birling house.

- ✓ In 1903, the Women's Social and Political Union was formed, led by Emmeline Pankhurst. The Suffragettes were fighting for the right to vote in Britain and for greater gender equality.
- ✓ By 1914, women had still not won the vote. Parliament rejected their plea and this was heavily influenced by male members of parliament who stated that women were too weak to have such responsibility. The vote was eventually given to women in 1928.
- ✓ *An Inspector Calls* is set in 1912 and Priestley transports his 1946 audience back to a time when women were powerless in society. However, he creates Sheila, a woman who gains strength throughout the play, and this acts as a reminder to the audience of these achievements.
- ✓ During the First World War, women began to show their strength and determination. Whilst men were away fighting, women were part of the war effort and this included women being employed into jobs that had been vacated by men.
- ✓ In 1918, the Representation of the People Act was passed which gave all men over the age of twenty-one the vote. Women over the age of thirty (who were part of a married household) could also vote.
- ✓ Priestley uses the character of Sheila as a symbol of strength and change in society. He suggested to his 1946 audience that more could be achieved, particularly that there was hope for the younger generation to achieve more.
- ✓ During the 19th century and into the early 20th century, women who were married became the property of their husbands. If a woman owned property prior to marriage, this would now be owned by her husband. In the play, Priestley creates a female who **subverts this patriarchal rule**. Sheila knows that Gerald has been unfaithful to her and so, despite the expectations of her family, she ends her engagement to Gerald.

Sheila tells Gerald that she respects him more now than she did before his interrogation, which suggests that their relationship was **fractious** beforehand. As Sheila begins to discuss morals with other characters, she appears to mirror the role of the

Inspector in delivering Priestley's **moral message**. Sheila **assertively** challenges the **patriarchal** attitude of her own father here, using the **imperative command** 'don't interfere.'

How does Priestley use the character of Mrs Birling to explore his views on charity and welfare?

Priestley uses the play to criticise charity organisations in 1912. These charities were often funded by the rich in society, but often this would create prejudice as the upper classes often decided which charity case was most deserving of their money. In the Edwardian era, charity organisations were established as a way for upper class women to undertake useful work. Charity work gave many women a sense of achievement at a time when opportunities for women to contribute to society were very rare. These charities were in place to help the most deserving in society. However, these decisions would often be made by a board of women who were not able to empathise with those that they were there to help.

Priestley creates the character of Mrs Birling who is prejudiced towards Eva's case and thereby refuses to help her.

Priestley also calls upon his audience to appreciate the new Welfare State which was established by the Labour government in 1945. This created much more support for the lower and working classes. The Labour Party vowed to tackle poverty and make significant changes to the ways in which welfare was offered in society.

Class and Pregnancy Outside of Marriage in the Edwardian Era

Pregnancy outside of marriage was uncommon among the upper classes, mostly because the behaviour of these girls was controlled by their fathers. Often, upper class women were accompanied in their outings by a family member.

In the middle classes premarital pregnancy was also fairly rare. If this did occur, the woman was either quickly married to her seducer, or sent away to give birth in secret, and the child was often adopted.

For the lower and working classes, options were even more limited. They often struggled to survive and would have to seek help from charities. Sadly, many babies were found abandoned during this time

How does Priestley use the characters of Gerald and Eric to explore the immoral behaviour of privileged men within patriarchal Edwardian society?

The social expectations in this era ruled that those from different classes were forbidden to marry. If this rule was to be breached, it would be viewed as scandalous. Life in the Edwardian era was fairly pleasant for an upper-class gentleman. He needed to be wealthy, educated in the right schools, connected with the right people. Priestley uses the play to highlight the public facade which many gentleman wore. He reveals the fact that many men in the upper classes lived a double life, often visiting prostitutes and keeping mistresses.

Priestley uses the character of Gerald to show that Edwardian gentlemen were capable of immoral behaviour. He reveals the idea that these individuals often wore a public facade, which presented them as respectful and virtuous; however, privately these men were exploiting the working and lower classes.

Priestley sets the play in 1912 and showcases a patriarchal society in which women were often conditioned to accept infidelity, often in favour of status and the security of marriage.

Gerald represents capitalism. He agrees with Mr Birling over the sacking of Eva Smith and supports Mr Birling's capitalist views. Priestley uses the character of Gerald to shine a light upon the hypocrisy of the upper classes in Edwardian Britain.

How does Priestley present the difference in attitudes of the older and younger generations?

Despite the manner in which the early twentieth century was an intense period of change, the family often continued to be governed by tradition. Family relations were often based on patriarchy and the dominance of the father. Children were largely expected to be subservient and respectful towards their elders.

Priestley does not shy away from criticising the traditional family unit. This is part of his vision for change. A clear indication of this is the manner in which he repeatedly discredits Mr. Birling as a character through the use of dramatic irony. We are not encouraged to respect this character's position of power, and so we are inclined to criticise the system of patriarchy. Over the course of the play, we further see how the Inspector's intervention breaks the family apart. Despite this, Priestley does not wish us to view this in a negative light.

The generational divide in *An Inspector Calls* is very clear. Both Sheila and Eric are described as being in their early twenties and so belong in the younger generation. The only slightly confusing character is Gerald who, at thirty, is somewhat in-between. He ultimately allies himself more with Mr. and Mrs. Birling. The Inspector is described as being in his fifties. This places him in the same generation as Mr. and Mrs. Birling. The choice to create the Inspector in this way emphasises the contrast between them, while further showing us that it is possible for the older generation to have enlightened views.

Priestley clearly presents us with a sense of the importance of the older generation in shaping the views of the younger generation. At the start of the play, we clearly see the way in which Mr. Birling seeks to instruct the younger generation as he lectures them on a range of matters. The audience are encouraged to question Mr. Birling's wisdom and thus to question the worldview he passes on. Despite discrediting the character of Mr. Birling, Priestley still chooses to show the importance of the older generation in shaping the younger generation but does this through the character of the Inspector.

The Inspector effectively silences Mr. Birling with his entrance. What follows is a direct contradiction of the worldview that Mr. Birling was seeking to pass on to the younger generation.

Priestley uses the characters of Mr and Mrs Birling as the embodiment of the unfair system, linked directly with the ideas of tradition and conservatism. Throughout the play, these characters reject Priestley's ideology through their rejection of the Inspector's message. The Inspector is an exception to the rule that the older generation resist change; he actively promotes change.

The difference between the younger and older generation is their capacity for change. This establishes a sense of hope and optimism for the future. Sheila's character arc is the primary example of how Priestley shows that there is hope for the future. She begins the play as a naive and rather superficial character. She is ignorant to the plight of others. The intervention of the Inspector makes her aware of the plight that others face. She visibly matures before our eyes, ultimately becoming empowered enough to challenge her parents.

Mr Birling's character arc shows a clear contrast with that of Sheila. In truth, Birling's character is noteworthy for an almost lack of development. He repeatedly resists the influence of the Inspector, stubbornly holding on to his outdated worldview, and so he does not reach a point of redemption in the play. This may impart a sense of hopelessness in terms of enlisting the help of the older generation in changing society, or it may simply emphasise the challenges and barriers that the younger generation will face in achieving such change.

A glimmer of hope? It could be said that this offer the older generation a second chance to 'come clean' and accept their responsibility, however it could also be said that all hope is lost by this point as it is simply too late.

Allegory: while the events of the plot are highly engaging, Priestly only portrays these events in order to convey his message. It is essentially a tool to help him to achieve this. The play serves as an allegory. This means that the plot is constructed in order to convey a message. This message is really clear. The plot serves to demonstrate the negative consequences of capitalism in order to convey support for socialism.

Vocabulary Lists for "An Inspector Calls"

Tier 2 Words

These words are more common and might appear in a variety of contexts, helping students to build their general academic vocabulary.

1. **Inequality**
 - Definition: The state of not being equal, especially in status and opportunities.
 - Example: The play highlights the inequality between the upper and lower classes.
2. **Exploitation**
 - Definition: The action of using someone unfairly for one's own advantage.
 - Example: Workers in 1912 faced exploitation by factory owners.
3. **Privilege**
 - Definition: A special right or advantage available only to a particular person or group.
 - Example: The Birlings enjoy many privileges due to their wealth.
4. **Stigma**
 - Definition: A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.
 - Example: There was a strong social stigma attached to unmarried mothers in 1912.
5. **Facade**
 - Definition: An outward appearance that is maintained to conceal a less pleasant or creditable reality.
 - Example: The Birling family maintains a facade of respectability.
6. **Ruthless**
 - Definition: Having or showing no pity or compassion for others.
 - Example: Capitalists in the play are depicted as ruthless in their pursuit of profit.
7. **Propaganda**
 - Definition: Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.
 - Example: Priestley uses the play as a form of propaganda to promote socialist ideas.
8. **Complacent**
 - Definition: Showing smug or uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one's achievements.
 - Example: Mr Birling's complacent attitude is evident throughout the play.

9. **Prejudice**

- Definition: Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.
- Example: Mrs Birling's prejudice against Eva leads to tragic consequences.

10. **Ironic**

- Definition: Happening in the opposite way to what is expected, often causing wry amusement.
- Example: It is ironic that Mr Birling dismisses the possibility of war, which the audience knows is inevitable.

These are more specialised terms that are specific to the context of the play and its themes.

11. **Capitalism**

- Definition: An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.
- Example: Mr Birling's character represents capitalist ideals.

12. **Socialism**

- Definition: A political and economic theory of social organization which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole.
- Example: The Inspector's views align with socialist principles.

13. **Bourgeoisie**

- Definition: The middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes.
- Example: The Birlings are members of the bourgeoisie.

14. **Proletariat**

- Definition: Workers or working-class people, regarded collectively.
- Example: The character of Eva Smith represents the proletariat.

15. **Dramatic Irony**

- Definition: A literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions is clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character.
- Example: Priestley uses dramatic irony to highlight Mr Birling's ignorance.

16. **Laissez-faire**

- Definition: A policy or attitude of letting things take their own course, without interfering.
- Example: The laissez-faire attitude of the government favoured the capitalists.

17. **Microcosm**

- Definition: A community, place, or situation regarded as encapsulating in miniature the characteristic qualities or features of something much larger.
- Example: The Birling family is a microcosm of the upper class.

18. **Patriarchal**

- Definition: Relating to or characteristic of a system of society or government controlled by men.
- Example: The play critiques the patriarchal society of Edwardian England.

19. **Suffragette**

- Definition: A woman seeking the right to vote through organised protest.

- Example: The Suffragettes were actively fighting for women's rights during the time the play is set.

20. **Raisonneur**

- Definition: A character in a play or narrative who expresses the author's message, philosophy, or point of view.
- Example: Inspector Goole acts as the raisonneur in "An Inspector Calls".