J. B. Priestley

The playwright
J. B. Priestley

- John Boynton Priestley was born in Bradford in 1894,
- When the First World War broke out, Priestley immediately joined the British Army. After being wounded and affected by a gas attack, Priestley was withdrawn from active service and became part of the Entertainers Section of the British Army.
J. B. Priestley continued

- After the war, Priestley went to Cambridge and completed a degree in Modern History and Political Science. He also worked on the student newspaper.
- After university, Priestley continued to work as a journalist, including working as a theatre critic.
Links between Priestley’s life and ‘An Inspector Calls’

✓ Priestley lived through the period that he explores in his play, including the time alluded to by the Inspector.

✓ Priestley fought in the war that the Inspector predicts: ”Fire and blood and anguish”. Priestley saw the suffering of war at first hand and wanted to avoid further wars.

✓ Priestley was always interested in historical events and politics. His play presents the conflicting views behind Capitalism and Socialism.
‘An Inspector Calls’

The Social & Historical Context
Social & Historical Context

• ‘An Inspector Calls’ was written in 1946 but is set in 1912. Put historically, it was written just after the Second World War and set just before the First World War.
• J.B. Priestley had lived through both wars, which must have had a huge impact upon him.
• By setting the play in the past, Priestley can make use of dramatic irony – the audience knows what happens after the events in the play but obviously the characters don’t.
“Last month, just because the miners came out on strike, there’s a lot of wild talk about possible labour trouble in the near future. Don’t worry. We’ve seen the worst of it.”

• The early 20th century saw the beginning of a movement away from an elite few controlling everything towards a situation where society tried to be more equal.
• There were an increasing number of strikes during this period and in the time after the play is set (undermining Mr. Birling again).
• Women were also becoming more insistent in their demands for equality – the suffragette movement becomes particularly militant at this time in history.

“And we’re in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity.”

In the years after the play is set, there was an economic depression, which was not helped by the cost of the war.
The Great War or First World War, began in 1914 and ended in 1918.

Whilst the catalyst for the war was the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, there were in fact a number of causes. One issue was that many of the Allies disliked the fact that the Central Powers (the other side) were countries which had a very powerful elite who wanted more power and resisted democracy.

The First World War is used in ‘An Inspector Calls’ to show that mankind need to change. Mr. Birling’s comments make him look foolish in front of the audience (because of dramatic irony). The reference to the war may also remind the audience of what happens when individuals seek power for themselves rather than caring for others.

“Just because the Kaiser makes a speech or two, or a few German officers have too much to drink and begin talking nonsense, you’ll hear some people say that war’s inevitable. And to that I say – fiddlesticks!”
“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.”

The *Titanic* was built just after the turn of the century and made her maiden voyage on the 10\textsuperscript{th} April 1912.

The *Titanic* was considered a pinnacle of naval architecture and technological achievement, and was thought by *The Shipbuilder* magazine to be "practically unsinkable*. *Titanic* had a double-bottom hull, containing 44 tanks for boiler water and ballast to keep the ship safely balanced at sea (later ships also had a double-walled hull). *Titanic* exceeded the lifeboat standard, with 20 lifeboats (though not enough for all passengers).

On the night of 14 April/15 April 1912 the *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank, with great loss of life. The United States Senate investigation reported that 1,517 people perished in the accident, while the British investigation has the number at 1,490. Regardless, the disaster ranks as one of the worst peacetime maritime disasters in history and by far the most infamous.
In twenty or thirty years’ time – let’s say, in 1940 – you may be giving a party like this – your son or daughter might be getting engaged – and I tell you, by that time you’ll be living in a world that’ll have forgotten these Capital verses Labour agitations…”

• In 1940, Winston Churchill became Prime Minister, following the resignation of Neville Chamberlain.

• Winston Churchill was originally a member of the Conservative party, but he also spent time as a member of the Liberal party. For Priestley, Churchill may have represented the fact that the “Capital verses Labour agitations” would not be so easily “forgotten”.

• Aside from Churchill, in 1945, just before Priestley wrote the play, a Socialist government came to power after a landslide victory. The first audiences of the play would have understood clearly the irony in Mr. Birling’s words.
In the play, Mr. Birling represents a capitalist society. This is an economic system that is based on the private ownership of industry.

The problem with Capitalism is that it often leads to the few exploiting the many and creates a situation where those who have money have the power to stop others from sharing the wealth.

Capitalism is often part of Conservatism. Conservatives believe that people should take greater responsibility for themselves. Traditionally Conservative governments keep taxation low, in the belief that people enjoy the benefits of hard work and success. Opponents of Conservatism believe it reduces social mobility and that it benefits the rich over the poor.

"...a man has to make his own way – has to look after himself – and his family too, of course ... a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own –"
Socialism

“But 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.”

“We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.”

In basic terms, Socialism is the belief that as a society, we have to look after one another. In particular, Socialists believe that the rich have a responsibility to look after the poor. In Socialist societies, taxation is higher in order to fund a more considerable Welfare State (the term for all the organisations designed to help people, e.g. State schools, NHS, Unemployment Benefit…). Socialist want to see the collapse of the class system so that people can achieve and live good lives irrespective of their background.
To summarise, in 1912, when ‘An Inspector Calls’ is set, British society was still very Victorian. The country was still benefiting from new technology; it still had a rigid class system and the politics of the time were very Conservative (individual responsibility).

In 1945, when ‘An Inspector Calls’ was written, British society had changed a great deal. The two World Wars had greatly changed people’s view of the world; the class system was less rigid; women had been given the vote and the politics of the time was focused much more on Socialist ideas (collective responsibility).
Act One

• The Birling family (Arthur, Sybil, Sheila and Eric) and Gerald Croft, are having a meal to celebrate the engagement of Sheila and Gerald.

• Arthur Birling makes a toast. In it, he informs the younger members of the family that their future looks bright and that it is important to look after themselves. Priestley makes use of dramatic irony to undermine Arthur Birling – Birling says there won’t be a war and talks about the success of the Titanic.

• Just as Mr. Birling says, “a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own”, the doorbell rings. Shortly after, the maid shows Inspector Goole into the room.

• The Inspector explains that a young woman has died after drinking bleach. He questions Mr. Birling, who admits to having her sacked after she was involved in a strike at the factory. The Inspector then questions Sheila, who admits to having the girl sacked from Milwards because she was jealous that the girl looked better in the dress she liked than she did.
Act Two

• The Inspector’s attention falls on Gerald. When questioned, he admits that he knew the girl. After meeting her at the Palace Music Hall in Brumley, Gerald set her up in the flat of a friend and they became lovers. After a happy period, it came to an end and Eva / Daisy left Brumley and went to the seaside. After the questioning, Gerald goes for a walk.

• The Inspector questions Mrs. Birling next. She admits that the girl came to her charitable organisation and asked for help, as she was pregnant and could not ask the father for money. Mrs. Birling believes the girl is putting on graces and is offended that she uses the name “Mrs. Birling”. She therefore persuades the other members of the charity to refuse her request. Mrs. Birling is defiant and refuses to accept she did anything wrong. She tells the Inspector that the father of the child is to blame and it is the Inspector’s “duty” to arrest him.

• Instead of leaving as Mrs. Birling hoped, the Inspector waits to “do his duty.”
Act Three

- Eric returns to the house and into the firing line. He knows that his secret is already out but does explain what happened – he had an affair with the girl and she fell pregnant. He offered to marry her but she declined, knowing that he didn’t love her. Eric gave her money to begin with, which he stole from his father’s business. When she realised the money was stolen, she refused to take any more.

- The Birling family appear to have learnt their lesson and seem sorry for what they have done. The Inspector tells them that we all have to look after each other and that there are plenty of other people in the world like Eva Smith. He then leaves.

- Shortly after, Gerald Croft returns from his walk. He brings into doubt the identity of the Inspector (having spoken to a policeman who has never heard of him) and even explains that it is possible that Eva Smith never existed.
Act Three continued

• Quickly convinced by Gerald’s arguments, Mr. and Mrs. Birling decide that it was a joke and laugh the whole thing off. They have not really learnt anything.
• Eric and Sheila are not so easily swayed. They argue with their parents that this doesn’t change anything – they are still responsible for the terrible things they did.
• The telephone rings – it is for Mr. Birling. A young woman has just died at the infirmary and a police inspector is on his way to the house.
• The play ends on this bombshell.
“An Inspector Calls” – a well-made play

“An Inspector Calls” is often classified as a well-made play. Such plays have the following features:

1. **Exposition** – the opening is designed to provide a gentle introduction to the story, introducing characters and setting the scene.

2. **Entrances & Exits** – these are timed carefully in a well-made play so that they heighten the tension and drama.

3. **The Obligatory Scene** – A well-made play will contain a scene or scenes where a secret is revealed. This also adds to the tension and drama.

4. **The Climactic Curtain** – acts and/or scenes will end on a cliffhanger, a point when things are particularly tense or dramatic.
A well-made play continued

5. **Mistaken Identity** – the well-made play often features mistaken identity or issues surrounding identity.

6. **Plot** – the plot focuses on one story-line. There are no real sub-plots or deviations from the primary focus.

7. **The Dénouement** – the ending of a well-made play is both logical and plausible. Is this true of ‘An Inspector Calls’? Why might Priestley have broken away from the criteria at this point? Why would he undermine his audience’s expectations in this way? Does the ending shock or surprise the audience? Does the ending leave the audience questioning the play’s meaning more?
‘An Inspector Calls’

Key Character Facts
Mr. Birling

- Prosperous factory owner, not the social equal of his wife. He is 'a self made man'
- First priority is to make money 'It's my duty to keep labour costs down'
- Welcomes Croft into his family as he represents a business link between his firm and that of Gerald Croft's father (a rival)
- Has an honest approach to life, he tells the Inspector that he wouldn't listen to Eva Smith's demand for a wage rise 'I refused, of course' and is surprised why anyone should question why.
- Strongly believes that 'a man has to make his own way'. He does not consider the harm he may cause to other people because of his attitude. He is a 'hard headed business man'
- He is a magistrate and former mayor who is looking forward to receiving a knighthood
Mr. Birling continued

- He is very aware that Gerald's mother is rather against her son's marriage because she believes him to be marrying beneath him socially
- He is optimistic about the future, yet we know that what he predicts will not become true (NB dramatic irony)
- He refuses to accept any responsibility for Eva's death. He becomes increasingly annoyed by the Inspector's questioning and Eric's unsympathetic attitude
- He tries to threaten the Inspector by talking about his friendship with the Chief Constable
- The most disturbing part of the play for Birling is the scene in which he learns that his own son is shown to be a thief, a drunkard and is responsible for fathering a child. When he learns of all this he exclaims 'You damned fool - why didn't you come to me when you found yourself in this mess?'
- Eric's reply indicates that Mr Birling was never close to his son 'Because you're not the kind of chap a man could turn to when he's in trouble'. Such a response indicates that things aren't going to improve much after the play ends
Mr. Birling continued

• He represents a very unattractive sort of person. At the end of the play he grudgingly wishes things were better but even here he still thinks in terms of money 'Look, Inspector - I'd give thousands'

• He continues to ignore the shameful things that his family has done. When it appears that the Inspector might be a hoaxer he is happy to believe that everything is as it was a few hours ago. He copies the Inspector and laughs when he remembers the faces of Eric and Sheila and accuses them of being 'the famous younger generation who know it all'. This is an example of pride coming before a fall, a moment later of course he is panicking as the phone rings again

• Mr Birling represents Priestley's hatred of businessmen who are only interested in making money. He will never alter his ways and it is left to the younger generation to learn from their mistakes
Sheila Birling

- At the start of the play she is 'very pleased with life'. She is young, attractive and has just become engaged.
- Her happiness is soon to be destroyed as is her faith in her family.
- Her response to the tragedy is one of the few encouraging things to come out of the play. She is genuinely upset when she hears of Eva's death and learns from her own behaviour.
- She is very distressed by the girl's suicide and thinks that her father's behaviour was unacceptable. She readily agrees that she behaved very badly and insists that she never meant the girl any harm.
- The Inspector says that she is only partly responsible and later on, when he is about to question Gerald, he encourages her to stay and listen to what he has to say so that she doesn't feel entirely responsible.
- Not only is she prepared to admit her faults, she also appears keen and anxious to change her behaviour in the future, 'I'll never, never do it again'.
Sheila Birling continued

- She is aware of the mystery surrounding the Inspector, yet realises that there is no point in trying to hide the facts from him.
- She is mature about the breaking up of her engagement and remains calm. She won't be rushed into accepting the ring back once the Inspector has left.
- She is unable to accept her parents attitude and is both amazed and concerned that they haven't learned anything from the episode. Although the Inspector might be a hoax, the family have still behaved in an entirely unsuitable manner.
- She learns of her responsibilities to others less fortunate than herself (the idea of the community) and is sensitive. Her readiness to learn from experience is in great contrast to her parents.
Mrs. 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.
Mrs. Birling continued

- 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.
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?"
Eric Birling continued

- 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."
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."
Gerald Croft continued

- 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.
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.
Inspector Goole continued

- 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.
Inspector Goole continued

• 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?

• Remember that one of the things the examiner is looking for is your personal response, so be prepared to state an opinion.
Eva Smith

• Of course, we never see Eva Smith on stage in the play: we only have the evidence that the Inspector and the Birlings give us.
• The Inspector, Sheila Gerald and Eric all say that she was "pretty." Gerald describes her as "very pretty - soft brown hair and big dark eyes."
• Her parents were dead.
• She came from outside Brumley: Mr Birling speaks of her being "country-bred."
• She was working class.
Eva Smith continued

- The Inspector says that she had kept a sort of diary, which helped him piece together the last two years of her life:
- However, in Act 3 we begin to wonder whether Eva ever really existed.
  - Gerald says, "We've no proof it was the same photograph and therefore no proof it was the same girl."
  - Birling adds, "There wasn't the slightest proof that this Daisy Renton really was Eva Smith." Yet the final phone call, announcing that a police inspector is shortly to arrive at the Birlings' house to investigate the suicide of a young girl, makes us realise that maybe Eva Smith did exist after all. What do you think?
- Think about Eva's name. Eva is similar to Eve, the first woman created by God in the Bible. Smith is the most common English surname. So, Eva Smith could represent every woman of her class.
“An Inspector Calls”

Themes
The Generation Gap

The Younger Generation

• In the play, the younger generation (Eric and Sheila) show that they are capable of change. The express sympathy for the strikers in Act 1 and they also show greater sympathy for Eva Smith. Through the play, they are honest about their actions and refuse to go back on what they have learnt.

• Sheila and Eric’s ability to change means that Priestley can end the play with an element of hope. It is possible that the next generation can make society better. Without this, the play would end hopelessly, with the characters continuing to repeat their mistakes.

The Older Generation

• In the play, the older generation (Mr. & Mrs. Birling) seem incapable of real change. They are set in their ways and see Sheila and Eric as “foolish” “children”.

• They have little sympathy for Eva Smith and are only sorry that she has died because it could impact on their lives.

• Priestley uses Mr. & Mrs. Birling to represent old-fashioned ideas. He discredits them, abd what they represent, by making them look foolish and by catching them out at the end.
These men are all inspectors, but they're not the Inspector. The question is, "Who is Inspector Goole?"
“Who is Inspector Goole?”

- ‘Inspector’ suggests someone who ‘inspects’ things – to look closely at... Priestley’s stage directions tell us that the lighting becomes ‘brighter and harder’ on his arrival – a spot light on the family for his investigation perhaps?
- The name sounds like ‘ghoul’ which makes him enigmatic (mysterious). Is he from another world? A spokesman for the dead girl come to plead her case?
- His physical description – ‘an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness’ – nothing distracts him from his purpose of discovering the truth. His ‘solidity’ is necessary if he is to be a match for the Birlings. He appears incorruptible, calm, determined. He speaks ‘weightily’- this is a man who is serious about his mission.
“Who is Inspector Goole?”

• The timing of his arrival is crucial: just as Mr Birling has been voicing his philosophy of life that ‘a man has to look after himself and his own’. This interruption signals that the Inspector will challenge this viewpoint and undermine their notion that they are a “nice respectable family”. It is a good example of Priestley’s use of dramatic irony.

• Throughout the play he shows the Birlings (and the audience) that people are responsible for each other; that we are indeed “bees in a hive”. He voices Priestley’s beliefs about society that primarily people must accept responsibility for others and have a social conscience. He gives a moral perspective on the way the family have behaved.
“Who is Inspector Goole?”

- The mood of the play changes as soon as he arrives by becoming more sombre. He is not drawn into ‘friendly’ chatter with Mr Birling.
- He reveals everyone’s secrets – has an uncanny knowledge of what each character had done and when they have done it.
- He asks probing questions which lead them to confess. As Sheila says, “somehow he makes you”. He makes the Birlings and Gerald face up to what they have done and take responsibility for their part in the “chain of events”.
- The Inspector controls everything: he decides who will speak and when; who will be allowed to leave and who should stay; who sees the photograph etc.
“Who is Inspector Goole?”

- He is omniscient (all knowing), mysterious and powerful but compassionate to those who admit their responsibility, “if you’re easy with me then I’m easy with you”.

- He is no ordinary policeman. He is concerned with moral truth – what is right or wrong – rather than what is legal or illegal. He often speaks like a judge or a prophet: “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” and is the voice of social conscience: “Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges”.

- He has several functions in the play: story teller (filling in background histories)/father confessor (hearing each character’s confessions and getting them to repent).
Responsibility

• Responsibility is arguably the most important theme in the play. The words ‘responsible’ and ‘responsibility’ appear a considerable number of times.

• At the beginning of the play, Mr. Birling gives his interpretation of ‘responsibility’ in his speech. Towards the end of the play, the Inspector gives his alternative interpretation.

• These speeches reflect the opposing viewpoints in the play:
  – Individual responsibility vs. collective responsibility
  – Conservatism vs. Socialism

• Think about how Priestley makes it clear that he supports one view and opposes the other.
Responsibility

When thinking about this theme, consider:

• Personal responsibility – each character is forced to consider to what extent they are responsible for Eva’s death;

• Towards the end of the play the Inspector tells the family that they can divide responsibility amongst themselves after he has left;

• The different generations respond differently to the Inspector’s visit – who really takes responsibility for their actions?

• Mrs. Birling is part of a Charitable Organisation – is this because she wants to take responsibility or because it makes her look good?

• Eric tries to take responsibility for Eva and the baby but does it by stealing;

• The characters’ failure to fully take responsibility leads to the second telephone call – would the telephone have rung if they’d learnt from their mistakes?

• Who else is supposed to learn to take responsibility?