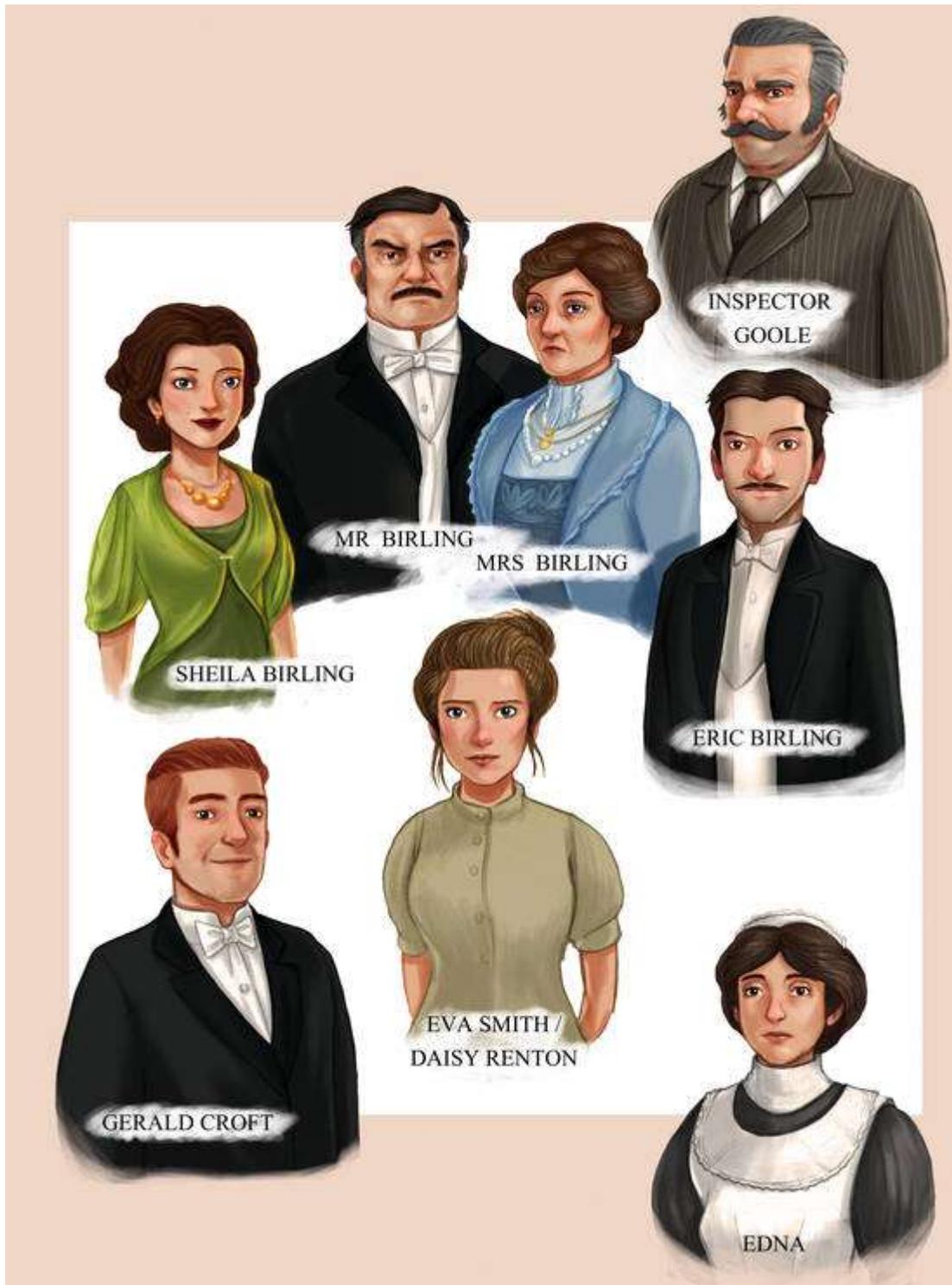


An Inspector Calls

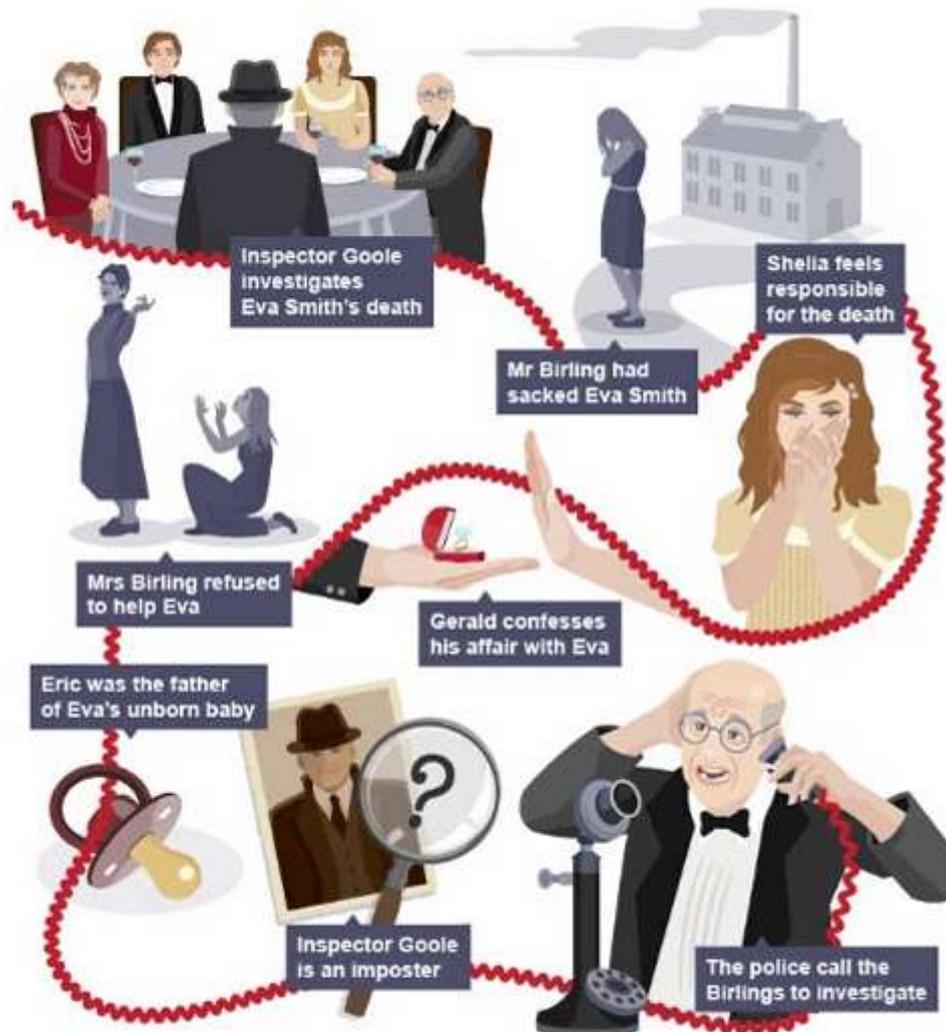
Hessle High School Revision Guide



Characters



Plot Summary



1. An inspector arrives at the Birling house. He tells them how a girl called Eva Smith has killed herself by drinking disinfectant - he wants to ask them some questions.
2. The Inspector reveals that the girl used to work in Arthur Birling's factory and he had her sacked for going on strike. Mr Birling refuses to accept any responsibility for her death.
3. The Inspector then reveals that Sheila thought that Eva had made fun of her, complained and got her sacked. Sheila is deeply ashamed and feels responsible for the girl's death.
4. The Inspector forces Gerald to confess to an affair he had with Eva. Sheila respects Gerald's honesty but returns the engagement ring he gave her.
5. It is revealed that Sybil Birling had refused to help the pregnant Eva.
6. It turns out that it was Eric who got Eva pregnant, and stole money from his father to help her.
7. The Inspector leaves. The family ring the infirmary and there is no record of a girl dying from drinking disinfectant.
8. Suddenly the phone rings, Mr Birling answers it, to his horror the phone call reveals that a young woman has just died from drinking disinfectant and the police are on their way to question them about it. The curtain falls and the play ends.

Context

When the play was written after World War Two in 1945, there was no form of welfare from the government to help the poor. J B Priestley believed in socialism, the political idea based on common ownership and that we should all look after one another. **Mr Birling** represents greedy businessmen who only care for themselves. Priestley uses him to show the audience that the Eva Smiths of the world will continue to suffer if people like Birling remain in positions of power.

The hardships of wartime challenged the class structure in Britain. Due to rationing of food and clothes, people of all classes were eating and dressing the same. They were also fighting side by side, and so class barriers came down. **Sybil Birling**, like her husband Arthur, represents a type of middle-class snobbery that existed prior to the World Wars. Priestley hoped that these sorts of attitudes would die out, and uses Mrs Birling to show how they can lead to cold and thoughtless behaviour.

Sheila, like **Eric**, allows Priestley to show his opinions on youth. He felt that there was hope in the young people of post-war Britain. He saw them as the ones who would help solve the problems the country had with class, gender and social responsibility. This is seen in how Sheila is deeply affected by Eva's death, she accepts responsibility straightaway and promises to never behave in such a way again. This is not the case with the older characters, Mr and Mrs Birling and even Gerald do not accept responsibility and we do not get the impression that they will change.

J B Priestley uses **Eric** as he does **Sheila** - to suggest that the young people of a post-war Britain would be the answer to a hopeful future. With Eric he also addresses some concerns he had about the dangers of immoral behaviour. Through Eric, Priestley shows that excessive drinking and casual relationships can have consequences.

Priestley uses **Gerald** to attack the upper-classes of post-war Britain. He shows that despite outward appearances, Gerald is described as an 'attractive chap' and 'well-bred'. This class of people were still capable of questionable behaviour. Gerald has an affair and initially tries to avoid telling the truth. Priestley also suggests that they saw themselves above the problems of the working-classes - Gerald tries to get himself and the Birlings out of trouble.

Inspector Goole sheds a light on all the concerns that Priestley had at the time of writing *An Inspector Calls* around age, gender, class and social responsibility. Priestley uses the Inspector to make the audience question their own behaviour and morality and hopes that they will learn some lessons as the Birlings do. The issues the Inspector highlights are just as relevant to a modern day audience.

Themes

Social responsibility

An Inspector Calls was first performed in the UK just after the end of World War Two, in 1946. It was a time of great change in Britain and many writers were concerned with the welfare of the poor. At that time there was no assistance for people who could not afford to look after themselves. Priestley wanted to address this issue. He also felt that if people were more considerate of one another, it would improve quality of life for all. This is why social responsibility is a key theme of the play. Priestley wanted his audience to be responsible for their own behaviour and responsible for the welfare of others.

In An Inspector Calls, Priestley explores social responsibility through:

- the treatment of Eva Smith
- how each character does or doesn't take responsibility for their behaviour
- the Inspector's lessons

Class

Before World War Two, Britain was divided by class. Two such classes were the wealthy land and factory owners and the poor workers. The war helped bring these two classes closer together and rationing meant that people of all classes were eating and even dressing the same. The war effort also meant that people from all classes were mixing together. This was certainly not the case before.

Priestley wanted to highlight that inequality between the classes still existed and that the upper-classes looked down upon the working-class in post-war Britain.

In An Inspector Calls, Priestley explores the theme of class through the treatment of working-class Eva Smith by the wealthy Birlings and Gerald Croft when she is in the following situations:

- when she is a factory worker
- when she works in a shop
- when she is effectively homeless
- when she is potentially a single mother

Age

Age is an important theme in *An Inspector Calls*. Priestley uses it to show how he believed that there was hope in the younger generation's ability to learn and change.

The older characters' opinions and behaviours are stubbornly fixed. Mr Birling refuses to learn and Mrs Birling cannot see the obvious about herself and her children. Eric and Sheila however are younger - they accept their mistakes and offer the chance for a brighter future.

In *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley explores the theme of age through:

- Sheila and Eric's response to Eva's death
- Mr and Mrs Birling's response to Eva's death
- how the older characters perceive the younger ones

Gender

An Inspector Calls was written after World War Two. As many British men went away to fight during the war, their positions in work had to be filled by women. This helped change existing perceptions. Men had to acknowledge the fact that women were just as capable as them. As a result of this, many women enjoyed a newfound freedom that working and earning money allowed them.

Not all men saw this change in attitude as a good thing and stayed stuck in the past. Priestley explores the impact of these new gender roles through the independence of Eva Smith and the sexist attitudes of Mr Birling.

In *An Inspector Calls* Priestley explores the theme of gender through:

- how Mr Birling and Gerald Croft view women
- how Mrs Birling treats Eva Smith
- how Eva Smith is portrayed as independent and outspoken before her death

Quotations

Mr Arthur Birling

- **"It's exactly the same port your father gets."**
- "there isn't a chance of war"
- "the Titanic... unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable"
- **"there'll be peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere."**
- "There's a fair chance that I might find my way into the next Honours List. Just a knighthood, of course."
- "there's a very good chance of a knighthood - so long as we behave ourselves, don't get into the police court or start a scandal - eh? (*Laughs complacently*)"
- **"(solemnly) ...a man has to make his own way – has to look after himself – and his family too, of course"**
- "the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everyone else..."
- **"as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense."**
- "a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own."
- **"(angrily to Eric) You're the one I blame for this."**

Mrs Sybil Birling

- "You're looking tired dear. I think you ought to go to bed – and forget about this absurd business."
- **"Girls of that class-"**
- "You know of course that my husband was Lord Mayor only two years ago and that he's still a magistrate-"
- **"(with sudden anger, to Inspector) Well, come along – what is it you want to know?"**
- **"(with dignity) Yes. We've done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases."**
- **"naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her."**
- "It didn't take me long to get the truth – or some of the truth – out of her."
- **"I did nothing I'm ashamed of."**
- "I've done nothing wrong – and you know it."
- **"I accept no blame at all."**
- "If he refused to marry her – and in my opinion he ought to be compelled to – then he must at least support her"
- "He should be made an example of. If the girl's death is due to anybody, then it's due to him... make sure that he's compelled to confess in public his responsibility."

Sheila Birling

- "(coming in, closing door) you knew it was me all the time, didn't you?"
- **"I felt rotten about it at the time and now I feel a lot worse."**
- **"(miserably) So I'm really responsible."**
- "(Suddenly, to Gerald) All right, Gerald, you needn't look at me like that. At least, I'm trying to tell the truth. I expect you've done things you're ashamed of too."
- "Yes, but it didn't seem to be anything very terrible at the time. Don't you understand? And if I could help her now, I would –"
- "(stormily) ...It's the only time I've ever done anything like that, and I'll never, never do it again to anybody."
- **"he's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves."**
- **"I behaved badly too. I know I did. I'm ashamed of it. But now you're beginning all over again to pretend that nothing much has happened!"**
- "I suppose we're all nice people now"
- "it doesn't much matter who it was who made us confess. And it was true, wasn't it? ...That's what's important – and not whether a man is a police inspector or not."

Eric Birling

- "in his early twenties, not quite at ease, **half shy, half assertive.**"
- "(Takes decanter and helps himself.) Mother says we mustn't stay too long... I left 'em talking about clothes again... Women are potty about 'em."
- "By Jove, yes. And as you were saying, Dad, a man has to look after himself."
- **"He could have kept her instead of throwing her out."**
- "And I don't see why she should have been sacked just because she's a bit more spirit than the others... I'd have let her stay."
- "(uneasily): I'm sorry – but you see – we were having a little party – and I've had a few drinks, including rather a lot of champagne – and I've got a headache – and as I'm only in the way here – I think I'd better turn in."
- **"You know, don't you?"**
- "(bitterly) You haven't made it any easier for me, have you, Mother?"
- "I'm not very clear about it, but afterwards she told me she didn't want me to go in but that – well, I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty – and I threatened to make a row."
- "Oh – my God! – how stupid this all is!"
- **"Because you're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble."**
- "(nearly at breaking point) Then – you killed her... you turned her away – yes, and you killed her – and the child she'd have had too – my child – your own grandchild – you killed them both – damn you, damn you –"
- **"You're beginning to pretend now that nothing's really happened at all...The girl's still dead, isn't she?"**

Gerald

- **"All right, if you must have it"**
- "I noticed a girl who looked quite different. She was very pretty."
- **"(distressed) Sorry – I – well I've suddenly realized – taken it properly – that she's dead –"**
- "Gave me a glance that was nothing less than a cry for help"
- "She was desperately hard up and at that moment was actually hungry"
- "I didn't install her there so that I could make love to her"
- **"(hesitatingly) I didn't feel about her as she felt about me"**
- "I wasn't telling you a complete lie"
- "It wasn't disgusting"
- "She didn't blame me at all. I wish to God she had now. Perhaps I'd feel better about it."
- **"As I'm rather more – upset – by this business than I probably appear to be – and – well, I'd like to be alone for a while."**
- **"I don't think he was an Inspector at all"**
- 'Everything's all right now Sheila'
- "what about this ring?"

Inspector Goole

- **"he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness."**
- "He speaks carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking."
- **"(Cutting through massively) Like a lot of these young women who get into various kinds of trouble, she'd used more than one name."**
- **"INSPECTOR interposes himself between them and the photograph."**
- "It's the way I like to go to work. One person and one line of inquiry at a time. Otherwise there's a muddle."
- **"After all it's better to ask for the earth than to take it."**
- **"I'm waiting... To do my duty"**
- **"Each of you helped to kill her"**
- "there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us"
- "all intertwined with our lives"
- **"We don't live alone. We are members of one body".**
- **"We are responsible for each other."**

Revision Quiz

- 1. What are the Birling family celebrating at the start of the play?**
- 2. What is the inspector investigating?**
- 3. What did Mr Birling do to Eva Smith? Why?**
- 4. What did Sheila have Eva sacked for?**
- 5. How is Gerald connected to Eva?**
- 6. Who did Eric steal money from to give to Eva?**
- 7. Why does Mrs Birling refuse to help Eva?**
- 8. Who is the father of Eva's child?**
- 9. What is revealed about the inspector near the end of the play?**
- 10. How does the play end?**

Example Exam

Question

Either

0 | 1

How far does Priestley present Eric as a character who changes his attitudes towards himself and others during the play?

Write about:

- what Eric says and does throughout the play
- how far Priestley presents Eric as a character who changes his attitudes.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

or

0 | 2

How does Priestley explore the importance of social class in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- some ideas about social class in the play
- how Priestley presents the importance of social class.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]