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GCSE English Literature

An Inspector Calls - Grade 9 Analysis · AQA Set Text

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AQA Set Text

28 entries

Priestley's 1945 morality play wears the costume of an Edwardian drawing-room thriller to deliver a socialist sermon. Set in 1912 but written after two world wars, the play exploits the gap between what its characters do not know and what its 1945 audience does, turning Mr Birling's confident predictions into instruments of dramatic irony. This sheet treats the play as a constructed argument: study how the Inspector functions as a dramatic device, how the cyclical ending traps the unrepentant, and how Priestley engineers every entrance, lighting cue and curtain to indict capitalist self-interest. Argue method and message; never retell the plot.

THEMES - the case for the prosecution

Social responsibility - the play's thesis

Priestley builds the entire play to deliver the Inspector's creed: '*We are members of one body.*' Eva Smith's death becomes a chain of individual selfishness, dramatising how private choices have public consequences. Grade 9 move: read the Inspector's final speech as direct address to the 1945 audience, with its prophecy of 'fire and blood and anguish' converting the murder mystery into a warning about the cost of collective irresponsibility.

Class and the abuse of power

The Birlings weaponise wealth and status against the working-class Eva. Mr Birling sacks her for asking a fair wage; Mrs Birling denies her charity on a snobbish technicality. Priestley exposes class as a system of casual cruelty disguised as respectability. Argue that Eva, kept offstage and voiceless, represents the dehumanised proletariat - a statistic the propertied class refuses to see as human.

Gender and the position of women

Priestley anatomises Edwardian patriarchy. Sheila is treated as decorative property, Eva is exploited sexually by Gerald and Eric, and Mrs Birling polices other women's morality while excusing men. The double standard that ruins Eva is shown as structural. Argue that Sheila's growing assertiveness charts the emergence of a new female consciousness against her mother's complicity in her own subjection.

The generational divide

Priestley locates hope in the young. Sheila and Eric absorb the Inspector's lesson while their parents retreat into denial, so the family literally splits along generational lines. The stage thus becomes a map of social possibility: the older Birlings are 'hard-headed' and unchanging, the younger 'impressionable' and reformable. Argue that Priestley invests his 1945 message of reconstruction in youth.

Socialism versus capitalism

The play is an ideological contest. Birling's capitalist mantra - a man must 'look after himself and his own' - is set against the Inspector's collectivism. Priestley rigs the debate: Birling's confident capitalism is undercut by dramatic irony, while the Inspector commands moral authority. Argue that the play is structured as a refutation of laissez-faire individualism in favour of a socialist ethic of mutual obligation.

CHARACTERS - arc, key moment, interpretation

The Inspector - dramatic device and moral voice

Arc: a controlled, escalating force who dismantles the family then vanishes. Key moment: the final speech, 'fire and blood and anguish', which breaks the fourth wall toward the audience. Interpretation: Goole (a homophone of 'ghoul') is less a character than Priestley's mouthpiece - an omniscient, possibly supernatural agent of conscience who controls the play's rhythm, taking 'one line of inquiry at a time' to enforce moral order.

Mr and Mrs Birling - the unredeemable	Arc: from complacent authority to exposed yet unrepentant. Key moment: Birling's relief that 'there'll be a public scandal' averted, proving he has learned nothing. Interpretation: the parents personify capitalist and patriarchal denial; Priestley denies them an arc deliberately, so their refusal to change indicts the whole establishment as incapable of self-reform and in need of external correction.
Sheila Birling - the play's conscience-in-progress	Arc: from naive, jealous girl to the family's moral interrogator. Key moment: warning the others 'he's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves', showing she now sees through pretence. Interpretation: Sheila dramatises the possibility of change; her shift from object to agent models the awakened conscience Priestley hopes his audience will adopt, making her his most optimistic creation.
Eric Birling - privilege and its abuses	Arc: from drunk, peripheral son to guilt-stricken confessor. Key moment: rounding on his mother, 'you killed her', collapsing family loyalty into moral accusation. Interpretation: Eric exposes the predatory underside of male privilege, yet his capacity for shame aligns him with Sheila and the redeemable young, suggesting even the flawed can be reformed by accepting responsibility.
Eva Smith - the absent victim	Arc: she has none onstage; she is reconstructed through others' accounts. Key moment: the Inspector's insistence that 'there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths', multiplying her into a class. Interpretation: Eva's enforced silence and absence are the point - Priestley denies the working-class victim a voice precisely to dramatise how the powerful erase the people they exploit, making her an everywoman rather than an individual.

KEY QUOTATIONS DECODED - language, form, structure, deployment

'Look after himself and his own'	Birling's capitalist creed ('a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own'), delivered just before the doorbell, is structurally undercut: the Inspector's entrance answers it like a rebuttal. Deploy to show Priestley using stagecraft as argument, interrupting individualism with the voice of collective conscience at the exact moment Birling finishes speaking.
'The Titanic ... absolutely unsinkable'	Dramatic irony detonates here: the 1945 audience knows the ship sank, so Birling's certainty discredits him retroactively. Deploy to argue that Priestley engineers Birling as an unreliable prophet, so that every confident capitalist claim he makes is pre-loaded with failure for the audience to detect.
'We are members of one body'	The Inspector's collective metaphor, with its biblical echo, recasts society as a single organism in which harming one harms all. Deploy as the play's ideological centre - the socialist counter-thesis to Birling's individualism, framed in scriptural register to claim moral authority.
'Fire and blood and anguish'	The Inspector's apocalyptic triad evokes the two world wars the 1945 audience has survived, turning prophecy into recent memory. Deploy to show Priestley collapsing the gap between 1912 and 1945: the threatened catastrophe has already happened, making the warning a verdict.
'Girls of that class'	Mrs Birling's dismissive phrase exposes how class prejudice dehumanises, reducing Eva to a category beneath consideration. Deploy to analyse how Priestley puts the language of snobbery in the mouth of the least sympathetic character, condemning the attitude through its speaker.
'He's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves'	Sheila's metaphor reveals her new perceptiveness and the Inspector's method of letting the guilty self-incriminate. Deploy to show the generational divide in action: Sheila understands the moral mechanism her parents cannot, marking her as the awakened conscience.
'There are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths'	The epistrophe of 'millions' universalises the victim, converting one death into a social indictment. Deploy to argue Eva is a synecdoche for the exploited working class, and that Priestley's repetition forces the audience to scale personal guilt up to collective responsibility.
'I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty'	Eric's euphemistic admission exposes how male privilege excuses sexual violence as misadventure. Deploy to analyse Priestley's critique of gender: the casual phrasing reveals a culture that normalises men's predation while punishing the women who suffer it.

'It frightens me the way you talk'

Sheila's line to her parents dramatises the generational rupture: she is now alienated by the very complacency she once shared. Deploy to show the family fracturing along age lines, with the young recoiling from the old guard's moral blindness.

'A police inspector ... is on his way here'

The cyclical final phone call reopens the inquiry, trapping the unrepentant in an endless loop of judgement. Deploy to analyse structure as meaning: Priestley's ending denies the older Birlings escape, implying that those who refuse to learn are condemned to face the reckoning again.

CONTEXT (AO3) - woven, never bolted on

1912 setting versus 1945 audience

Priestley sets the play in 1912 but wrote it in 1945, exploiting the audience's hindsight about the Titanic, the wars and social upheaval. Weave: this temporal gap is the engine of the play's dramatic irony, letting Priestley discredit Edwardian complacency without a word of explicit argument - the audience supplies the verdict.

Priestley's socialism

Priestley was a committed socialist who helped shape the post-war welfare-state mood. Weave: the Inspector voices Priestley's belief in collective responsibility, so the play functions as advocacy for the 1945 electorate, urging them toward the social reforms a war-weary Britain was about to embrace.

Two world wars and the cost of division

Between the play's setting and its writing, Britain endured two catastrophic wars. Weave: the Inspector's prophecy of 'fire and blood and anguish' deliberately summons this history, framing the wars as the consequence of the selfishness Birling defends, so the audience hears a warning already proven true.

Dramatic irony as political weapon

Priestley turns the audience's superior knowledge into a rhetorical tool, so that Birling's every confident assertion collapses on contact with historical fact. Weave: dramatic irony is not decoration but argument - it discredits capitalist certainty structurally, making the form of the play do its persuasive work.

GRADE 9 THESIS LINES - conceptualised openers

On social responsibility

Priestley engineers 'An Inspector Calls' as a courtroom for the audience as much as the Birlings, using the Inspector as a dramatic device to prosecute capitalist self-interest and to argue that society's survival depends on recognising that 'we are members of one body'.

On structure and the cyclical ending

The play's circular structure, closing on a second inspector's imminent arrival, transforms a domestic thriller into a moral trap, implying that those who refuse responsibility are condemned to repeat their reckoning until the lesson is learned.

On dramatic irony and time

By staging 1912 for a 1945 audience, Priestley weaponises dramatic irony so that Birling's confident capitalism is demolished by the very history the audience has lived through, making time itself the play's most damning witness.

On class and the absent victim

Through the deliberately silenced, never-seen Eva Smith, Priestley dramatises the erasure at the heart of class exploitation, turning her absence into the play's loudest accusation against a system that consumes the poor while refusing to look at them.