

How Priestley  
dramatizes his ideas  
about society in *An Inspector Calls*...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

At the time when Priestley wrote this play the world war had just ended and Britain was looking forward to a new life and a change from the past. Churchill had just been expelled from Prime Minister and a Labour government had just taken over. Because of this, Priestley was writing a play in an extremely controversial time and therefore linked his characters and narrative to issues concerning Britain in the 1950's.

Priestley was a man who believed strongly in an equal society and sense of community. This is why in his plays he writes how a man who feels he is of a higher social class (Mr Birling) can be brought down to a different 'social level' just by an inspection from a man who may not even have any authority. Priestley also felt that people should feel responsible for his neighbour and therefore making a post-war country, which is a strong unit under the new government.

These are reasons why Priestley chose to write such a controversial play at a time when the country was changing so much, he did this to show how much he cares and try and enforce his views on the rest of the nation's minds.

Priestley intends on writing this play to persuade the audience to think about the need for social and moral change. As the characters were the play makes the audience inspect their own values.

The play is set in the dining room of a "fairly large suburban house" which belonged to Mr Birling a prosperous manufacturer. The stage directions say that the lighting should change from pink and intimate until the inspector arrives and then it should be brighter and harder. This change shows the

audience how the inspector's arrival is a turning point for the Birling's family's lives.

The family are all in smart evening wear showing that they are well off and have a maid which shows the Birlings are of quite a high social class.

Throughout the play the mood changes dramatically. At the beginning the family is celebrating marriage and has had a good dinner and they are all pleased with themselves. This lulls the audience into a false sense of security because the family all seem to have no problems or faults but with the arrival of the inspector and the family realises they are the focus of his inquires the mood changes.

Mr Birling thinks that the inspector has come to see something about a warrant.

When the inspector tells Mr Birling of this girl's horrible death Mr Birling is only interested on returning to the celebrations. Mr Birling starts referring to this girl as wretched showing he is annoyed that one of his old worker's suicide is interrupting his celebrations.

A slightly drunk Eric soon takes the side of the Inspector going against his father.

Eric: It isn't if you can't go and work somewhere else.

Inspector: Quite so

Mr Birling: (to Eric) Look- just you keep out of this.

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The Inspector then changes his line of inquiry to the rest of the family, " Are you sure you don't know." He looks at Gerald, then at Eric, then at Sheila.

This changes the mood dramatically as it is suddenly not just Mr Birling it is the rest of the family as well. Inspector then begins to inspect Sheila. Sheila starts of showing the audience how she feels about society, " But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people." Sheila then changes and becomes agitated, " When was this?" Birling then tells the inspector how he has ruined their celebrations and the Inspector returns this harsh comment by saying how he had seen someone ruin a nice little life. This reminds Mr Birling of the incident and Mr Birling shows the audience all he really cares about is himself. When Sheila is telling her story she almost breaks down crying showing she cares about what she did unlike Mr Birling.

The Inspector puts nicely how the whole family thinks they are higher social than the rest of the town, " So you used the power you had, as a daughter of a good customer and also of a man well known in the town, to punish the girl?"

This is what Priestley wanted because it makes the audience think about what social level they think they are.

Sheila then finds out that Gerald her fiancé was with this girl when she got fired from Millwards. This is important because it completely puts an end to the celebration of their marriage because Sheila now doesn't trust Gerald. That is why Priestley made this section so tense to show the audience that it is important.

Mrs Birling soon shows the audience that she has the same moral views as Mr Birling, " Girls of that class-"

Priestley represents Mr Birling and Mrs Birling as the past life in Britain. They both have strong social views, regarding themselves as upper class. This is what the world was like before the play was written. They don't want to face up to the fact that they are responsible for their actions even though they are of this higher class.

Priestley represents the Inspector as the present. He is trying to change Britain as the Labour government was at the time. Even though the audience is unsure as to whether he is an inspector or not he still makes a big impression on them and the family. After the war Britain was trying to change, instead of having social levels the government wanted equal rights just as Priestley did. That's why he uses him to represent the present.

Priestley represents Sheila as the future. She doesn't have these moral and social views. She believes strongly in equal society and is not afraid to show

this to her parents, “ You mustn’t try and build up a wall between us and that girl” Priestley uses Sheila to portray his views on society.

The new theatrical version has been highly adapted for the modern day audience.

The first scene has been dramatically from the original indoor, less advanced, play set in the 1910’s. The new stage setting helps the audiences travel back 90 years more easily by a very easy but effective method. When the curtains are pulled back a 1940’s war scene with sirens and children running around. There is a further curtain that reveals the 1910 setting. This creates a barrier between the modern age, 1940 and 1910, which the audience sees clearly and therefore relate to Priestley’s play and the image he is trying to create.

The play starts with diegetic music from a wireless. The children and Edna scattering around below the celebrating Birling family show that they are below them socially and literally. The rain, darkness and smoke symbolise that something bad is going to happen to the Birling family. The verbal aspect of Priestley’s play is modernised by using visual effects instead and these have the same effect on the audience as the original play did.

The modern version chooses to ignore and cut out most of the dialogue from the first scenes because they do not have the dramatical effect that a modern production needs.

The inspector opening up the Birlings house symbolises him opening up their lives and inspecting them. This is similar to the original play because the

Inspector came into their party changing the mood and turning what was a celebration for the family into a reflection on how amazing their lives really are. This shows that your social class is just a cover-up for making mistakes, even though Mr Birling believes he can't be questioned by anyone but the Inspector is brave and breaks the social shield.

Every family member being inspected is brought down to ground level by the Inspector which represents them being brought down to a different social level. This level is where the children and Edna are and where Eva Smith would have been had they not led to her death.

To conclude I think that Priestley has done very well to portray how he feels about society and moral issues in a play that was written in times of high controversy. In act one he clearly shows the audience that it doesn't matter what social class you are you are still responsible for your actions. The Royal National Theatre production shows the same views more effectively by using modern stage technology such as rain and smoke to represent evil and the stage layout showing clearly social levels. Both productions work well to make the audience reflect on their lives.