

J.b. Priestley create
dramatic tension and
mystery throughout
an inspector calls ...

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It is Sixty years since 'An Inspector Calls' was first performed in Moscow after the Russia Revolution in 1945. The play has remained popular ever since this first production and was revived very successfully at the National Theatre in 1994, only seven years after Mrs. Thatcher made her famous statement that 'There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women and there are families'.

One of the reasons for its enduring popularity must be the skill with which J. B. Priestly creates and maintains tension and mystery throughout the play.

Although it was first performed in 1946, it is set in 1912 when Edwardian class divisions were still apparent. One example of this in the play is from Mrs. Birling treating Edna abruptly by saying,

'All right, Edna. I'll ring from the drawing-room when we want coffee'.

She is telling Edna to get out of the dining room rather than being in the dining-room and disturbing their family's conversations. Another example in the play which suggests the Edwardian class divisions existed is from Mr. Birling trying to bully the inspector by asking him the question,

'How do you get on with our Chief Constable, Colonel Roberts?'

to intimate that he is a friend of the constable and he plays golf with him frequently. He is also intimating that he could get the inspector into trouble easily if the inspector behaves offensively to him. At the time, trade unions were weak so Eva led a strike in the hope that they could get fairer

treatment. However, Mr. Birling has refused her requests and she is sacked from the factory after leading the strike,

‘ She’d had a lot to say – far too much – so she had to go.’

The play was written at a time of great hope that society would become more fair and equal after World War Two. The First Labour government in Britain was first elected in 1945, committed to social change. The social legislation implemented to set up the National Health Service in Britain which has brought free health care to all classes of people. Further more, the social housing was also provided in the council housing estates for working class people and university education was made available to the working class people as well. The audience can tell that J. B. Priestly was a socialist by the inspector’s final words to the family in act three,

‘ We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.’

The inspector has also predicted and expected in the play that if people do not learn to be fair and treat others equally, they would end up with wars of ‘ fire and blood and anguish’.

There is tension which has already existed during act one. Mr. Birling’s speeches before the entrance of the inspector are dramatic and ironic, ‘ I say there isn’t a chance of war. The world’s developing so fast that it’ll make war impossible.’

However, the audience of 1946 would all know that he is definitely wrong as they would all know that two years later, World War One with Germany came along. This shows that Mr. Birling is overconfident to himself. Mr. Birling's speeches are completely wrong about so many events which also include his wrong prediction of the conflicts between workers and their bosses would come to nothing because there was the Lawrence textile strike in 1912 when the play was set. On the other hand, recently at the time when the play was set, Titanic, a very famous ship was built,

' And then ships. Why, a friend of mine went over this new liner last week - the Titanic - she sails next week - forty - six thousand eight hundred tons - forty six thousand hundred thousand tons - New York in five days - and every luxury - and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable.'

The writer, J. B. Priestly was making a fool speech for Mr. Birling as every audience knows that the Titanic was actually but unbelievably sank.

Things are not going absolutely pleasant already at the start of the engagement, Eric is drinking too much and Gerald's family did not attend to the engagement party to celebrate which has made the party not totally complete and perfect, ' I have an idea that your mother - Lady Croft - while she doesn't object to my girl - feels you might have done better for yourself socially'.

Gerald's mother, Lady Croft is obviously more established and socially superior, therefore she is not very happy and agreed with the engagement between Gerald and Sheila as she thinks that Gerald should have done

better than Sheila. The tension in the play increases when the unexpected visitor interrupts towards the end of the engagement party after the announcement of Edna, ' sir, an inspector's called'.

The inspector gave himself an impression of an enigmatic figure to the audience. He refuses to be bullied and intimidated by a social superior. He does not conform Mr. Birling's ideas about class. He treats and respects everyone the same and he thinks that everyone should be equal. Therefore, he does not implement social superior's order and he goes and do things in his own way, an example of this is when he tells and allows Eric to drink even when Mr. Birling, who should actually be the one who is in charged with the decision is strongly disagreeing,

' I know - he's your son and this is your house - but look at him. He needs a drink now just to see him through.'

The adjectives ' steadily', ' impressively' and ' gravely' are some of the examples used in the stage direction of the inspector in the play which describes and creates the way and effect of how calm and right the inspector is speaking. ' Distress', ' miserably' and ' uneasily' examples of adjectives used as stage direction for other characters which describes and suggests that they are upset, nervous and they speak with confession. The inspector is implacably focused on his enquiry and he is not easily diverted from other characters which keeps reminding them of the horrific details and make them unsettled. Rapidly it becomes clear that he is not actually a police

inspector as he is more interested in moral judgements rather than criminal law,

‘ Public men, Mr. Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges.’

This speech shows that the inspector is making Mr. Birling to realise that being rich does not mean being the best and happy. We could tell that the inspector in the play might be fake as he interviews every witnesses all together in a room which real police inspector would not do, they would interview witnesses separately so that they could not hear what each other says. J. B. Priestly did this deliberately for the purpose of increasing the mystery of the play.

‘ Is he a real police inspector?’

J. B. Priestly has left the audience to decide it by themselves. He has given a few clues in the play but the play does not actually explain the whole truth of the inspector. The name of the inspector, ‘ Goole’ might be a play on words as it sounds like the word ‘ ghoul’ which might also means ‘ ghost’. The inspector might even be an avenging angel as he speaks in such an emotive language with describing Eva and Daisy as a ‘ pretty’ and ‘ lively’ who died in ‘ misery and agony - hating life’, but no one actually knows. There is not a definite answer but it is to be judged by the audience differently by different point of views.

The dramatic unities which are used by J. B. Priestly in the play contribute the feeling of claustrophobia and indicate that there are no escape possible.

There are dramatic unities of the time, action and place. The play is claustrophobic as there is only one plot and no other sub-plot with the action taking place in only one location which is the Birlings' dining room. Also, the play takes place in 'real' time. As well as the dramatic unities used in the play, each act ends on a cliffhanger and so the audience is left hanging and wondering what is going to happen. The audiences' imagination build up the suspense which is also a reason of the increase of the tension in the play. The lighting in the first place of the play is particularly important. There is a big contrast of the lighting between at the start of the play and when the inspector has arrived. At the beginning of the play, the lighting would be 'pink and intimate' but then it becomes 'brighter and harder' as the inspector arrives. J. B. Priestly deliberately freezes the action between the Acts to create tension. The revelations are not chronological and it is more dramatic irony as Mrs. Birling is so emphatic that the father of the woman's child is responsible,

'She said that the father was only a youngster - silly and wild and drinking too much.', when the audience already knows this will be Eric,

'Secondly, I blame the young man who was the father of the child she was going to have. If, as she said, he didn't belong to her class, and was some drunken young idler, then it's all the more reason why he shouldn't escape.'

Once the inspector's interrogation stops, the tension diminishes. However, the recrimination begins, Eric and Sheila feel different from the others. They confess the tragedy that they have done as the others are only focusing on

whether the inspector is real or fake as they do not want to admit the 'facts' which the inspector has said and they are trying to prove that the inspector is fake, and therefore everything he says is fake.

'It doesn't much matter now, of course - but was he really a police inspector?'

'Well, if he wasn't, it matters a devil of a lot. Makes all the difference.'

'No, it doesn't.'

From the argument of Sheila and her father Mr. Birling with their different attitudes, the audience could tell that there are still some tensions present. Gerald and Mr. Birling work out that it need not have been the same girl. The tension rises at the end of the play as the family is falling apart and there are other mysteries coming up; they find out that the inspector is not really a police inspector, likewise Eva Smith and Daisy Renton is fake and made up which means that they did not actually kill her. However, they got another phone call from a police saying that a girl has committed suicide by swallowing some disinfectant and he is going to come along to ask some questions. It is just as the same as what the inspector Goole has said. There are a lot of unexpected questions at the end of this play which is why the play is full of tension, even when it is ended.

The tension and mystery are far from resolved at the end of the play. Was it the same girl whom the characters mistreated? Who or what exactly was the inspector? Will the evening of interrogations be repeated by the police

inspector on the way? The audience is left with realisation of the play, despite appearances, it is not a naturalistic murder mystery, but a vehicle for the playwright's socialist ideas of being responsible for each other.