

How Priestley uses the Inspector to create tension and suspense in an Inspector C...

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In 1945 audiences for the first time were seeing J. B. Priestley's latest work - 'An Inspector Calls': A play written to challenge the class system and social workings of Britain that had been in place for hundreds of years.

Priestley believed firmly in the concept of social equality, or as it's better known, socialism. During the war he made many radio broadcasts, talking about how a stronger Britain could be built from the ruins that the war would leave.

The class system comprised of three "levels": "Lower", "Middle" and "Upper". Almost the entire wealth in Britain was owned by a very small percentage of the upper class. It consisted mainly of owners of large business empires or other profitable enterprises. The middle class was made up of small time successful business men, or people who had married into it. The lower class consisted of factory workers, servants or other employees working for just enough money to keep themselves alive.

During the war this system had been inoperative. Rationing enforced the same clothing, regardless of class. Every British citizen had an equal chance of being killed no matter what their class - there was no superiority - all people were equal.

Priestley chose the end of the war to publish 'An Inspector Calls' as people still had fresh in their minds how they had to pull together as one strong nation, proof that a socialist Britain would function.

As the inspector is just about to arrive Mr. Birling is promoting his anti-socialist views: "the way some of these cranks talk...you'd think were all

mixed together like bees in a hive - community and all that nonsense." He is telling the audience exactly what the inspector is against. As though to reinforce this point the inspector arrives just as Mr. Birling is concluding his lecture to Gerald and Eric.

The inspector's presence on the stage was intended to be a powerful one. It makes the audience feel tense. We can see Priestley intended this from his stage direction on the first page: "...lighting should be pink and imitate until the inspector arrives, and then it should be bright and harder". The change in lighting reinforces the inspector's stage presence and defines his authority, power, commitment and determination by being able to change the atmosphere. This control over the stage will create a feeling of intimidation in the audience's mind, creating tension.

The inspector very much contrasts the Birlings, in his social views and more blatantly in the way he dresses. It is clear, from the moment he enters the stage that he is a working class person, (representing Eva) whereas the Birlings are quite apparently "Upper-Middle", this difference in class suggests tension as the Birlings would automatically assume themselves superior.

When the inspector begins to question the Birlings, and Gerald it becomes apparent that the seemingly respectable family may have something to hide and suspicions start to build up in the audience's mind.

Mr Birling is expecting to receive a knighthood, which would enable him to potentially move in higher social circles and move up the social ladder. As

long as he can “keep out of trouble for the next few months” his knighthood is almost guaranteed. When the inspector starts to uncover the less respectable side to his family tension is built because Mr. Birling and the audience are aware that should the results of the inspector’s enquiry get into the public domain his chances of being awarded a knighthood would be shattered.

The inspector tries to make the Birlings feel guilty for what they have done. The way in which he asks questions makes the audience think they are being accused; this also helps to build tension.

Every so often the inspector will describe Eva’s death, each time adding a little more detail, in the hopes of making them feel guilty and responsible for what they have done. The language he uses is graphic: he stresses words such as “agony” to try and make his point. He wants them to realise their social responsibility and not abuse their social position.

The inspector wanted Mr. Birling to pay fair wages to his lower class workers. He wanted Sheila to learn to control her temper and more importantly not to take it out on other people. The inspector wanted Gerald and Eric to be more responsible for their relationships both sexually and otherwise with women. He wanted Mrs Birling to have respect for the working class and not to abuse her position on the council that was intended to help women in distress.

Towards the end of the evening the inspector shocks them and the audience by telling them that Eva ended not only her own life, but that of a child she was carrying – Eric’s Child. Just before he announces this Priestley makes

effective use of dramatic irony by allowing Mrs Birling to incriminate her own son. This created tension between Eric and Mrs Birling.

Mr. Birling phones the local police chief to see if he has an 'Inspector Goole' on his team, when the answer is in the negative more tension and suspense is created as the Birlings and Gerald begin to wonder who the 'Inspector' he could have been.

His manner was very much different to that manner that would be expected of a police officer. He cut into conversations, completely disregarded social position and adopted a moralising tone: "...you see, we have to share something. If there's nothing else we have to share out guilt."

The stage directions also tell us that he stares at the person he is interrogating which would be extremely intimidating for the person in question. He makes use of imperative verbs - ordering people around: "...don't yammer and stammer at me man!" this would unnerve Mr. Birling greatly as his authority is being undermined in his own home.

Although he asked questions, he appeared to already know the answers which again reinforces that he wasn't there to get answers, he was there to make a point.

His parting words have an incredible effect, as the audience, who have just lived through a war, can easily identify with them: "...and if man cannot learn this lesson they will be taught it in blood, and fire, and anguish. Goodnight"

After the Inspector has left there is tension and suspense created as all the characters start to blame each other for their supposed involvement with the death of Eva. Mr and Mrs Birling still firmly maintain that they have done nothing wrong, Gerald accepts limited responsibility and despite all the evidence that Gerald put forward Sheila and Eric still recognise the part they played in Eva's suicide and feel responsible and guilty.

The play is ended in an intense atmosphere of tension and suspense as Mr. Birling answers the phone to find "...a girl has died on the way to the infirmary after drinking some strong disinfectant..." and "...a police officer is on his way here to ask us some questions." This leaves the audience wondering - Who was 'Inspector Goole' and how did he know what he did?