

B priestley ends each
act on a note of high
drama essay sample



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JB Priestley lived during the early 20th Century, a time of great global change. He wrote "An Inspector Calls" after the First World War and, like much of his work, contains controversial, politically charged messages. Keen to pioneer a new 'morality' in politics, Priestley's chief concerns involved social inequality in Britain and the need for nuclear disarmament.

Priestley presents his arguments clearly through interesting characters, with very different views and a powerful story line with major consequences to individual actions. In this essay, I will be discussing how tension is developed towards the end of each act and the way language and dramatic devices are used to reveal Priestley's political message. John Boynton Priestley was a journalist, novelist, playwright and essayist, born in Yorkshire in 1894.

In the 1930s Priestley became increasingly concerned about social problems, and in 1941 he became the chairman of the 1941, publishing a report that called for public control of the railways, mines and docks and a national wages policy. A further report in May 1942 argued for works councils and the publication of "post-war plans for the provision of full and free education, employment and a civilized standard of living for everyone." Later that year, the members of the committee established the socialist Common Wealth Party.

The party advocated the three principles of Common Ownership, Vital Democracy and Morality in Politics. "An Inspector Calls" was written in 1945, just after the Second World War, where people were recovering from 6 years of warfare, danger and doubt. However, the play is set in 1912, two years before the First World War would begin. Furthermore, in 1912, there were

strong distinctions between the upper and lower classes of that era but as a result of the two world wars, this was somewhat significantly reduced.

There was also the matter of women; they were seen inferior to men and all an upper-class woman could do was get married, whereas a lower-class woman was merely seen as cheap labour. However, this also changed as a result of the wars, and eventually women earned a more respected place in society. The last significant change to the conditions of Britain, at the time the play was written and set, was to the upper-class's attitude to social change; before the war, the ruling classes saw no need to change the status quo, whereas after the wars, there was great aspiration for social change.

"An Inspector Calls" is a combination of genres, blending drama, mystery, crime, politics and Priestley also presents this morality play within the "whodunit" genre; he uses this genre for various reasons. The message is definitely directed to the upper classes of society and Priestley uses his characters to channel his own thoughts and opinions or, in the case of Arthur Birling, contradicts them as he wanted the audience to have a low opinion of Birling because he was discouraging his Capitalist politics and trying to show people like Birling to be at fault.

As the play was written in 1947 and set in 1912, this is an example of dramatic irony and the audience would know that Arthur was very wrong in his opinions and might even think him to be stupid. When he says 'the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else', he explicitly says that he is strongly Capitalist and is narrow minded. Throughout the play, Priestley follows one of the classical or

three unities, which are rules for drama derived from a passage in Aristotle's Poetics. This is the unity of time where the action in a play should take place over no more than 24 hours.

This means there are no jumps in time or, especially in this case, change of scenery. This is dramatically effective for "An Inspector Calls" as the audience know exactly what has been said and done and everyone is just waiting for more revelations as the interrogations continue, knowing they will get an explanation immediately and nothing will be left unexplained about each character's story, except perhaps Inspector Goole's'. In Act 1, Priestley sets the scene very clearly, making sure he gets the message across that they are a well off family.

The atmosphere at the start of the play is happy and cheerful as they are all celebrating Gerald and Sheila's engagement. We can tell they were happy because the stage directions tell us Gerald and Mrs. Birling were "smiling" at times and Sheila was being "half serious half playful". The stage directions at the start of the play also tell us that Mr. Birling is a "heavy looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties with fairly easy manners but rather provincial in his speech", this suggests that his character is very self involved.

During Mr. Birling's speech about Gerald and Sheila's engagement he says to Gerald "Your father and I have been friendly rivals in business for some time now - though Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company - and now you've brought us together, and perhaps we may look forward to the time when Crofts and Birlings are no longer competing but are

working together - for lower costs and higher prices". This tells us that his character may be at sometimes more interested in business than his family. The speeches that Mr. Birling makes are most of the time long, boring and show that he is egotistical.

His speeches reveal a great deal about the social context. They include a lot of dramatic irony for example when Mr. Birling says " Why. A friend of mine went over this new liner last week - the Titanic - she sails next week - forty six thousand eight hundred tons - New York in five days - and every luxury - and unsinkable". This is dramatic irony because the audience know that Titanic sunk on its first sail this creates tension and makes Mr. Birling look foolish. I think Mr. Birling is very much in control at the start of the play because to his family he is a " practical hard headed businessman" as he always reminds them.

In Act 1, the timing of the inspector is uncanny; he rings the doorbell just as Birling has concluded his speech on responsibility, stating " A man should look out for himself, and his family if he has one". This is a prime example of a dramatically effective device, as it makes it seem like the Inspector is omniscient and purposefully makes this timely entrance almost as if to discredit everything Mr Birling just said, stopping the Birling family in their tracks.

The language in the stage directions on page 10 shows the mood has changed because Gerald and Mr. Birling create tension by talking about why a police inspector might be there, which makes Eric start to worry. Mr. Birling says, " I'm still on the Bench. It may be something about a warrant. " And

then Gerald says " Sure to be. Unless Eric's been up to something. And that would be awkward, wouldn't it" Then Eric says, Here, what do you mean? " Gerald replies, "(lightly) Only something we were talking about when you were talking about when you were out. A joke really. " Then in response Eric says, "(still uneasy) Well, I don't think it's very funny".

It shows the mood has changed because the stage directions tell us that Eric also becomes " uneasy". We can also tell that the party has been interrupted because the characters stop the cheerful and playful conversation and become more serious as Mr. Birling and Gerald begin to talk about why the Inspector may have called. This conversation between Mr. Birling, Gerald and Eric creates tension because Mr. Birling and Gerald are talking to each other about Eric, which makes Eric very anxious because he overhears. The dialogue on page 10 reveals that Mr. Birling's character is not very close to his son.

When the Inspector enters Mr. Birling says, " Have a glass of port - or a little whisky? " This is to break the ice, as Mr. Birling has never met the Inspector before. Mr. Birling also asks, " You're new are you? " and then leads on to say " I was an alderman for years - and Lord Mayor two years ago - and I'm still on the Bench - so I know the Brumley police officers pretty well - and I thought I'd never seen you before" he said this to let the Inspector know that Mr. Birling had some authority to try and scare the Inspector. The Inspector uses dramatic language to shock the Birling family of the girl's death, He says, " she was in great agony".

The stage directions tell us that Mr. Birling is impatient; this suggests that he could be worried or possibly guilty about something. Mr. Birling responds to the questions quite impatiently because he is scared of what the inspector might find out. Mr. Birling is against collective responsibility because he feels that he is above the problems of people of a lower social class. He says "put it like that, there's something in what you say. Still, I can't accept any responsibility. Mr Birling starts to show his annoyance when the Inspector starts questioning him.

He says, "I've half a mind to report you", this also shows how easily agitated he is. When the Inspector arrives Mr. Birling becomes defensive as the Inspector tricks him into revealing information. He also gets very agitated when the Inspector twists his words. His attitude reflects the key themes of the play, which are responsibility and guilt. Priestley achieved a simple yet interesting display of Mr. Birling's character by showing how mixed up his priorities are and by showing his attitude to other characters. It also showed clearly everything that he represents which is carelessness and slyness.

Lighting is also a key dramatic device used in this act, as the stage directions infer, when the Inspector makes his entrance the Birling family are somewhat thrown into relief or "exposed" as the lighting goes from dim and intimate to bright and harsh. Another way the Inspector changes the scene is how he changes the family's attitudes towards each other; they go from being overly polite to one another and relaxed to a suspense-filled, anxious and uneasy atmosphere, where the family start putting the blame on one another in a bid to rid themselves of any guilt.

Moreover, as we get deeper into Act 1 and Birling's and Sheila's parts in Eva Smith's suicide are revealed, tension is increased and, at the end of the act, Gerald has an involuntary reaction to the mention of Daisy Renton's name, leading us to believe Gerald also has a part to play in this mystery, which helps end the act on a note of thrilling suspense and high drama. In "An Inspector Calls", Inspector Goole's role is central to the play's message of social responsibility.

It is through the Inspector's meetings with the Birling family and Gerald Croft that each character is made aware of his or her selfish and uncaring attitude towards the less fortunate in society. In this sense, Inspector Goole could be called a staging device as a staging device is usually intended to enhance the play's central message or to create the desired mood and atmosphere. Yet, defining Inspector Goole as merely a staging device implies that he is not a character in his own right but exists simply as a way of exploring the personalities and lives of other, more fully rounded, characters.

This could be linked to his actual name: Inspector Goole (or Spectre Ghoul) suggesting he is not real and is more of a ghost or representative of the Birling family's conscience or even the voice of God, as he appears omniscient in the way he seems to know and understand an extraordinary amount and is in complete control of all the interrogations; an example of this is when he tells characters to "settle things later", suggesting there's a certain direction and speed he wants the conversation to go.

Furthermore, towards the end, he seems to be in quite a rush: he stresses "I haven't much time". This could be because he knows the real inspector is

about to arrive. He could even be the voice of Priestley, this is suggested in the way he talks and airs his political views, very unlike a police inspector, leading us also to believe he is not an inspector at all. Moreover, he is in control of the characters from Act 1 all the way through to Act 3, working systematically, revealing one story at a time.

This is how the Inspector adds to the tension in the play and he is essential to keeping the characters and audience on their feet and anxious about what is going to happen next. The Inspector's exit at the end of Act 1 is another way in which he seems omniscient; it's almost as if he knows what Sheila will say to Gerald when they are left together in the room, as it is evident there is high tension between the pair. Sheila, showing perceptiveness, takes up the role of inspector, questioning Gerald about how he knew "Daisy Renton".

It turns into an argument and, when Gerald starts to explain his affair with the girl, the Inspector returns with "well" - just in time for the confession. In this part of the act, we see Sheila Birling becoming more mature; she is not angry when she finds out about the affair, she says she respects his honesty. Also, she seems like the only character who really knows how the Inspector works and, in a way, she becomes the Inspector's accomplice when questioning Gerald. Moreover, just before the Inspector comes back in, she says to Gerald "...

He knows. Of course he knows" and "No, he is giving us rope - so that we will hang ourselves", showing how Sheila begins to understand what is happening through Inspector Goole's approach. Act Two then begins, exactly the same as Act One ended. Priestley decided not to change anything in

order to achieve a sense of continuity. Continuity is thus used as a dramatic device to keep the play focused and concentrated on one subject. This also raises the tension and draws in the attention of the audience.

Referring back to the beginning of this essay and women's roles during 1912, it is apparent that Sheila and Gerald represent the conditions at that time. Women were regarded very differently from men in the eyes of society and the law. Women received a different education, they had fewer rights, and prior to 1918 were not able to vote in national elections. Marriage was seen as an upper-class woman's "career". And for the less wealthy, all they could do was work. By 1945, when "An Inspector Calls" was written, after the two world wars, women had been given a new role in society and were somewhat, highly respected.

Gerald and Sheila are showing the 1914 stereotype, though Sheila is shown becoming more independent and not afraid to say what she thinks. This is shown in the way she openly offers her opinions and is even sarcastic towards Gerald, "... and you were the wonderful fairy prince". She is also the main protestor against the older generation and by the end of the play she agrees with the Inspector's socialist views. At the end of act two, Priestley uses several techniques in order to make the scene dramatically effective.

The carefully written script creates an atmosphere of suspense and tension. The techniques Priestley uses in the script are dramatic irony and the dismantling of the false sense of security amongst the characters and consequently the audience. In this act, Mrs Birling is talking about how she met Eva Smith; Already pregnant, Eva Smith ventured to the Women's

Charity Organization of Brumley where Mrs Birling, a prominent member of it, turned her down from the support that she needed.

Eva Smith approached the Organization with the name Ms. Birling which caused Mrs. Birling to “naturally” be, “Prejudiced against her from the start.” This is a prime example of Mrs. Birling being proud and engaging herself in wrath, two of the seven deadly sins. Mrs Birling considered Eva’s story, “A load of silly nonsense.” and so she used her influence to, “Have it refused”, which again shows her pride and her prejudices. She considers Eva Smith as a small speck in the dust, this is seen when she talks about Eva using, “A girl of that sort.” in her language and sentencing.

The Inspector asks Mrs Birling near the end of his questioning whether or not she is sorry now for what she did to Eva Smith, Mrs Birling then very proudly replies that she is sorry that, “She should have come to such a horrible end” but then says that she accepts no blame for it at all, whereas the main person to blame would be, “The girl herself”. The Inspector tries to help Mrs Birling realise her part in the death when at the end, he once again, tells each character what they did to Eva Smith- “You turned her away when she most needed help.

You refused her even the pitiable little bit of organized charity you had in your power to grant her.” There is a prime example of dramatic irony in the play as Mrs Birling stresses how Eva and her baby are solely the father’s responsibility: “I blame the young man ... some drunken young idler ... he should be made an example of. If the girl’s death is due to anybody, then it’s

due to him". She continues to blame the father but the audience and other characters start to realise the truth and it is here that dramatic irony is used.

Sheila warns her mother, " You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl. If you do then the Inspector will just break it down. And it'll be worse when he does" and " mother stop-stop" but, at the end of act 2, where it is revealed that Eric is the father, Mrs Birling says, " I don't believe it. I won't believe it... " At this point, the door slams shut, showing use of a dramatic device and Eric enters the scene to accusative and inquisitive stares from his family and the Inspector, and you feel the release of the dramatic tension as the trap of the play snaps shut on him.

In act 2, Priestley's political message voiced by the Inspector, is particularly seen; the Inspector is offensive but fair; he doesn't give people with higher status's any advantages or treat them any different " Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges"; he believes everyone is equal and society should aim to be like that. This could be considered Priestley's key moral message which supports the idea that Inspector ' Ghoul' is in fact Priestley's voice. Symbolism is made more aware with the Inspector seen as the voice of Socialism and Arthur Birling, a representative of Capitalism.

The Birlings could also be symbolised by the seven deadly sins; Mr Birling being greed for sacking Eva Smith, just to save a few shillings, or pride for boasting about his wealth and high status. Mrs Birling could be wrath for being angry with Eva Smith over calling herself ' Mrs Birling'. Sheila could be envy for being jealous of Eva in Milwards, and Gerald could be lust for having an affair with Eva. The fact that they can be identified as sins shows how

Priestley emphasises the immorality of capitalism, placing “ An Inspector Calls” within the genre of a morality play.

As the play progresses, the audience not only notices the Inspector getting through to other characters but we also see the Inspector show expressions of understanding and sympathy. This is portrayed through the stage directions, “ stares speculatively after her. ” I think this is a very effective line and should be presented very clearly to imply the Inspector is surprised as well as hopeful that Shelia understands that she’s made a mistake and moreover it supports Priestley’s idea; everybody makes mistakes but it isn’t too late to change your ways and change help society as a whole.