

# Socialist and capitalist political views

[Literature](#), [Drama](#)



In this essay I will be exploring the ways in which JB Priestly presents and develops the tensions in Brumley in 'An Inspector Calls'. I will be looking at a range of tensions including class, intergeneration, male vs. female and also dramatic techniques used by JB Priestly. An Inspector Calls was written after the Second World War. It is set in the spring of 1912 at the Brumley home of the Birling's. In the play the central theme is responsibility. Priestley is interested in our personal responsibility for our own actions and our collective responsibility to society. Society was split into three classes at the time: Working class, Middle class and Upper class. The middle and upper class thought that the future looked pleasing and they were enjoying life. For working class women, a job was crucial, there was no social security at that time, so without a job they had no money. Women were not yet valued by society and had also not yet been awarded the right to vote. By setting the play in this period before the war but writing it after creates tension and irony throughout as the audience know what is to come. The question of the play is whether Eva Smith's fate was mainly a result of the kind of society that existed in 1912 or simply a result of unchanging human nature. The play unfolds by the mysterious Inspector Goole slowly exposing how each character plays a role in death of Eva Smith It begins with the Inspector's entrance bringing a socialist message, interrupting the character who was speaking prior to his arrival, Arthur Birling, a capitalist who had been preaching the value of capitalist views such as " a man has to make his own way-has to look after himself" (pg9). However the events of the play show this to be unworkable. In fact the bell rings when Birling is in mid-sentence. It appears the Inspector deliberately timed his entrance to make it even

clearer where his message is aimed. Drama is created because the Inspector on the other hand, believes that " we are members of one body. we are responsible for each other" pg 56) and had therefore come to the house to teach the Birling's and Gerald a lesson on how capitalists mistreated the working class . The underlying message for this has caused tension; a socialist is interrupting a capitalist. Priestley has created drama by using the sound of the doorbell to create tension between two opposing political views. The timing of entrances and exits is crucial. The setting and lighting are very important. Priestley describes the scene in detail at the opening of Act 1, so that the audience has the immediate impression of a " heavily comfortable house." Priestley says that the lighting should be " pink and intimate until the inspector arrives and then it should be brighter and harder". The lighting reflects the mood of the play hinting something is going to happen. Throughout the play there are subtle hints that is not all as it seems. This arouses interest in the audience. Birling still being a magistrate him and Gerald joke about the Inspectors visit shown in (pg 10) "I'm still on the bench it may be something about a warrant" Eric does not share the joke and says "well I don't think it's very funny" (pg10) hinting he may have something to conceal. The only physical evidence of Eva is the photograph which provoked great reactions, especially from Sheila. When the Inspector " produces the photograph" to her she " looks at it closely, recognises it with a little cry, gives a half stifled sob and then runs out"(pg21), this clearly states she has taken part in Eva's suicide story. The audience here reaches a turning point where now the " excitable and happy about life" Sheila is the reason Eva lost her job at Millward's. The photograph gives Priestley an

opportunity to present emotions that accompany the characters reactions to the photograph in detail creating drama and tension. The photograph is a recurrent dramatic device because instead of the Inspector showing the picture once, creating tension once, he creates it twice giving the audience a slow drip-by-drip detailed account of each characters feelings upon the presentation of the photograph and their relationship with Eva Smith, making the play dramatic. The audience then becomes intrigued to see how each of the character's react, each time the photo is presented. The Inspector uses the excuse of ' one person and one line of inquiry at a time' (pg12) and at the end of the play Gerald realises that by never allowing two people to see the photograph at the same time the Inspector may of used several different photographs. Dramatic irony is shown when Mr Birling explains at length his uncomplicated idea of the world. His vision is sunnily optimistic. He dismisses the prospects of war, strikes and other problems in a self-satisfied way by saying "there isn't a chance of war" (pg6) and the Titanic is ' unsinkable absolutely unsinkable" (pg7) which he mentions with such pride. Birling's insistence here on the facts is ironic in the light of later events. When the audience knows that there have been two world wars since and the sinking of the Titanic. This not only makes the audience think Birling is an opinionated and arrogant character giving a poor impression of capitalists, but also it generates great tension due to these events being very vivid in the minds of the audience for they have happened recently . Inspector Goole's message is that a great wrong has been committed. Notice the tone of the inspectors words when he warns them about ' fire and blood and anguish' pg 56 this is another direct reference to the First and Second

World War. The Inspector's prophecy was intended to remind them of the necessity of being responsible for one another. Eva is also a dramatic device because she is an unseen character. Priestley has cleverly described who she is without her having to perform on stage: She's described as "a lively good looking girl" (pg 14) she started to frequently visit the "Palace Variety Theatre" which led to affairs with both Gerald and Eric; and resorting to charity she attempted to get financial assistance from. This involvement with the characters is highly dramatic: the situations described are full of emotions and yet she is never revealed on stage, creating great suspense and mystery as we only know of her from the Inspector and through what the other characters reveal. There is also almost an affinity between Eva and Sheila as they are the same age and Sheila might have suffered the same fate as Eva had not luck given her a more privileged position in society. Eva's activities caused her to be dismissed by Mr Birling and the shop owner. Sheila's actions were clearly much more those of a genuine trouble maker but she was immune from punishment because of her social position. Mr Birling is self-centred and proud of his status, he tries initially to put the Inspector in his place by emphasising his position in society. He is described at the start as a "heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties but rather provincial in his speech." He thinks that it was outrageous of the Inspector to talk to a man of his standing in the way he did 'then look at the way he talked to me' Birling takes it for granted that these honours confer upon him some kind of special status which means that people must talk to him in a respectful and deferential way. Arthur Birling sees Gerald's father as his social superior and his comment "You ought to like this port Gerald as a

matter of fact Finchley told me it's exactly the same port your father gets from him" shows this. Sybil's manner indicates she is very conscious of social position especially her own. She is extremely snobbish and expects others to show her respect. She thinks people from the 'lower classes' are almost a different species. She ignores Sheila's warnings on the Inspector and persists trying to use her social position to intimidate the inspector. She has already attempted to discredit Eva as 'a girl of that sort' (pg47) her attitude to anyone she sees as beneath her is highly patronising. The quote, 'girls of that class' (pg30) demonstrates that Mrs Birling is a class conscious person and the emphasis on 'that' shows how dismissive she is of the working class. There is male vs. female tension shown between Gerald and Sheila in their marriage. Sheila hints there is a problem when she says 'yes except for all last summer when you ever came near me and I wondered about what had happened to you' The middle and upper classes had a double standard when it came to relationships. It was fully acceptable for respectable men to take part in pre-marital sex but not for the middle and upper classes women, they were expected to remain pure and innocent. Reputable women could not risk pregnancy outside of marriage. Men had sex with working class girls, prostitutes and mistresses as doing so with their own class would have been breaking the moral codes. Priestley has also made the play dramatic by having only Sheila and Eric, the two youngest characters, learn something from the Inspector's visit. Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald seem as if they want to return to their previous ways of treating those less fortunate than themselves; even though it has been highlighted by the Inspector and Sheila that all five of them are held morally responsible for Eva Smith's suicide. It is

not only the Inspector who has tried to get a socialist message across, Sheila also gets very upset at her parents for "trying not to face the facts" and accuses them of "being childish", this is ironic because they are the adults and typically should take responsibility for their actions. Drama is created due to the irony of the children having mature responses to the interrogation instead of thinking that "everything's all right now" at the revelation of the Inspector's authority. Mrs Birling (pg 30) says "You seem to have made quite an impression on this child, Inspector. The Inspector (pg 30) replies with 'We often do on the young ones. They're more impressionable.' By Gerald saying 'everything's all right now Sheila' it shows he has not learned as much as the other younger characters, he looks at the situation superficially and cannot seem to see that Sheila has changed even if he has not. Priestley was trying to show the difference between the young people and the older characters. Sheila and Eric both use slang expressions which contrast with the language used by their parents. This helps to emphasise their youth and liveliness and contributes to the play's authentic period atmosphere. At the end of the play when they find out that he was not a real police inspector and the girl isn't dead the adults carry on as if nothing has happened but the younger ones carry on as if the girl's dead. Birling says "I can't accept any responsibility" (pg14) whilst Sheila says 'I know I'm to blame I'm desperately sorry' (pg29). By the inspector being rude to Mr and Mrs Birling throughout it encourages Eric and Sheila to do the same. Just before the end of the play Mr Birling argues 'the whole things different now' and congratulates himself on having avoided a scandal whereas the children still show remorse. They represent the younger generation that Priestly hopes is still open minded

enough to learn to accept responsibility for others. The ending leaves the audience on a cliff-hanger. In Act 3 the Birlings believe themselves to be off the hook when it is discovered that the Inspector wasn't real and that no girl had died in the infirmary. This releases some of the tension - but the final telephone call, announcing that a real Inspector is on his way to ask questions about the suicide of a young girl, suddenly restores the tension very dramatically. It is an unexpected final twist, as everyone stares ' guilty and dumbfounded'. It makes a mockery of Mr and Mrs Birling's and Gerald's elaborate self-congratulation. It seems the older culprits are about to get what they deserve, because they have learned nothing. ' We are members of one body we are responsible for each other' is in the Inspector's final speech this presents the opposite view to the speech Arthur Birling made when the doorbell first rang. This ending mirrors the audience's reaction to the ending; prompting their initial perception of the play. These questions at the end cause suspense , further more drama is generated leaving the audience on the edge of their seats trying to find out unsolved mysteries like whether the call at the end meant the whole investigation was going to be repeated. The phone-call leaves characters panicked and de-stabilised-having the greatest dramatic effect on the audience. I believe An Inspector Calls to be a very effective play. JB Priestley communicates his ideas and beliefs of social equality and collective responsibility through his character, Inspector Goole, who with the help of other characters in the play, shows the audience just what can happen if one chooses to ignore others and deny responsibility for one's own actions and their consequences. The dramatic technique I feel that was particularly effective was that of the way he set the play before the



war and the Titanic but then wrote it after. It let me as a reader feel engaged and involved as I knew more than the characters themselves.