

How has seeing a performance of an inspector calls enhanced your understanding of...



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After watching Desmond Davis' production of the play ' An Inspector Calls', my understanding of the script and the under-lying meanings of the play have been considerably enhanced. ' An Inspector Calls' is a play about a girl named Eva Smith. At the very beginning of the story we learn that Eva Smith committed suicide by swallowing a large quantity of washing up detergent, which leads us to the question, Why? An inspector that was investigating the circumstances, in which Eva Smith died, went to the house of a very wealthy upper class family called the ' Birlings'.

Who when the inspector came are in the middle of a celebration. The inspector begins to rigorously interrogate the other characters and involvement by each individual is slowly revealed. The inspector then leaves, as abruptly as he came and they discover that he was an impostor, then several characters begin to disregard their involvement in the suicide. ' An Inspector Calls' ends with a phone call that Arthur Birling answers and manages to stammer ' A girl has just died – on her way to the infirmary – after swallowing some disinfectant. And a police inspector is on his way here – to ask some – questions'.

We assume that this time the inspector will be legitimate. There were quite a few differences between the screenplay Guy Hamilton directed and the play that Priestley wrote. The main difference between the book and the film is that in the film you actually meet the character Eva Smith/Daisy Renton in the flashbacks used by the characters to describe their contact with her. The film uses flashbacks to enhance our knowledge of Daisy Renton's personality and character, we actually see her move, act and speak in the production whereas in the book she is only spoken about and referred to.

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In the screen-play she comes across as gregarious but desperate for happiness, which is the same image that appeared in my head whilst reading the story. If you watch a play in a theatre you are and feel more involved with the production itself as you actually see the real actors and you don't get distracted from the story as there is nothing else going on around you, but the production itself. Films, on the other hand, can get boring in places and there are distractions around you all the time that could make your attention waver.

In a theatre you can't really escape from the production in front of you as everything else is in darkness. The film combats this problem by using good visual effects and keeping the story running at quite a fast pace. The play was recorded in black and white and some great visual effects were achieved. Namely the regular close-ups of people's faces and reactions, this coupled with the varied camera angles and positions work to great effect. An example of this is when the inspector is interrogating Sheila. She is staring transfixed, at the mirror looking perplexed and thinking of the 'horrid death' she helped to cause.

This is extremely effective as the inspector is pacing in front of her and you can see his face while she has her back to the camera but you can still see her face via the reflection in the mirror. This conveys to the audience the sheer power of the inspector's interrogation techniques; the way she has become almost lifeless, like a puppet being controlled by the inspector. The inspector also appears larger than the other characters in some scenes as he is filmed in the foreground, whilst other characters remain in the background.

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This enhances the way we think of the inspector, he's bigger and more in control of the situation than anyone else, which he is so it adds a wonderful effect. During some of Mr Birling's and the Inspector's heated conversations the camera would flick between the characters very quickly so that the words coming from each person's lips would be visible but also so hear and see would their reactions to these words. This made me more aware of the different characters thoughts and feelings The set is very well recreated in the film and this enhances the way we see the Birlings and their wealth.

From the play it comes across that the Birlings were wealthy but seeing the film really makes this clear. In the film you can see how ornate and extravagant all of the Birlings possessions are. Even the mounds of food that are visible during the opening credits show us that they are extremely wealthy. The footage shot during the opening credits also tells us that they don't do manual labour or work physically hard. We can see this because we get close up shots of their hands and arms, they are not callused or sore from hard work but soft and clean.

The set design enhances our mental image of the period of time the play is set in when you see the 'horse and cart' the old fashioned buildings. Even the old fashioned furniture in the Birlings house helps us to mentally set the date of the production, 1912. Sound effects were used throughout the play most notable was the clock that chimes just before something dramatic happened such as a revelation by one of the Birlings or when the inspector first appears. When Gerald says 'goodbye' to 'Daisy Renton' he runs down the stairs and as he does so, some music plays to the sound of his feet on the stairs.

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This adds a great sense of urgency and is very effective, this is because he knows he's done wrong and its like the faster he runs away down the stairs the less wrong he has done. When in fact he has committed the worse crime you can when involved with someone, have an affair. Music is used to create and adapt different moods in the play, the jazz during the love seen by the fire and the background music slows when the mood is sad or reflective. The way the characters are costumed gives us an insight into their wealth and also their personalities.

Mr Birling is wearing a suit and he smokes a cigar. This is Hamilton's attempt to show us how superior Mr Birling is compared to the other characters, it also fits Mr Birlings pompous manner perfectly. Sheila wears an attractive evening gown, with her hair tied up and she has perfect nails and un-smudged makeup. This shows she is a little bit vain and as we already know this was the reason she had Eva Smith sacked from her job at 'Milwards'. Gerald and Eric both dress similarly in a suit, shirt and bow tie.

Mrs. Birling wears a large frilly dress with shoulders and sleeves (Unlike Sheila, whose dress is sleeveless). Mrs Birling wants to appear elegant and well dressed as she wouldn't want to look like people who weren't as wealthy or 'girls of that class'. The way the characters are dressed is very typical for the social class and period they are in. It is as if they are trying to show off to each other even within their own family by expressing wealth in their clothes. There costumes also enhance our view of the time period the play is set in as they are very different to the attire we are accustomed to today.

Edna the maid has a different style of costume to everyone else, she has an apron and old clothes on, and this shows the clear gap in the classes between the Birlings (and Gerald) and Edna. This enhanced my own view of the class gap between the Birlings and the working class. The class difference is also shown because she serves for them not the other way round and she has a regional dialect that is different to the 'Queen's English' the Birlings and Gerald use. (Except Mr Birling, who shows a slight regional accent at times thus indicating that he is a social climber.)

The film enhances our views of the inspector by the way he looks. He is paler than the rest and his dark clothes make his face stand out more and makes him a more prominent figure than the rest of the cast. This enhanced his character immensely in my perspective as he was always the boldest and the brightest, during the discussions and as this was represented in his physical appearance too it helped me to grasp his involvement a lot more. Sheila is one of the only people that come out of the incident as remorseful and a changed person. Sheila met Eva Smith/Daisy Renton at 'Milwards' when she was trying on a 'dress'.

While Sheila was trying on the hat she caught sight of Eva/Daisy smiling at her as she was trying on a hat that clearly didn't suit her. This made Sheila become 'furious' because she had already been in a 'terrible temper anyway' and because of this she basically ordered the manager of 'Milwards' to sack Eva Smith/Daisy Renton from her second job. When the inspector shows her the photograph of Eva Smith/Daisy Renton she recognises her immediately and instead of pretending that she didn't know

who the person was like her father she admitted to knowing her and to doing what she did to get her sacked.

The main differences between her and the rest of the cast is enhanced by, my viewing of the production, these were things like changes in her tone voice and manner. (Which you can't get from books.) When she is interrogated and realises what she has done and the way she gets angry at Mrs. Birling for ' building up walls' and at her father and mother for recognising the part they played in the girls suicide. She cares a great deal about what she has done so much in fact she inquired whether she was ' really responsible' for driving the girl to suicide.

Mr. Birling, is a very confident man who likes the sound of his own voice. Throughout the first act he gives what he thinks is ' good advice' to the other characters whether they want it or not. His view on life is very blinkered and Priestley uses his speeches to show this by the use of dramatic irony. He describes how the ' titanic' is ' unsinkable' and he thinks that the likelihood of a war occurring is ' fiddlesticks'. These two events obviously did occur and it shows the audience that he talks to show a superficial superiority over the rest of them.

He likes the sound of his voice too much and he doesn't even stop talking after Mrs. Birling calls ' Arthur' to signal that he is talking to much, he says he knows he is ' talking to much' but then he doesn't stop, he carries on. It appears that he sees Sheila's and Gerald's engagement as a business opportunity and spends more time talking about bringing the companies ' together' and to ' lower prices' than the emotional side. He is proud of his

social status and lets everyone know it by mentioning his possible 'knighthood'.

Mr. Birling when questioned about the time he sacked Eva Smith/Daisy Renton for causing 'trouble at the works' out rightly 'refused to accept responsibility'. And that the fact he wouldn't let her have a raise to 'twenty five' shillings a week, it led to her being out of work and on the streets for 'two months'. This paved the way to her committing suicide and this makes his character seem very cold and naive in a way as he refuses to accept blame. He shows no feeling towards Eric when he admits to stealing money for Eva Smith/Daisy Renton by fiddling with the 'receipts'.

He shows that he has no real feeling or compassion as he threatens that Eric could get thrown out of the house. Even at the end of the play when he must surely know he was partly to blame for her death, he is only worried about the possibility of a 'scandal' coming out or the possible thoughts of losing his 'knighthood'. His thoughts don't dwell on Eva Smith and the loss of a life that he contributed to cause. The production enhanced my view of Mr. Birling and it made his rude, pompous character stand out. He is disrespectful to others, even to his own wife and son at a point.

I think Mrs Birling was the most cold and shrewd character in the play, she was the last factor that brought Eva/Daisy to the edge and yet she shows no remorse and refuses to accept any 'responsibility'. When Eva came begging for help, she refused to do so and called her impertinent, when the point of her organisation is to help people exactly like her. She was a kind of 'classist' she thought of people of 'that class' or lower class as scum and

builds a ' wall' up between her and them even after Sheila warns her not to. Her wild ranting lead onto her dropping her own son deeper in trouble than he had been before.

She said that, ' he' (Who she didn't know was Eric at the time) was basically totally to ' blame' and the cause of her suicide and that he ' should be made an example of'. This left Eric practically alone and unaided as Mr. Birling agreed with Mrs. Birling just because she didn't know when to stop. Mrs Birling comes over as nasty and as cold as I believe Priestley intended her to be. The cold-hearted women's true colours shine through her elegant pretence and the way the production enhanced this to great effect was that the way in which she was so cruel and heartless, even at the end.

This makes her seem a hundred times worse than the way she describes ' girls of that class'. The production enhanced my understanding of the play by making the way the characters act and feel a lot clearer. The sound effects worked really well, whenever I heard it chime I thought what was that for? The production also brought hidden messages from the play such as Priestley's view of the class system. I don't think he approved of the class system and the way people of lower class were treated. Which also leads me to believe that one of the reasons he wrote the play was to get his own back on upper class people.

Getting across his beliefs that people who are in the upper class aren't necessarily all good and law abiding. I think he believes that just because someone was of a different class it didn't mean they would live up to there stereotypical labels branded on them by narrow-minded people. As well as

enlightening me about Priestley's personal opinions on things the film has created clearer images of the people more to blame for Eva/Daisy's suicide.

It has made characters like Sheila and Eric easier to empathise with and has made other characters like the two parents Mr. and Mrs. Birling easier to dislike and feel disdain towards their lack of feeling and thoughts for the girl. The film stayed true to the play pretty much, except for the inclusion of Eva Smith/Daisy Renton in the flashbacks and also a few other minor details like the way Sheila reacts to the ring that's bought by Gerald for her engagement. In the film she says 'It's the one I wanted' and in the book she says that it's the one 'you wanted me to have'. There are a few other subtle details like that that didn't alter the story much at all.