

Who is most
responsible for the
death of eva smith



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An Inspector Calls is a play that was written in 1945 by J. B.

Priestley. When the play was written the war in Europe had just ended, as had the coalition government that had been in action during the war. This gave people a chance to vote for a new government, a vote that the Labour government won by a landslide victory. This new government was meant to give everyone an equal chance after the war, and 'An Inspector Calls' is effectively propaganda showing how this new government is improved over the social structure running before it (namely when the play is based before the war). The play is set in 1912, just before the beginning of the first world war, when British social structure depended on class and wealth to such an extent that if a person had no job or social standing then they were literally destitute. Essentially the play is only trying to portray how Labour would make this kind of 1912 society non-existent, so that there would be no more pompous, rich Birling like characters.

Priestley intends the inspector to appear as a socialist while Mr and Mrs Birling portray the upper class 'snobs' not concerned with the welfare of anyone but themselves. Sheila and Eric, however, are the new generation of thinkers, concerned about the good of everyone and believing that everyone should have an equal chance, not being condemned to suffering because they are of a lower class and social standing. It seems that Priestley is trying to show that these two have the same attitude as the new Labour government, ready to learn from their mistakes and to try to set things right in Britain. The characters all have differences between them but the main contrast is between the younger generation and their parents.

Arthur Birling can be described as a pompous, rich businessman, mainly concerned with the possibility of a knighthood and just how much money he can squeeze out of his factory before he actually has to stop paying his workers. His wife Sybil Birling is the same: – arrogant and surrounded by a sense of her own superiority. However she is the social superior of her husband and runs the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation, a charity for distressed women with no financial support to help themselves or their children. Sheila and Eric are the younger and more easily influenced generation, and see the situation entirely differently to their parents.

While their parents do not take the incident to heart, it has a lot more of a personal effect on these two and they do actually feel genuinely responsible for the suicide of Eva Smith: – Sheila for giving the complaint that made the shop sack her, and Eric for making her pregnant with no intention of having a long term relationship, and when she could by no means afford to have a baby. Gerald is a very down-to-earth, forward thinking young man whom is very logical in his approach and is in fact a bit of a hybrid between the two generations. He is guilty of previously taking Eva Smith as a mistress behind his fiancée's back, and while he feels regret over what he has done, he still thinks like Mr and Mrs Birling in that it is not directly his fault and that he cannot therefore be held responsible. The inspector seems to see through all this however and, one by one, interrogates them so as to make them feel fear and guilt from their actions.

He gains control over them as soon as he enters the room and manages to maintain his authority right until he is gone. He gives an impression of impregnable solidity that cannot be opposed, and he subdues them so well

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with this that they do not even begin to question whether or not he is a genuine inspector until long after he has left. This is helped even more by the fact that his timing is impeccable for dramatic effect, due to the fact that he appears just after they have finished a good meal celebrating Sheila's engagement to Gerald. They are all feeling very pleased with themselves at the time and this creates a haze through which they cannot think clearly enough through to interrogate the inspector themselves. Gerald even admits this himself later on by saying that getting out helped him to think clearly and see through the false inspector's charade. The reactions of the two generations when they do find out that the inspector is indeed a fraud are also somewhat different.

Arthur and Sybil Birling are relieved that it supposedly was all a prank and that there will be no public scandal after all. Their only real concern is then Eric's self-confession to being an alcoholic and the account of the money that he stole. Eric and Sheila see the situation entirely differently, however, by still feeling huge regret for their actions. They know that even though it may well be proved to be a hoax, Sheila still managed to make a perfectly harmless girl redundant, and Eric made the same, or maybe a different girl, pregnant with no intention of a long-term relationship with her. They find it unacceptable how their parents can carry on behaving in such a way, when each of them have still committed a terrible crime, whether or not there was a real Eva Smith.

The inspector himself concludes that there are millions and millions of other 'John and Eva Smiths' out there and that, directly or indirectly, they could harm the lives of many more of them. Priestley himself was a socialist so in <https://assignbuster.com/who-is-most-responsible-for-the-death-of-eva-smith/>

all of the inspector's lines he is expressing a personal opinion of the result of the play. Throughout the entire play Priestley is trying to portray the fact that the new generation seem a lot more concerned than the adults are, meaning that the new Labour government are concerned with the welfare of the nation and that the problems brought on by the previous coalition government, such as rationing and job loss, would come to an end. He is simply saying that the new Labour represents a 'glimmer of hope' for the less fortunate of the British workforce. The underlying theme is that not one of the characters can be pinned down as being the most responsible as they are ALL responsible, in some way or another, for contributing the death of Eva Smith. Eric and Sheila try to explain to their arrogant, unrealistic parents that now even if there wasn't an Eva Smith, they have to change their attitudes or they will end up harming the many other millions of John and Eva Smiths in the world.

It is only a fitting ending to the play then, that the arrogant adult Birlings receive a call describing an identical case that had just occurred. De ja vu, Perhaps, but the moral is that if the pompous, arrogant upper classes will not learn from their mistakes then there will no longer be room for them in society and they will have to suffer just as much as the poor working class Smiths.