

The role of the inspector and the effect he has on the characters



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The play begins with a family, the Birlings, seated in a room filled with expensive luxurious furniture and yet it does not seem cosy or homelike, 'The general effect is substantial and heavily comfortable, but not cosy and homelike...' From the onset of the play we are given a glimpse of the reality of the Birling family and there is a clear contrast in appearance as they own expensive furniture and yet it is not homelike or cosy. This can be linked to the effect that the Inspector has upon the other characters. He takes the superficial respectability of the Birlings and exposes the reality to show that there is no love between them.

When the curtain opens the family are seated round a table and there is an atmosphere of smugness and self-satisfaction. Sheila is also filled with excitement. This emphasises the atmosphere of happiness and satisfaction. However the Inspector ruins this atmosphere and his role is to destroy the smugness as this happiness is obviously not genuine. Mr. and Mrs. Birling seem like unpleasant characters and the Inspector unleashes the inner most thoughts of these characters and exposes the reality under the veneer of respectability.

The opening of this play is important as it shows the Birlings before they are exposed and shows how appearances are not always a true representation of a character. This introduction of the characters explains the general impression of the Birlings and their upper class respectability. During Act 1 we encounter the happiest moment in the play as Gerald proposes to Sheila, 'I'll never let it go out of my sight for an instant.' This is an ironic comment as Sheila later returns the ring to Gerald and this is a direct consequence of the Inspector's visit and questioning.

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The Inspector has a massive impact on Sheila's life as he drives an emotional wedge between her and Gerald. Also during Act 1 Arthur Birling delivers a long speech about the world developing. The play was set in 1912 and attitudes were very complacent. Arthur Birling was over confident; always thought things were going well, '... And I say there isn't a chance of war. The world's developing so fast that it'll make war impossible... Why a friend of mine went over this new liner last week - the Titanic - she sails next week.... and every luxury- and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable...' This speech by Mr. Birling is a speech of utter complacency and J. B Priestley is using him as a spokesperson for attitudes of the period. Birling also mentions 1940 during his speech.

Priestley uses this year because this was a time where Britain was on the verge of defeat because they were alone at war with Germany. The audience would realise and appreciate the irony of Birling's reference to 1940 because the first performance of this play was in 1946. Another ironic point in this speech is when Birling mentions the Titanic and boasts that it is unsinkable; he is completely wrong about this remark and many others.

The Titanic can also be a symbol of the Birlings because on the surface it was luxurious and unsinkable and on the surface the Birlings look unsinkable and are content with life. However when the Titanic met the iceberg, it sank. The Birlings' iceberg would be Eva Smith and the Inspector. This clearly shows his blind faith in the future and his complacency in his family. This is an early glimpse of how wrong Mr. Birling can be. Just prior to the Inspector's dramatic arrival Birling relays another of his philosophies, '... a man has to

make his own way-has to look after himself - and his family of course, when he has one... '

Here Birling is speaking for the whole social attitude of the time in which the play is set. He is also a spokesman for the wealthy class, the people who were arrogant and believed they should not have to take responsibility for others. At this point in the play the Inspector makes a dramatic entrance with a ring of the door bell. It is significant that the Inspector's ring is described as sharp because it changes the whole attitude of the gathering . However the Inspector does have a much more dramatic role and effect on the other characters throughout the play. He bears bad news that a young woman has died in the infirmary.

Eric reacts quite suddenly and involuntarily responds with a genuine expression of upset, ' My God! ' This shows that from the beginning Eric has some good in him. This is a clear contrast with Birling's attitude, ' But I don't understand why you should come here, Inspector... ' Here there is a clear difference between father and son. Eric has some genuine concern inside him for his fellow man but Birling sticks to his philosophy and only cares about himself. The Inspector follows this with a curious reaction and shows a picture, but only to Arthur Birling. No one else is allowed to see this.

The Inspector questions Mr. Birling and reveals that he had previously sacked Eva Smith. Birlings philosophy now rebounds upon him. The Inspector refers to a chain of events and discusses how what we do has consequences upon others and they can be good or bad. Birling sacking Eva sent her on a different path, her path of decline. If she had not been sacked then she may

not have committed suicide and this is central to the theme of the play and is referred to constantly by the Inspector. The Inspector relays the effects of the Birlings' upon Eva Smith and this helps the audience to build up a picture of the victim.

She was a lively, hard working, good looking girl. We feel sorry for Eva Smith because of how she was treated by Birling. With the Inspector's further questioning the audience begin to see a growing difference between characters. Gerald has an attitude which reflects Birling's and they are in agreement in looking down on the factory workers, ' It's about time you learned to face a few responsibilities... ' Eric on the other hand disagrees with his father and is beginning to drift away from his intransigent attitude; the Inspector has created a gulf between these characters, No, I mean about this - Eva Smith.

Why shouldn't they try for higher wages? ' This is ironic because Birling spends the rest of the play having to face up to his responsibilities. Sheila's reaction was an echo of Eric's, a sensitive response. Both characters show some sorrow and sensitivity, unlike Birling. Priestley makes this an effective piece of theatre as the setting never changes which would normally be boring and uninteresting. However he has to do things to make the play engage with the audience. A dramatic moment in the play is when the Inspector confronts Mr.

Birling about his involvement with Eva Smith, ' Are you sure you don't know? He looks at Gerald, then at Eric, then at Sheila. ' This has a great influential difference on the audience and the characters on stage. The dramatic

implication by the Inspector is that he believes there was more than just Birling involved in Eva's death. This implication has put great stress upon Birling and he changes his tone as he is becoming increasingly worried about his knighthood. Later in this scene Sheila echoes Eric's outbursts of concern but there is a clear difference between them.

Sheila speaks as the family voice of conscience with a much stronger voice than Eric, but Eric's a drunkard and appears much weaker than Sheila and without the visit from the Inspector we would never have noticed this. One of the purposes of the Inspector's visit is to bring out the personality of Eva Smith and shows us how her life followed a pattern of good and bad times. The first thing we learn about Eva Smith is that she worked for Birling and this would have been a happy time in her life. However this did not last long as she was sacked by him for asking for a pay rise.

Then she was without a job and it was a bad time in her life until she found a job at Milwards but then she was sacked because of Sheila. This pattern continues throughout her life as it is a cycle of happiness eventually followed by sadness. The Inspector also has a habit of turning the characters' words against them, the audience enjoys this mockery. ' We were having a nice little family celebration tonight. And a nasty mess you've made of it now, haven't you... ' The Inspector throws this comment back at Birling and this makes the audience despise Birling.

The Inspector follows his next line of the enquiry and shows a photograph to Sheila and gives her chance to explain her involvement with Eva Smith.

When she gives her account we see the unpleasantness inside her and this is

brought out by the Inspector's visit. The Inspector can be described as a surgeon because he exposes the unpleasantness that lies below the respectable surface. The next dramatic moment happens after Sheila's account and here the Inspector announces that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald's reaction to this announcement arouses the audience's interest.

At the end of Act 1 we are left with Sheila and Gerald alone on stage and the scene ends with the engaged couple arguing. It is clear to the audience that Sheila has a deeper understanding of the Inspector than any of the other characters. The scene also ends on an emotional climax when the Inspector re-enters. Act 2 begins at the same point in which Act 1 ended. All Greek dramas followed the three unities and so does this play. Priestley follows these three unities in order to create an intensive claustrophobic atmosphere.

It also helps to reinforce the Inspector's role as he does not ease up on the characters and appears as a dominant presence on stage. In the 2nd Act the Inspector deals with the issue of guilt and preaches that it is all of the characters who should feel guilty, '... we'll have to share our guilt ' The Inspector tries to explain to the characters that they all have to share the responsibility of Eva Smith's death but they will all feel guilty about what happened. Mrs. Birling's attitude is completely unsuitable for this scene and she has a condescending approach to the allegations.

Sheila senses this unsuitable attitude towards the Inspector. Throughout the play Sheila develops sensitivity and is able to understand the feelings of

others and can sense the condescension in her mother's voice. Sheila has sufficiently changed to sense this attitude is wrong and this is due to the Inspector's visit as she can sense the power of his presence. ' 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. ' This is a very prescient comment from Sheila.

She realises that the Inspector has the power and ability to make these characters admit things that they would not normally talk about. Sheila later mentions Eric's drinking problem which the rest of the family has been completely unaware of and this comment is brought out because of the power of the Inspector and is a direct result of his presence. The Inspector is exposing the reality of each character and is finding the truth beneath the veneer of respectability. The Inspector's next victim is Gerald and he concentrates on this character for part of Act 2.

Gerald was the son of Lord and Lady Croft and the Inspector proves that even someone of Gerald's elevated social status can feel threatened by him. As a result of this pressure Gerald confesses to his involvement with Eva Smith. However Gerald does express some grief at her death and was probably the closest to Eva Smith and treated her with the most kindness. He had an affair with her but also showed her kindness and affection and this was the only time she was shown love and consideration. Mr. and Mrs. Birling are callous, intransigent characters and at the beginning of the play Gerald seems like these characters.

However, when he gives his account he seems much more like Sheila and Eric. Eric manages to move away from the callousness and intransigence and becomes much more sensitive and sympathetic because of the Inspector's visit. There are times throughout the play when we see changes in Gerald but once the Inspector leaves, Gerald reverts back to his original behaviour. Eric and Sheila also change when the Inspector is present but stay that way once he has left. However Mr. and Mrs. Birling never change their attitude towards the situation. Throughout the play the characters learn things about members of their family that they did not know before.

Mrs. Birling also learns things about other people, not just members of her family. She learns that Alderman Meggarty, a highly respectable council figure, was not all that he seemed. In reality he was a drunkard, a molester and an attempted rapist. This is the unpleasant truth. We find out that Gerald saved Daisy Renton from people like Alderman Meggarty and the way he treats her is totally different than the way she is treated by the rest of the characters. When Gerald explains this the audience believes him and so does the Inspector as he took her in as an act of kindness, ' I know.

Somehow he makes you. ' This again shows Sheila's understanding and emphasises the Inspector's hypnotic influence over them all. Gerald is beginning to develop. He is showing his feelings and feels free to admit his adultery to his fiance. However, once the Inspector leaves Gerald reverts back to his original manner. Daisy Renton was sensitive and made no demands on Gerald. She could have made things awkward for Gerald but she chose not to because she had morals and principles unlike any of the other

characters. However Sheila emphasises the drama when she returns the ring to Gerald.

This is due to the Inspector's influence as he is so powerful he can destroy relationships. Throughout this play Sheila becomes very sensitive but Sheila and Gerald are changed because of the Inspector's visit and they have also found out the truth about each other due to his enquiry. The pattern of involvement in Eva Smith's death is as follows, Mr. Birling, Sheila, Gerald, Eric and then Mrs. Birling. Priestley, however, goes out of this sequence which proves a climax for Act 2. These twists are what keep the audience interested.

The Inspector has just finished questioning Gerald when he shows Mrs. Birling a photograph; he discusses and questions her involvement with The Women's Charity Organisation. Mrs. Birling shows a completely callous disregard for people's feelings. It is ironic that she is the most uncharitable person in the play and yet she is a chairperson for a charitable organisation. Another moment of high drama begins to unfold at this pivotal moment in the play. The Inspector reveals that Mrs. Birling saw Eva Smith only two weeks ago. Mrs. Birling is at her most heartless and shows total lack of feeling even though Eva's suicide is partly because of her actions.

She is proving difficult for the Inspector to breakdown as she is firm and totally unbreakable and shows no emotions. Again, in order to keep the interest of the audience Priestley introduces another dramatic twist: '... just remember that this girl was going to have a child...' This has never been mentioned before, but the Inspector feels that it is the right time to introduce

this news. Sheila is horrified at this; she is permanently changed and has developed sensitivity towards others because of the Inspector's influence.

Now at this point in the play it is the climax of this act as Eric's involvement is brought out because of the Inspector's shrewd questioning. The Inspector is also steering Mrs. Birling into a condemnation of her own son. He is not letting her off the hook-neither is he accepting her answers as he does not want the generalised answers she is giving. The Inspector is beginning to pressurise Mrs. Birling He is trying to squeeze the truth out of her. Cleverly he builds up another, more recent mental picture of Eva Smith; she was pregnant, living in bad conditions and had no money.

His questioning also brought out Eva's principles as Eric had offered her stolen money which she could not accept because of her morals. The Inspector's questions become pointed and he pushes Mrs. Birling into a corner and eventually she condemns this young man, who she does not yet know is her son. Sheila is more aware of the Inspector's hypnotic influence and she notices the truth about who the father of Eva Smith's baby is.

Because of the Inspector's influence Sheila can see the truth and is the first to do so. Mrs. Birling acts triumphantly on stage but at that precise moment she is defeated.

Throughout the play the stage directions change dramatically. At the beginning of the performance all the characters are happy and excited but, after the arrival of the Inspector, attitudes change. The Inspector has destroyed the air of smugness and has ruined the atmosphere from the moment he entered. The characters are now thunderstruck and agitated.

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The action of the Inspector when he holds up his hand as he calls for silence is as if he has a mesmeric effect upon the scene and characters. This is as dramatic as his entrance in Act 1 when everything stops after his 'sharp' ring of the door bell.

This drama is echoed when Eric opens the front door and the whole cast freeze on stage. At the beginning of Act 3 the tension is maintained from the previous scene and now Eric enters the stage and straight away heads for the drink cabinet. The Inspector has opened their eyes and has let them see the others' true personality and has exposed their weaknesses. He is about to do the same to Eric. Eric is young and is an embryonic Alderman Meggarty but the Inspector stops this change. If the Inspector had not turned up Eric would not have changed.

Yes, I insisted - it seems.... and I threatened to make a row... ' The Inspector's questions force Eric to show that he was on the route to becoming an Alderman Meggarty. Eric realizes his faults and the audience can see he really does regret the past. Later in Act 3 we discover that Eva was a romantic and that even though Eric proposed to her she did not accept. This was because she knew he did not love her and she had principles, she thought that love had to be part of marriage and because there was no love between them they could not possibly be married.

Eric is different to any of the other characters as he admits to a crime; he embezzled money from his father's company. We the audience are hypnotized into thinking that all the characters are guilty when in fact it is only Eric who committed a crime. This is a shock to the audience as this is

the only crime that is committed. This makes us explore the meaning of wrong doing as it is not a crime to get a girl pregnant or to have her sacked. Neither is it a crime to refuse charity but it is a crime to steal money. The intelligent audience would try to explore this with a deeper meaning.

In my opinion I think that the characters should share equal responsibility for Eva Smith's death. However if just one of them had helped her it would have taken her off the road to suicide. If Mr. Birling had not fired her she would still be alive. If Sheila had not influenced the manager to sack Eva then she would still be alive and have a job. Gerald probably helped Eva the most as he cared for her and helped her escape her job as a prostitute. Mrs. Birling could have offered Eva charity but she refused it which drove her further along the road to suicide.

Eric was also part of her suicide as she was pregnant with his child and when she asked for support he offered her stolen money which she could not accept. It is strange that Birling reacts more angrily at the fact Eric has stolen money rather than the fact that his son made Eva Smith pregnant. This clearly shows that Birling's sense of priority is completely wrong and he only concerned about material properties and not the well being of a young girl. Birling and Eric are beginning to drift further and further apart.

' Because you're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble - that's why. There is no pretence any more and we are seeing the raw Eric and his father as they have lost their false appearance of family love and closeness. There is no bond between them and this is a direct response to the Inspector's visit. They have seen each other at their worst. At this

point the Inspector reveals to Eric that his mother had dealt with Eva at her charity organisation and that she refused to give her money. Eric begins to become increasingly angry and almost strikes his mother and in a few minutes he reveals that he hates his father.

So the audience discovers that he hated his father and that now he hates his mother. He is becoming increasingly murderous against her. This is another effect of the Inspector's visit. The Inspector is about to leave but first comes his closing speech. This is important for the meaning of the play and as though he is a judge and he is summing up the trial of the Birlings. During the play the Inspector has been a counsel for the defence and was defending Eva Smith. He has also acted on the role of a police inspector as the prosecution attacking the guilty characters.

Inspector Goole can also be seen as the jury or to some of the audience the audience may seem like the jury. This speech given by the Inspector is the direct opposite of that given by Birling in Act 1. Priestly cleverly uses the name Eva Smith because it is a common name and in the play she represented millions of other people who were in a similar situation. The first time this play was performed was after World War 2. At this time the Inspector's words meant much more and had greater relevance.

This was due to the fact that during the war the people endured a lot and faced hell which was hard to forget: ... if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. ' This would appeal to the people who lived through World War 2 because they knew what it was like to see hell and they would never forget it, so this reference would be relevant

to them. 'An Inspector Calls' is a detective play. However Priestley takes the idea of a detective story but he begins with one suspect and ends up with five guilty people. In the normal genre of a detective novel the detective would begin with several suspects and interview them all and discover the guilty one.

Priestley has taken this idea and turned the normal detective genre upside down. This helps to show the Inspector's effect upon the characters as he draws each character out in turn and exposes their guilt. In fact all of the Birlings and Gerald form a circle of guilt which the Inspector has brought out because of his questions. If the Inspector had not visited the Birlings' house the characters would never have known what the others were truly like. He also exposes the truth and shows that even though someone may look respectable, underneath there could be evil.