

The interconnected nature of society in an inspector calls



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *An Inspector Calls*, J. B. Priestley expresses the importance of the interconnected nature of society through his exploration of how his characters react to their responsibility; this theme is also addressed through ideas of society present both at the time of writing and when the play was set. Priestley chiefly uses the character of Inspector Goole to convey the theme of interconnectedness and responsibility, who catechises to the Birlings the belief that, ' We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other'. Through statements such as this, the play demonstrates how the Inspector believes that every member of society is affected by every other.

There is no way to escape association with others, as the Birlings believed at the beginning of the play. The short, definitive sentences create an imposing and authoritative tone that matches the Inspector's ' massiveness', as he is originally described. The Inspector continues to warn that ' if men will not learn [this] lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.' This reinforces the Inspector's message and carries a powerful and threatening tone that confronts both the Birlings and the audience alike. The use of a syndetic list of three, ' fire and blood and anguish' evokes images of divine retribution, therefore making the Inspector the ultimate force of good against the evil of complacency and selfishness. Furthermore, the use of the syndetic list shows to the audience that the Inspector is impassioned and angry. This demonstrates how ardently the play criticises a society where one is responsible only for themselves. ' Lesson' shows how the Inspector is an didactic or possibly sanctimonious character, who can be said to be a representation of Priestley with his message of the need for an

interconnected and fair society. In fact, Priestley had strong socialist and left-wing views that the audience can view as having been transferred to Inspector Goole. At the time of writing, in post-war Britain, the public had been exposed to the abundance of poverty in the country and there was a call for a fairer society, resulting in the Beveridge Report and the creation of the welfare state. Priestley witnessed the creation of the welfare state; therefore, *An Inspector Calls* was written with the idea of social equality as a fundamental theme of the play and indeed the as the chief axiom of the Inspector's lecturing. A 1945 audience would recognise the Inspector's call for social responsibility and see the proleptic irony in the Birlings' original contempt towards lower classes in society. This is especially poignant considering that the period of the play, 1912, is immediately before the outbreak of WWI and therefore is just before the beginning of changing attitudes and the desire for an integrated society.

Another way in which the play stresses the need for an interconnected society is by highlighting the Birlings' complacency and arrogance. In Mr. Birling's Act 1 speech, he states that 'a man has to make his own way—has to look after himself', showing how he is selfish and only cares about himself. Birling is then immediately interrupted by the Inspector's arrival, foreshadowing the way the Inspector contradicts Mr. Birling's ideologies and beliefs later in the play. This could also be said to relate to the difference between capitalist and socialist beliefs and the tensions between the two ideologies at the time of writing, with the election of a new labour government, but also at the time the play is set, when socialism and communism were becoming more prominent throughout Europe, culminating

in the Russian revolution of 1917. In this way, the dismissal of Birling's philosophies could reflect the decline of capitalism and the rise of socialism at the time of writing. The audience is led to immediately dislike and disagree with Birling and his ideas of self-sufficiency and consequently the play praises an interconnected society, the opposite of what Birling stands for. Birling continues his speech to declare that 'the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive.' This demonstrates how Birling believes in segregation by social class, therefore complying by the Edwardian view of the social structure. The simile 'like bees in a hive' could be a reference to him being a factory owner, and therefore would show how he is complacent and leaves the work to those he deems less important than himself. At the time the play is set, factory workers were rebelling against their unfair work conditions and it was only by the time of writing this was taking effect and the idea of workers' protection was improved. Therefore, in some ways, Mr. Birling is forecasting his own future by criticising the idea of a community working together - a socialist idea held by Priestley and assumedly the majority of the audience. Furthermore, the proleptic irony in the reference to 'these cranks' could be referring to left-wing politicians, which makes Birling appear foolish as the audience knows that in a few years those 'cranks' would be in power. Alternatively, Birling could be referring to liberal writers such as Priestley, which is also an example of irony, as Priestley, the author, holds all the power over the play and his representative, Inspector Goole, holds the power within the play.

Finally, the play shows the importance of an interconnected society by demonstrating the effect of being detached from others. Throughout the course of the play, the characters are found to be at least partially responsible for Eva Smith's suicide, resulting in indignation or guilt. The Inspector states, ' we'll have to share our guilt', foreshadowing at how all the characters will share responsibility eventually. The older characters, Mr. and Mrs. Birling, deny their guilt, but Sheila and Eric are emotionally disturbed by the knowledge of what they've done. By the end of the play, Eric reflects, ' I did what I did. And Mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her. It's still the same rotten story.' This shows how he has accepted his culpability and cannot forget about it, despite the Inspector's dubious credibility. While the family are cleared of legal guilt, they are still morally in the wrong, which will inevitably affect the family's relationship and life in the future. As Sheila states, she ' can't help thinking about this girl,' suggesting that the memory of Eva Smith will haunt her conscience for a long time. This acts as a warning to the audience to be mindful of their actions and take into account the repercussions on others, therefore demonstrating how the play stresses the importance of the interconnectedness of society.

Priestley's play therefore stresses the importance of an interconnected society by demonstrating the effects of guilt on the human conscience and the consequences of denying responsibility. However, Priestley also draws on contextual references to both 1945 and 1912 to evoke to the audience the need for interconnection. This drama thus teaches its viewers how the significant lessons from the play should be applied to the real world.