

How JB Priestley  
combines dramatic  
effectiveness with  
political comment in  
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**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

An Inspector Calls can be described as a carefully constructed play as the author, J. B Priestley, cleverly combines dramatic effectiveness with strong political comment to create an entertaining play based on morals and ethics to make the audience think about the issues contained within the play. I believe that Priestley intended to change the perception of his audience's opinions of society, and so by writing this play, he achieved these aims. An Inspector Calls was written in the mid 1940's, although the actual story is set in 1912.

It deals with one major political issue in particular and that is the immense contrast to the lives led by the rich as opposed to the lives led by the poor. The arguments for and against a socialist system are a great feature of the play. J. B Priestley, if we can judge him from 'An Inspector Calls', was a socialist. He believed that whether or not we acknowledged it, we all live together in a community and have a responsibility to look out for each other. Being a well-known essayist at the time, he wrote essays as well as plays to highlight these beliefs and also to share them with the rest of the world.

We know, as is stated in the introductory passage to the Heinemann edition of the play, that Priestley was significantly influenced by his father and his circle of socialist friends' "hot arguments" and their broad minded political discussions and debates. Priestley describes himself as "politically minded" and these views were to have a great impact in some of his later works. The play is well structured in that it observes the classical unities of time, action and place. The time it takes for the events to unravel on stage is the same time it would take the same events to occur in real-life time.

The place and action have been restricted to the same scene and storyline throughout the play. In doing this, Priestley hopes to prevent the audience's attention from straying from the plot of the play. In addition to this, by only having a small cast of characters the audience can understand them more fully and explore each of their individual personalities further. The 'whodunit' formula, popular at the time, is also adopted within the play. This keeps the audience guessing as to who is ultimately to blame for the eventual demise of the victim, Eva Smith.

The stock ingredients of a typical detective thriller are also present. These consist of the following: A victim, A group of suspects who somehow relate to the victim and also a police detective/inspector who is sent to question the suspects. Guilt is slowly established amongst the characters as they gradually realise that each of them has played a part in driving a young girl to commit suicide, some more than others. A mysterious police inspector, Inspector Goole, is present to make each character confess to him, and to themselves, that their actions and intentions towards Eva Smith were wrong.

An Inspector Calls is more than just a basic thriller story aimed specifically at entertaining the audience. It is also a very serious play about morality and the struggle of each character's conscience and their battles between right and wrong. Arthur Birling is the kind of character that Priestley is warning us against. Priestley uses this character to put across the capitalist views that he strongly disapproves of. Birling is described as a "heavy-looking, rather portentous man", who is "rather provincial in his speech".

He is a prosperous business man of the upper class of society. Priestley gives Birling strong opinions and beliefs about a capitalist, although counteracts them all using the character of the inspector. Birling believes that socialism is not right and that a man should look after himself and his family. " We have a responsibility to look after ourselves" and the " rich stay rich and the poor stay poor". Birling seems a very confident man. But the audience's confidence in him is shattered by the false views and statements he proclaims.

For example " The Titanic is unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable" and also " The Germans don't want war. " Birling announces these things so solemnly and he really believes in himself. But as we now know, there were two great world wars against Germany resulting in global chaos and that the Titanic sank on her maiden voyage, thus proving Birling wrong. Priestley purposefully gave Birling these misguided views to show that his opinions are all wrong and also suggests that he is rather pompous, selfish and somewhat of a fool. Suspense and dramatic irony feature greatly in the play.

Suspense is effectively used to keep the audience engaged and entertained whilst dramatic irony is used to show the characters just how ignorant they are to their situations and involvements surrounding the death. Mrs Birling is a prime example of this if I refer to the end of act two. The audience are led to conclude that Eric is the father of the unborn baby through the inspector's intense process of elimination of the suspects. Sheila eventually figures it out but Mrs Birling is adamant in blaming the young man responsible for the troubles he has caused Eva, and the Birling family.

Mrs Birling portrays herself as very ignorant to the fact that she is partly to blame for the termination of Eva's child, her grandchild. She also tries to put all of the blame onto the father of the child, 'I blame the young man'. She sees that he is entirely responsible, 'Then he'd be entirely responsible'. Mrs Birling is very distressed and dismayed when she finally figures out who the father is. There is an air of mystery surrounding Inspector Goole as he seems to know a lot about the background of each character and the roles each of them played in Eva Smith's life.

The inspector is present to promote Priestley's socialist views and also to link all of the characters to the demise of Eva Smith. The audience never finds out who he is and are left to draw their own conclusions. The inspector is intentionally left as a mystery so as to have a greater impact on the audience and to make them think more about the purpose of the play.

Priestley's aims are made clear through the inspector, by focusing particularly on his closing speech to the Birling family. For example, 'We are members of one body' and also 'We are responsible for each other'.

These are Priestley's socialist opinions being spoken by the inspector to the Birling family. 'We are members of one body' suggests that we are all people/human and so deserve to be treated fairly and respectfully. 'We are responsible for each other' meaning that we should look after each other and have a duty to support our fellow man. We see that the inspector's closing speech does have an impact on Mr Birling as he offers 'thousands, yes thousands' of pounds to help out others in a similar position as Eva Smith's.

But as the inspector correctly states, 'You're offering the money at the wrong time'. The inspector's closing sentence is a shocking one as he says 'If men will not learn their lesson, then they will be taught in fire and blood and anguish'. This may mean that if a person does not learn from their mistakes the first time round, then a more harsher lesson may be inflicted upon them. As the audience gradually progresses through the play, we are no longer expected to believe in its realism.

The play has become a sort of parable in that it is illustrating a moral truth about society. There may be hope for the characters Sheila and Eric as they seem truly remorseful of their actions. But Mr and Mrs Birling only seem to care about getting away with it without too much publicity. Although they have not committed a crime in the eyes of the law, but have behaved selfishly and immorally. In the case of *An Inspector Calls*, a valid speculation would be that the author aimed to educate his audience through the characters' realisation of their roles in Eva Smith's suicide.