

Analyse the dramatic  
devices Priestley  
employs in an  
Inspector Calls to  
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An Inspector Calls is a play set in 1912, Edwardian England written by J. B Priestley. It is a play that exploits many dramatic devices to create tension and communicate the key theme of collective responsibility. He employs his characters, dramatic irony, contrast, lighting and his ending to do this at the same time they contribute to the rapid pace of the play and the clarity of Priestley's message. The time in which the play was both set and performed allows Priestley to convey his message most effectively and create a lasting impression on his audience.

Priestley uses the characterisation of the inspector to present his political views and therefore his view on collective responsibility. Priestley was a socialist, believing in a community where everyone is responsible for each other. He blames the death of Eva Smith on all of Birlings and Gerald Croft through his mouthpiece, Inspector Goole. The inspector tells the Birlings, "We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other." This is directly enforcing the theme of the play, social responsibility and the repetition of the word "we" helps to put across the sense that we should all be united together.

Mr Birling states that the Inspector is, "probably a socialist" confirming that the Inspector is mirroring Priestley's own political views and therefore his attitude on Priestley's central theme. By using the role of the inspector to convey the views of socialism and collective responsibility, Priestley shows his ideas in a good light. The inspector appears to know every detail of the case and as the play pans out we see he is exactly right about everything he predicts. This makes the audience more likely to trust and believe his views

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on social responsibility and see them to be true, honest and a view that would benefit society.

This is reflected in the general view one has of an inspector, and true and honest man of authority, doing good for the community. Priestley also uses the Inspector to show how important he feels it is for collective responsibility to be adopted by members of society. It is described by the Inspector that without out the idea of collective responsibility our actions can have terrible consequences. The death of Eva smith is the example used by Priestley to show this. The inspector describes the death as “ burnt her inside out” and she died after “ several hours of agony”.

The connotations of the word burning help to convey the destructive death effectively and it is clear Eva suffered for many hours. Henceforth, the description of her horrendous death is greatly emphasising the evil consequences of their actions where they didn't realise their responsibility for people other than themselves. I feel Priestley uses this to show the urgency and importance that members of society take responsibility for each other. The Inspector also states, “ And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.

This uses words such as blood and fire which have strong emotions attached to them with connotations of death and destruction. This almost acts as a threat to the audience inciting them to recognise the value of this message.

Having first performed the play in 1945 this message would have had the

desired effect on the audience due to the very recent ending on the Second  
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World War where the country was in disarray and the members of society longing for the countries recovery and would naturally never wish for destruction on such a vast scale to repeat itself.

Using the character of Eva Smith, a working class girl adds more detail to a type of responsibility Priestley thinks society should have. It is made clear to the audience that the Birling's are exceedingly wealthy. At the beginning of the play, Priestley sets out an extensive series of stage directions which is not typical of a playwright emphasising the importance of the details he writes about. Within them he describes the Birlings to live in a "fairly large suburban house" described as "heavily comfortable".

He also describes objects such as "dessert plates" and "champagne glasses" as well as other expensive items showing them to be an upper class family in society. Through the characterisation of Mr Birling it becomes apparent all he cares about is profit and society and its conventions, not the people within it. When he describes that if everyone took responsibility for everything that happened to people in society, "it would all be very awkward wouldn't it". The choice of the word awkward effectively shows how Mr Birling only cares about the social inconvenience it would have upon him.

Birling tells the inspector, "We've been modestly celebrating his engagement to my daughter, Sheila" implying that they don't want their evening ruined by the Inspector. Priestley is showing how in the rigid class system of 1912, the upper class didn't have any respect for the lower class, portraying the selfishness of the upper class as they don't appear to want to know the affairs of the lower classes. Being a rich man Mr Birling is hugely

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benefitted by the capitalist system and does not need to concern himself with the problems of the lower class. Mrs Birling also reflects a similar view of the lower classes.

She turns down Eva's plea for financial help and denies her responsibility, " I was perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim for my assistance. " The entire plot is demonstrating the responsibility the upper class characters have for the death of Eva Smith, a member of the working class, condemning the opinions of those who do not accept this. Through this Priestly is emphasising the responsibility the upper class should for the lower class and he uses this class divide to show that the rigidity of the class system is incompatible with his views on community and responsibility.

Priestley uses juxtaposition of the characters Mr Birling and the Inspector in order to emphasise his own views on collective responsibility to be right. He does this by using the contrast of Mr Birling and other members of the Birling family to show Capitalism and the views of collective responsibility held by a capitalist in a bad light. This contrast is most prominently seen in the character of Mr Birling. He is a capitalist who believes that a man has to make his own way in life and not to worry about others.

He brands socialists as " cranks" who talk about " community and all that nonsense, as if we were all mixes up together like bees in a hive". The imagery Priestley uses of bees in a hive is very effective. This is due to the picture it conjures in our mind, of a community all caring and looking out for each other, all working for the common good. This positive idea is something

that Birling is seen to strongly reject as it does not benefit him, being a rich  
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capitalist man. This is reinforced by the stage directions at the beginning of the play.

Their house is described as lavish and comfortable yet, “not cosy and home like”, which is what Priestley, wants to portray Mr Birling as, successful yet cold hearted. Capitalism is shown to have corrupted the Birling’s distancing them from each other and introducing formality between the members of the family, for example the stage directions state, “with Arthur Birling at one end, his wife at the other” showing the husband and wife to be sat at opposite ends of the table. To sway the audience’s opinion even further, Priestley uses dramatic irony to portray Mr Birling as a fool.

This is where Priestley’s choice of when the play was set and then when it was performed are vital. Mr Birling proclaims there “isn’t a chance of war” and that the titanic is “unsinkable- absolutely unsinkable” which with the hindsight of both the world wars and the sinking of the Titanic, the audience know to be completely false. This makes the audience question Mr Birling’s integrity and make him seem idiotic. This therefore makes them less inclined to believe anything else Birling says and therefore his view on collective responsibility too.

Not only does priestly use his characters and their dialogue to show his theme, there are other more subtle dramatic devices used which help to communicate his central theme. Eric and Sheila’s positive response to the Inspector’s message, compared to Mr and Mrs Birling’s negative response, is also greatly symbolic. Priestley uses this generation divide and contrast to

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show that the younger generation symbolise hope for the future, a future of socialism. This is due to the way they are remorseful for their actions.

Sheila states, " I felt rotten about it at the time and now I feel a lot worse" showing how the death has affected her because she knows she is partly responsible for it, " No, not really it was my own fault" the fact she speaks so freely about it clearly shows she is perfectly willing to accept it. After this point in the play her role seems to mimic the inspectors, she tells her parents, " You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl showing how everyone plays a part in a community.

Eric reflects the same opinions as Sheila after learning the part he plays in Eva Smith's death, " it's what's happened to that girl and what we did to her that matters". This shows how Eric views the responsibility they had for Eva Smith as the only important thing. Priestley therefore uses these characters to positively contrast to the opinions of Mr and Mrs Birling to show collective responsibility as an optimistic thing. He shows the characters positively growing as people through acknowledging their responsibility.

This mirrors what he feels would happen to the country if collective responsibility was adopted. Priestley uses contrast in his lighting to show how naive and foolish the Birling's are in their opinions and how the inspector brings a harsh truth to them. The highly specific introductory stage directions state the lighting " should be pink and intimate until the inspector arrives and then it should be brighter and harder". I think the lighting first used creates the sense that the Birling's are looking through ' rose-tinted glasses' with an unduly cheerful and naive view of their life.

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This is because they only look after themselves and through the capitalistic system; they have benefitted hugely and are very wealthy. It is for this reason they do not concern themselves with anyone else's problems especially those of the lower classes. The lighting and the idea they are looking through 'rose tinted glasses' shows that that this 'warm' and 'joyful' atmosphere is not really what it seems. This is confirmed when the Inspector appears and the lighting changes to a "brighter and harder light" where it gives the impression of exposure of the truth.

This harsh truth is the devastating consequences of when people do not realise their responsibility for one another and do not view society as a community. It is this Priestley wants the audience to take heed of. Priestley times the Inspector's entrance perfectly which not only prepares the reader for the main theme but the importance it is to have throughout the play too. The Inspector arrives midway through Birling's speech concerning his capitalist views on the responsibility of a businessperson.

He exclaims incredulously, "You'd think everybody has to look after everybody else" showing how ridiculous he believes this concept is. He states just before the Inspector enters, "I've learnt in the good hard school of experience that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own- and-". The entrance, timed just as Birling is recalling his views on collective responsibility is an effective one as Birling is describing the philosophy that the inspector is brought into challenge, which is to be the plot of the entire play. The timing of the entrance also seems to discredit what Mr Birling has just said.

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Using the Inspector's entrance in this way highlights the key theme of collective responsibility and emphasises how important it is to be in the play. The ending Priestly chooses shows that life is cyclical and that the same things will happen again if people's attitudes to social responsibility do not change. The event ending the play is that having found out, " There's no Inspector Goole in the police" the Birling's receive a phone call from the police stating " A girl has just died -on the way to the Infirmary-after swallowing some disinfectant" and that " a police inspector is on his way here-to ask some- questions".

This extraordinary repeat of the evening's events shows that as the characters of the older generation refused to admit their role in Eva Smith's death, or take any responsibility, it will keep happening until they accept it. This represents that with the same attitudes of capitalism (as held throughout the two world wars) life will just go on in circles repeating history. The History Priestley is of course referring to is the two world wars Britain had just faced in 1945, when it was first produced.

Priestley wants to show socialism and the ideas of collective responsibility that accompany it as a way to stop the awful events of the past happening again and a way to move forward and to rebuild the country. Priestley believes the way to do this is by people working together as a society, instead of reverting back to capitalism. As the end of the play plays an important part in communicating Priestley's key message he does well to end the play on this cliff hanger as it keeps the audience thinking about the play and its meaning even after it is finished.

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To keep the entire play concentrated on his main theme, Priestley doesn't change anything between acts, each one starting as the last one finished. This achieves a sense of continuity. Continuity is therefore a dramatic device Priestley uses to keep the audience focused on the message he wants to communicate. Priestley intelligently uses his dramatic devices to build tension, creating a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety about the outcome of certain actions and events within the play. Priestley first creates tension through the timing of the inspector's entrance.

This is because Birling's speech is interrupted by, " the sharp ring of a front door bell". The loud sound shocks the audience and then leads to the mystery of who is at the door, naturally building tension. Mr Birling tends to speak in large speeches; he and his family see him as someone who people would not dare interrupt. The fact Mr Birling's speech is interrupted by the arrival of the inspector, which I feel enhances the tension created even further. There is also tension created through the Inspector's entrance itself.

We learn from the stage direction that despite that the Inspector is not of a large size and weight, " he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness". Dramatic tension is therefore naturally created as the audience sees a determined, fearsome character enter the room, greatly contrasting to the previous atmosphere in the Birling household. It is through this that the audience realises that the Inspector is there for a significant reason. The fact he is an Inspector of police emphasises further that the reason for his presence must be important.

Tension is then created as the audience are unaware and curious as to why he is there and leaves the audience guessing subsequent events. This tension is heightened due to the Inspector dragging out his explanation of why he is actually there. Mr. Birling directly questions, “ What can I do with you? Some trouble about a warrant? ” The Inspector replies, “ No. Mr Birling ” building tension as he does not answer the question for not only Mr Birling but also the audience, first time round.

Priestley also uses contrast in his lighting to create tension with the Inspector’s entrance. Before the inspector enters the lighting is “ pink and intimate ” due to the joyous atmosphere within the household with the engagement of Sheila Birling and Gerald Croft. However on the Inspectors entrance the stage direction implies a change in the lighting, it becomes, “ brighter and harder ”. This creates tension for the audience as the lighting has changed from a cosy, comfortable colour with connotations to romance to a sharp bright colour.

Thus making the audience feel uptight and creating tension. The character of the Inspector is a device used by Priestley to create tension throughout the entire play. This is due to the way the Inspector controls the pace of the play’s events by slowly unravelling Eva Smith’s life and dealing with one character at a time, exposing their involvement with her death. In this way Priestley transforms the play into a murder mystery where the audience are constantly trying to predict the future events.

One of the ways the Inspector controls the pace information is written within the stage directions, “ Both Gerald and Eric rise to have a look at the  
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photograph (of Eva Smith), but the inspector interposes himself between them and the photograph, which the inspector then replaces in his pocket". This shows how the Inspector is increasing tension for the characters in the play and therefore the audience too by breaking up the plot into sections and gradually revealing the plot. Priestley times the ending of the acts perfectly to obtain tension between the acts. He does this by ending them on cliff hangers.

An example of this is at the end of Act One when Gerald admits to Sheila that he had had an affair with Eva Smith. The Inspector then enters and simply says " Well? " which hooks the audience, as they want to find out what is to be said next. Priestley also uses the ending of An Inspector Calls to create tension by ending it on a cliff hanger. Some of the tension built up in the play is relieved when the Birling's feel they are off the hook as they believe it was all a hoax. However, the final telephone call answered by Mr Birling reveals that what they deemed to be a hoax was in fact true.

This rapidly restores the tension very dramatically and leaves the audience on an unexpected final twist that none of them could have been expecting. Lastly, Priestley creates tension throughout the play through the conflict between the characters in An Inspector Calls. This way of creating tension, by having a conflict that builds up between two parties is adopted by most plays. Conflict is created between the Inspector and the Birling's by Mr and Mrs Birling's complete denial and outrage to the idea that they hold responsibility for Eva Smith's death.

The stage directions describe Mr. Birling as saying things, “ somewhat impatiently” and he repeatedly states in different ways the blunt fact, “ I can’t accept any responsibility”. This conflict inevitably creates tension for the audience. As well as this type of conflict, there is also conflict created between the members of the Birling family. For Example, when Sheila talks to Gerald about “ last summer, when you never came near me and I wondered what had happened to you”. Gerald vaguely states he was busy and the audience get a sense of underlying secrecy when Sheila states, “ that’s what you say”.

This creates tension between the characters and for the audience as they wish to know what actually happened. Priestley also uses accusations and uneasy laughter between the members of the Birling family, such as “ unless Eric has done something” in order to build up tension. This provokes thought within the audience as to whether Eric has done something, inevitably creating tension as the answer to this is unknown. This tension is increased through hinting from Priestley that the family have actually done something wrong.

For instance Mr Birling emphasises, “ so long as we behave ourselves”. It is therefore clear to see, that without doubt J. B Priestley uses his characters, dramatic irony, contrast, lighting and his ending to great effect in communicating his main theme and creating tension. Tension is successfully employed by Priestley, using mainly conflict between his characters and the character of the inspector to control the pace of the plot with the ending cliff hanger leaving his audience wanting more.

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Yet at the same time, Priestley uses these same devices, most significantly his uses his characters to convey not only his views of socialism and his key theme but uses contrast and dramatic irony to show the downfalls of capitalism. In addition to this the Inspector, lighting and the ending are also used to enforce the importance of collective responsibility. Leaving the audience with the clear message that, “ We are members of One Body”.