

How does Priestley
use a play that seems
to be about an
ordinary middle-class
family...



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An Inspector Calls at first glance may seem like a "whodunit" surrounding a traditional Edwardian middle-class family. However on deeper reading very apparent Priestley intends it to be a parable, voicing his political views to other people.

Priestley had previously broadcast on the radio, however this was taken off air, as Priestley had voiced his political views on there, claiming he felt the Second World War was unnecessary and showing his frustrations that people had not learnt from the first war which was supposedly "the war to end all wars", and people saw this as unpatriotic and disrespectful to the men who were fighting. There are many hints to show Priestley has socialist ideas, which he is trying to voice through the character of the Inspector, "We are all members of one body. We are responsible for each other" is an example of this, reflecting one of the key ideas behind socialism, that everyone's lives are lived together, rather than alone. He even pokes fun at capitalist views, the character of Birling being a caricature of a selfish capitalist, summed up in his philosophy of life that "...

a man should mind his own business and look after himself and his own". He portrays Birling as being incredibly sure of himself, but in fact very ignorant, such as the dramatic irony when Birling claims "I say there isn't a chance of war" when in fact, a few years after the play is set, the First World War breaks out. Then "the Titanic... - unsinkable" - again the Titanic sinks only a few months after the play is set.

And also "there's a lot of wild talk about possible labour trouble in the near future" and again there were a large number of strikes around the time of

the play. Everything Birling says is made to make him sound like he merely likes the sound of his own voice but in fact knows nothing, and he also slanders socialists calling them "cranks" and saying they "can't let all these Bernard Shaws and H. G. Wellses do all the talking", (very prominent literary socialists). He tries to reflect the way he sees capitalists as buffoons and tries to show the audience this through the character of Birling. It is also clever how Priestley times the Inspector's arrival, as straight after Birling outlines his philosophy on life (as mentioned above), he is abruptly interrupted by the doorbell ringing, the arrival of the Inspector.

This interruption not only shows the Inspector will interrupt their lives, and change their outlook too. It is intended to be ironic that Birling should say that just before the socialist Inspector arrives. He shows his thoughts on how he sees the middle class families' views of the lower class being pompous, stuck-up and uncaring. The Inspector slowly reveals how each character has exploited Eva in different ways. Each of them thinking of themselves before the girl, and not of the outcomes of their actions, building up and peaking when eventually Mrs. Birling actually condemns her own son ".

.. find this young man and then make sure he's compelled to confess in public his responsibility...

", here again showing how ignorant he sees the middle class to be. Mrs Birling won't even accept responsibility for her actions, trying to shift the blame on to someone else, and presenting herself as incapable of showing compassion or understanding, Priestley wants this idea to be seen as true of many middle class people. The way the Inspector does this shows the skill

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Priestley uses in the structure of the play. He uses entrances and exits so the right people are on the stage at the right time for private conversations. An example of this is when Eric takes the Inspector to the drawing room to speak with Birling, leaving Sheila and Gerald on the stage at a critical point, just as Sheila begins to realise he has had an affair, so the nature of their relationship can be shown to the audience. One critical factor outlined is the need Sheila has for honesty; "That's probably the best thing you've said tonight.

At least it's honest." and that Gerald does not want this honesty, and wants to brush "unpleasantness" under the carpet: "Why should you? It's bound to be unpleasant and disturbing". This characteristic reflected in Gerald is similar to that of Mr and Mrs Birling, but not present in Sheila and Eric, who are the characters who learn from what the Inspector has taught them. Each character in the Birling household reflects a different side of the hypocritical middle-class family which they have tried to hide with a facade of being very caring and respectable. The Birlings were obviously keen to be seen as a family very caring of the poor, as Mrs. Birling was one of the chairwomen of a charity committee- "we've done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases".

This becomes both ironic and hypocritical after the story of the treatment of one less fortunate girl by the family unravels. The family are not generous and kind with money as being on a charity committee would suggest. Mr Birling is very tight with his money, and is unwilling to increase some of his workers pay by a very small amount "...

If I'd agreed to this demand for a new rate we'd have added about twelve percent to our labour costs. " This again reflects the selfishness Priestley sees in the capitalist attitude to life. This is not the only time however, that money is brought in to the situation by Birling. He also states " Look, Inspector- I'd give thousands- yes thousands-" to fix the situation, showing in no circumstances can he, or the capitalist class he represents, think of a situation in terms of anything other than self-gain and money. The family, especially the elders, obviously have a very clear idea, and have almost kidded themselves all of the upper middle class of the town are completely respectable and upstanding, generous people. In fact it comes to light that one of the prominent members of the upper middle class community, Alderman Meggarty is " a notorious womanizer as well as being one the worst sots and rogues in Brumley", and on top of that Eric turns out to be an alcoholic, and Gerald to have had an affair.

It becomes clear that the entire " respectable" upper middleclass are in fact riddled with hypocrisy and secrets. The play has a very clear moral to it, summarised in the Inspector's final speech, he says that if we do not learn to respect others, we shall be taught in " fire and blood and anguish", these very apocalyptic images, make the Inspector sound almost like an old testament prophet, that people who do not learn will be condemned. This could be referring to the war which breaks out soon after the play is set, and also World War II. However it could also be referring to the emotions felt when the situation with Eva happens for real (because the characters do not realise yet, that no girl has actually died so far), or perhaps the syndicalist strikes that break out soon after the play is set because labour costs are so

low. It is hard to tell what Priestley meant the Inspector to be visualised as, perhaps some kind of time-traveller or angel, because he seems to mysteriously know all about Eva's life. It seems he also knows the "real" police inspector is due to call at a certain time as he says is constantly saying "I haven't much time".

He could even be Eva Smith's child, as an adult travelling from the future, and he is alive as Eva is not dead yet, and he disappears as Eva actually dies, then after the family is rung by the real police inspector. This would explain why he didn't have much time if he knew Eva was going to die, and so he would go too as he wouldn't have been born if Eva dies. When the play was written, and when the play was set are also key factors to the meaning behind the play, the fact it was set in 1912 and was written in 1945 shows that Priestley's message is universal; it applies to people in 1912, all the way up to the present day and everywhere before, after and in between. He was hoping the message of his play would however; change minds and help a victory for Labour over the Conservatives who were dominated the coalition government, headed by Winston Churchill, the prime minister. The reason he felt this was needed was because, like other socialists, he did not want the mistakes after the first war to be repeated.

He felt the reason the Second World War had broken out was because of the failures of capitalism, and that little more than a decade after the first war the UK fell in to the great depression with horrific poverty, and he worried this could happen again, unless Labour was elected after the war to implement socialist policies. So by setting it in 1912 for a 1945 audience, he thought people would realise the fact changes should've been made in 1912

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to avoid the first war and after it “win the peace”. He feels if Labour had been in a position to implement Socialist policies then, maybe neither the war, nor the economic depression and unemployment issues of the 1930’s would have happened. The play also shows optimistic hope for the future, as the younger members of the Birling family learn from their mistakes- “And that doesn’t alter the fact we all helped to kill her”. The older members don’t seem to be able to learn, the second they think they’re out of the woods they stop worrying, forget what they’ve been told and even begin to poke fun at the Inspector.

They have learnt absolutely nothing, with Sheila even saying “That’s just what I feel Eric, and what they don’t seem to understand”. All the older members seem to care about is their reputation. Soon after the Inspector leaves, Birling exclaims “Most of this is bound to come out. They’ll be a public scandal.

This conveys the fact that, even at the end of the play, after the Inspector’s visit most of the family members, particularly the older members, are still self-centred and missing the point as they were before. The Inspector says “We often do on the younger ones. They’re more impressionable”, meaning younger people learn better, showing Priestley has hope for the younger generation as the future. It is clear through-out this play that Priestley is voicing Socialist ideas, and trying to make others see, agree and believe them. The family are intended to represent the Capitalist upper middle class, in what Priestley sees as their “true light”. Even the stage directions ask for the light to be sharper and brighter when the Inspector arrives.

This shows Priestley thinks the Inspector sees the world clearer and in a 'better light' and that he has come to 'shed light' and understanding on the family, and through them helping others look deeper into Capitalism, in ways which other people viewing the play may not have realised.