

Scrutinising the theatrical effects used by JB Priestly

Literature



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For the duration of this assignment, I shall be scrutinising the theatrical effects used by J. B Priestly in his classic tale of " An Inspector Calls". By combining quotations and examples from the manuscript itself, the topic of whether these methods of drama work will be questioned. I myself will be concentrating largely on the final pages of Act One of the play. With this I will create a thorough analysis of some of techniques featured here. To conclude the assignment, I shall be taking into account the question of whether the techniques employed by Priestly would have an effect on a 21st Century Audience of today.

J. B Priestly sets the play in the fictional city of Brumley in the year of 1912. Brumley is situated in the North Midlands, which at the time was considered a vast industrial area. In this city of factory owners and corrupt politicians, social standings were far more important than they were today. Many men who had invested in such industries as coal and iron had made considerable fortunes. Men such as Arthur Birling may have come from humble origins but their wealth allowed them to climb up the social ladder. But many employers did not take the rights of workers too seriously.

Thus, upper and lower class was developed and for some such as Eva Smith, the situation could only get worse off than it had been. This has a big effect on how the drama is presented. It is a special genre of writing and needs a performance in a theatre to arrive at a full interpretation of its meaning. It must not be read but acted out. Contained within it must be certain features such as a main plot and different themes. But most of all are the dramatic and stylistic features involved. This coincides with Eugene Scribe's (1791-1861) theory of a well-made play.

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He came up with the formula that the structure of a well-made play should be carefully crafted in order to arouse suspense and tension. In total, he came up with seven different features. An extremely common technique employed by Priestly is that of the "Obligatory Scene"(This is only an exaggeration of the word scene. It does not mean a whole scene, as there is no different scenes in "An Inspector Calls", only three separate acts). This hallmark of drama takes place when a secret revealed to that of everyone present, audience and performers included. An ornate example of this takes place from page 20-25.

The Inspector mentions the topic of Milwards department store, due to Eva Smith's acceptance into their offices before her untimely death. Once this is brought up, Sheila Birling is the first to react: "Milwards! We go there". Straight away it is obvious to tell that Sheila has some sort of connection with the shop Milwards. As the Inspector continues his enquiries, he seems to have an understanding of who is partly to blame for victim's death. He mentions that "a customer had complained about her".

Sheila seems to be disturbed by this remark, and her facial expressions show for this: (staring at him, agitated)". When offered to see the photograph of the victim in question, Sheila is non-hesitant. However, when the photograph is produced, she "recognises it with a little cry, gives a half-stifled sob, and then runs out". Now, some sort of truth has been revealed. Why would Sheila react in this manner? It has become evident that Sheila is to blame for the discharge of Eva Smith from Milwards. The moment of Sheila's exeunt, Mr. Birling quarrels over why he would want to go "upsetting a child like that? "

This quotation reveals Mr. Birling's attitude towards his daughter is seeing her as still being a juvenile. This was conventional amongst the majority of upper class society.

Many parents were convinced that they had to impose their will and authority over their offspring. In this circumstance, Mr. Birling regards himself as being dominant over Sheila and Eric. After Mr. Birling's feud and rather loud exit, Sheila returns to confront the Inspector. He points out Sheila's petty motives of jealousy and anger, and misuse of her power as the daughter of rich and influential parents to blackmail the shop into sacking the girl.

When he tells Sheila is only partly to blame, we realise he intends that all of them should share the responsibility. Sheila now realises what a terrible thing she has done. Although the Inspector will not accept belated regrets as an excuse, Sheila learns her lesson and is determined never to act so unfairly again. The Inspector sums up what has so far been revealed about the involvement of Birling and Sheila, and tells them that the girl sacked from the shop had " changed her name to Daisy Renton". Momentarily, Gerald reacts sharply to the name.

This is told in his speech and body language: (startled) " What? " (pulling himself together) " D'you mind if I give myself a drink, Sheila? "" Gerald's reaction to the name suggests he had a very close relationship with her. He feels that since he is no longer seeing the girl that everything is all right. But Sheila has an understanding of the Inspector's power to make them reveal all. This device of theatre all adds to the drama. If left in suspense, the

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audience will become aroused and if a vital secret is revealed, they will feel several emotions, which lead them into a state of anticipation.

It is quite obvious to see that the "obligatory scene" is a key main in the composure of a well-made play. Without any delay, the stylistic feature of the "Climatic Curtain" is applied. It is another asset of a well-made play. It takes place when the end of an act finishes on a tense and highly dramatic moment. An excellent sample of this takes place on pages 25 and 26.

Revealing that Gerald has had some sort of sexual liaison with the so-called "Daisy Renton"; the Inspector departs the room with Eric to allow Gerald and Sheila to converse the matter further. Sheila instantly challenges Gerald.

She realises that Gerald's lack of attention to her the previous summer was due to his affair with Daisy Renton. Even though Gerald attempted to cover the truth: "(trying to smile) " Well what, Sheila? " he said adamantly " I didn't" have an affair with Daisy Renton. He gradually admits to having an affair, but " hadn't set eyes on another girl for at least six months". No later than sooner of clarifying the existence of the affair, Gerald denies his role in the death of Eva Smith by commenting that " I don't come into this suicide business". Again there is an essence of responsibility surrounding the family.

It is almost as if they do not want to be involved in lower class affairs. This puts forward the idea that social standings were an important aspect in the year the play was set. After his confession, Gerald pleads for Sheila not to mention anything about him and the girl to the Inspector. Sheila informs him of the Inspector's powers to reveal the hidden truth: " Why you fool-he knows. Of course he knows... You'll see. " In a brief moment, Sheila stands in

triumph while Gerald looks crushed. When the Inspector returns, his simple "Well?" leaves the audience in tense anticipation as the curtain comes down on Act One.

The effect Priestly creates is that of the audience being left in the dark about how much of this is known by the Inspector. Could there be unforeseen consequences to disclosure? This unearths many different questions to be answered. This ultimately why the " Climatic Curtain" is renowned as being the " Cliff Hanger" to any well-made play. If you look very carefully at the examples I have just evaluated, it becomes quite distinctive that they all bear some sort of resemblance. These techniques of drama seem to have a common factor linking them with one another. I am of course referring to the stylistic feature of the " Detective Novel Format".

In this, the careful questioning of a detective or inspector solves a mystery frequently involving a murder. In a traditional " who done it" mystery, the criminal would be revealed. When the " Detective Novel Format" is applied, the denouement occurs at the end, usually ending up with all the characters in one room. The detective would then proceed to uncover the identity of the culprit. Even though " An Inspector Calls" does not live up to the guidelines of a traditional " who done it", questions are still raised about why Eva Smith would contemplate committing suicide.

Although the Birling family and Gerald Croft did not commit any deliberate acts of harm towards Eva Smith, they are still held responsible for her death. When looking at this certain device, you must look at the play as a whole. To start with, the play takes place in " The dining room of a fairly large

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suburban house" belonging to " a prosperous manufacturer". In modern detective novels or plays, the backdrop of an aristocratic mansion is often used to portrait the perfect crime scene. Soon the characteristics of the Birlings and their guest Gerald Croft are established in the opening pages.

Mr. Birling is seen as being a wealthy, pompous businessman who might as well be married to his work. He also shows his ignorance to the developing events of 1912: " The Germans don't want war. Nobody wants war". Judging by Mr. Birling's attitude towards his work, he is a man of industrial revelations. Gerald Croft bears likeness to Mr. Birling. Being the main rival of " Birlings and Company", he is eager to worm his way into the Birling family: " I insist upon being one of the family now. I've been trying long enough haven't I? " All at once, the maid, Edna, enters the room and informs the occupants of the table that an inspector has called round.

Without any warning, Birling is forced to show the inspector into the room. Birling tries to cover his nerves by stating " It may be something about a warrant". This seems rather odd due to Gerald gestures of " Nodding confidently". As the Inspector enters, his presence causes a great sense of unease. Mr. Birling is aware of this and believes that blustering about his social powers will fend off the Inspector's interrogations. This plan of action fails as the Inspector begins firing his shrewd and determined questions at the family.

He briefs the family on the girls' death and mentions that she had died by " Suicide, of course". This is recognisable as being a clear assault on each of the family members present. This is made obvious due to the fact that

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everyone had some part to play in the death of the girl. As the involvement of each family member is progressively established, the structure becomes that of a "who done it", with the Inspector apparently slowly unravelling the history of Eva Smith. Once the Inspector has finished his enquiries, he leaves the family in guilt-ridden mess.

Mr. and Mrs. Birling accompany Gerald in eagerly trying to improve their own situation by discrediting the Inspector. Emphasis is placed on the idea that it has all been a hoax, so reducing the seriousness of the admissions they all have made. However, The telephone call at the end reopens the question of the Inspector's identity. It also leaves the audience wondering whether it will be the same inspector who comes to question them and how events will progress this time around. When the Inspector first arrives with the news of Eva Smith's suicide, it is realised that he is there to find the murderer.

Even though there was no single killer, the combination of the Birling family and Gerald Croft drove a young girl to causing her own demise. It is clear that the "Detective Novel Format" has a huge effect on the denouement of a well-made play. In conclusion to this assignment, I do believe that the theatrical effects implied by J. B Priestly in "An Inspector Calls" do function with the audience of today. It is clear to see that each feature used somehow relates to a 21st Century Audience. The "Obligatory Scene" is used frequently in modern day soaps, such as Eastenders.

When a secret is revealed though, the technique of the "Climatic Curtain" is accustomed to ending the programme on a tense moment. This leaves the viewers in an oar of wonder of what is to happen next. However, the "

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Detective Novel Format" has been used by writers such as Agatha Christie and Dashiell Hammett to really add depth to the structure of the play. "An Inspector Calls" is a tale of social standings, financial differences, cruelty and injustice. There can be no doubt that the modes of Theatrical Art employed by J. B. Priestley have maintained the interests of audiences in 1946, as they still do for us today in the 21st Century.