



First Rate Tutors

An Inspector Calls

Model Answers



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An Inspector Calls

Revision Notes

Priestley's Life:

John Boynton Priestley was born into a working class family in 1894. He knew early on that he wanted to become a writer, but decided against going to university as he thought he would get a better feel for the world around him by working. Instead, he became a junior clerk with a local wool firm at the age of 16.

When the First World War broke out, Priestley joined the infantry and only just escaped death on a number of occasions. After the war, he gained a degree from Cambridge University, and then moved to London to work as a freelance writer. Much of his writing was ground-breaking and controversial.

Social Historical Context:

The play was written in 1945 at the end of two World Wars. It is set in 1912, Edwardian England, just two years before the first war. This was a very difficult time for England. It was a period when there were many strikes, food shortages and great political tension. By 1945 Europe was in ruins and two cities of Japan were destroyed by atomic bombs.

This play has a moral message - that we should think of others and work together to ensure a fairer, more equal society. This idea is known as socialism – even now, the political party Labour to some extent follow this idea. When the play was first published, Labour had just taken over the country for the first time. Before Labour, the country was run by the Conservatives – these people believed that each person had to look after themselves.

During Edwardian England (1912), there was also a divide between the people of England at that time; the rich and the poor. 87% of all the money in England belonged to only 5% of the population. In 1912, England had little welfare system, in other words, there was no dole if you didn't have a job. Even when you did have a job, there were no real unions or laws that helped people at work- there was no minimum wage and the average number of hours people worked each week was up to 65, we only work an average 39! Employers could basically treat their workers as they wanted. If you were ill, you were unlikely to be able to see a doctor if you were poor.

The play is set in the fictional town Brumley – a northern town like Bradford (where Priestley is from). Bradford had many factories owned by rich people who paid very little for back breaking work. Women had fewer rights than men at the time and had not yet won the right to vote. They were not expected to work unless they were the lower class, then they would have to work to survive. The eldest male of any home would be the main breadwinner (the person who brings the money home), they were also in charge at home, and their word was law; a wife would never argue or answer back to her husband or eldest son.

Plot Summary:

1. The Birling Family and Gerald Croft are having a dinner celebrating Sheila Birling's engagement to Gerald Croft.
2. Just as Mr Birling is at his most confident; an inspector arrives to investigate a suicide.
3. Mr Birling reveals he sacked Eva Smith.
4. Sheila explains that she had Eva sacked from her next job at Milwards.
5. Gerald recognises the name Daisy Renton (Eva's second name)
6. Gerald admits that he kept Daisy as his mistress.
7. Mrs Birling tells the group that she denied help to a pregnant girl when she went to Mrs Birling's charity organisation
8. Eric enters, just as we realise he is the father of the child.
9. Eric explains his relationship with the girl and how he stole money to help her.
10. The Inspector leaves.
11. The family gradually realises the Inspector could have been a fraud.
12. The celebratory mood is almost restored – then a phone call announces that an Inspector is on his way to investigate a girl's suicide.

Themes

Social responsibility

During the early 20th-century there was no government support for the poor. *An Inspector Calls* was first performed in the UK just after the end of World War Two, in 1946. It was a time of great change in Britain and many writers were concerned with the welfare of the poor. At that time there was no assistance for people who could not afford to look after themselves. Priestley wanted to address this issue. He also felt that if people were more considerate of one another, it would improve quality of life for all. This is why social responsibility is a key theme of the play. Priestley wanted his audience to be responsible for their own behaviour and responsible for the welfare of others.

Age

Age is an important theme in *An Inspector Calls*. Priestley uses it to show how he believed that there was hope in the younger generation's ability to learn and change. The older characters' opinions and behaviours are stubbornly fixed. Mr Birling refuses to learn and Mrs Birling cannot see the obvious about herself and her children. Eric and Sheila however are younger - they accept their mistakes and offer the chance for a brighter future.

Gender

During World War Two women had a more prominent role in the work place. *An Inspector Calls* was written after World War Two. As many British men went away to fight during the war, their positions in work had to be filled by women. This helped change existing perceptions. Men had to acknowledge the fact that women were just as capable as them. As a result of this, many women enjoyed a newfound freedom that working and earning money allowed them. Not all men saw this change in attitude as a good thing and stayed stuck in the past. Priestley explores the impact of these new gender roles through the independence of Eva Smith and the sexist attitudes of Mr Birling.

Class

Priestley highlighted the inequality between upper, middle and working- classes. Before World War Two, Britain was divided by class. Two such classes were the wealthy land and factory owners and the poor workers. The war helped bring these two classes closer together and rationing meant that people of all classes were eating and even dressing the same. The war effort also meant that people from all classes were mixing together. This was certainly not the case before.

Responsibility:

The Inspector wanted each member of the family to share the responsibility of Eva's death: he tells them, "each of you helped to kill her." However, his final speech is aimed not only at the characters on stage, but at the audience too: "One Eva Smith has gone - but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do."

An Inspector Calls Quote bank

Quotes according to characters:

Inspector Goole:

‘It’s better to ask for the earth than to take it.’

‘There are a lot of young women... if there weren’t the factories and warehouses wouldn’t know where to look for cheap labour. Ask your father.’

‘Sometimes, there isn’t as much difference as you think ... I wouldn’t know where to draw the line.’

‘You were annoyed with yourself and passed the annoyance onto her.’
‘She wanted to keep this youngster out of any more trouble – isn’t that so?’

‘You’re offering the money at the wrong time, Mr Birling.’

‘One Eva Smith has gone... but there are millions... of Eva Smiths... all intertwined with our lives... if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.’

Mr Arthur Birling:

‘I look forward to a time when Croft’s and Birling’s are no longer competing but working together – for lower costs and higher prices.’

‘The Germans don’t want war... the Titanic, she sails next week... and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable.’

‘The way some of these cranks talk now, you’d think everybody has to look after everybody else.’

‘But it doesn’t convey anything to me.’

‘Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges.’

Mrs Sybil Birling:

‘Girls of that class...’

‘Alderman Meggarty... we are learning something tonight.’

‘She seemed to me to be not a good case – and so I used my influence to have it refused.’

‘Some drunken young idler, then that’s all the more reason why he shouldn’t escape.’

Sheila Birling:

‘She was a very pretty girl too... and that didn’t make it any better.’

‘I couldn’t be sorry for her.’

‘...talked about building up a wall that’s sure to be knocked flat.’

‘I don’t care about that, the point is that you don’t seem to have learnt anything.’

‘I suppose we’re all nice people now.’

Eric Birling:

‘She wouldn’t take any more and she didn’t want to see me again.’

‘and the child she’d had too – my child – your own grandchild – you killed them both – damn you-’

‘The money’s not the important thing. It’s what happened to the girl and what we all did to her that matters.’

Gerald Croft:

‘And I’ve told you – I was awfully busy at the works all that time.’

‘I didn’t install her there so I could make love to her... I was sorry for her.’

‘She told me she’d been happier than she’d ever been before.’

Model Answers

How does Priestley reveal the important roles that Sheila and Eric have in An Inspector calls?

Write about:

- **how Eric and Sheila respond to their family and to the Inspector**
- **how Priestley presents Eric and Sheila by the way he writes.**

J. B. Priestley uses the characters of Sheila and Eric Birling as important examples of the terrible way those in the upper classes treat the poorer members of society. However as the play progresses and they learn of their transgressions, as well as the devastating impact that they had on Eva Smith and Daisy Renton, they are used as powerful examples of the change that the wealthy are capable of. Sheila and Eric become extremely remorseful and they provide potent examples of people who have the power to spark social change. This essay will examine the important roles that they both have in “An Inspector Calls.”

Firstly, we meet the character of Sheila Birling and we learn that she is “a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited.” She is engaged to Gerald Croft, who is the son of a wealthy and aristocratic family and she seems to be quite excited, childish and she relies on her parents for guidance: “go on, mummy. You must drink our health.” Priestley presents Sheila’s character in this manner at the outset of the play as contextually – he uses her character to show how insulated the children of wealthy middle class and upper class people were. Her childish attitude is a reflection on how detached many people in the middle and upper classes were from society. Priestley purposefully chose to set the play in the Edwardian Era which was just before the onset of the First World War as a way of showing the stark divides that existed between women like Sheila, who by birth were gifted with plenty, as opposed to women like Eva who were exploited and mistreated from their youth and through their adulthood simply because they were part of the powerless working class.

While Sheila’s character is quite effeminate, she has a strong side to her as she is assertive. This is in direct contrast to her brother Eric, who at the start of the play is presented as somewhat irresponsible and troubled. He appears isolated and mysterious as he “guffaws” at a private joke that Sheila derides: “You’re squiffy.” We increasingly sense that he may be an alcoholic as Eric himself hints at this when he sarcastically proposes a toast to the engagement of Gerald and Sheila: “We’ll drink to their health...” It is interesting that of the two siblings, it seems that the weaker one is a man and it appears that Priestley did this as a way of reversing the roles that were traditionally assigned to men and women at the time. While Sheila is outspoken and assertive – which at the time were perceived as

“masculine” qualities, Eric appears to be defeated, passive and constantly living in his father’s shadow – something that was perceived as more of a “feminine” trait. Hence Eric’s character is important as his role was used by Priestley to criticise and deride the sexist views at the time that refused to grant women the right to vote or own property as they were “lesser” beings, while men were seen as more in control of their lives. Eric appears to lack much self-control and autonomy. This may be Priestley’s way of showing that it is wrong to assign different rights to people based on their genders.

As the play progresses and the Birling family encounters the Inspector, we learn that Sheila also harbors a darker, jealous streak. We discover that Sheila is insecure about her appearance and beauty and when she encounters Eva who works at a shop she visits, she is instantly jealous. Sheila tries on a dress and she grows angry as she realises that “It just suited her. She was the right type for it, just as I was the wrong type. She was very pretty too...” As a result, she uses her power and influence to have Eva unfairly dismissed from her role. This illustrates the importance of Sheila in the play as it illustrates that many people in the upper classes used their power unfairly to victimise and oppress those who were poor and marginalised. However once Sheila realises her terrible actions, she appears remorseful and she takes responsibility for her role in Eva’s death: “It was my own fault.” This is powerful as it shows that Priestley wished to use Sheila’s character to teach the audience – particularly the wealthier viewers – that they have a duty to society to help the working classes. In addition to paying them an equal wage as a way to reduce poverty, the upper classes have a duty to engage in charitable actions that help and benefit the poorer people among them.

Furthermore Eric plays an important role in the play because although at he does not care to involve himself in the discussion when the Inspector first appears, we learn that he had a major part to play in the death of Eva Smith, who is Daisy Renton by the time she meets Eric. We learn that he abuses his power over her as a prostitute by forcing her to have sex with him, and then later abandoning her when she falls pregnant. He even admits that “I didn’t even remember...” However when he realises the consequences of his actions played a role, not only in preventing Daisy from working as a prostitute as she was pregnant but also leading he to commit suicide, he becomes extremely guilty.

Eric abandoned her while she was pregnant. However he begins to feel extremely guilty about the role he played in Daisy Renton’s death: “You’re beginning to pretend now that nothing’s really happened at all. And I can’t see it like that.” Eric represents the younger generation because even though he had a huge part to play in Daisy Renton’s death, he takes full responsibility for what has happened. When Sheila admonishes the family and by telling them not to “pretend that nothing’s happened,” he agrees with her. Indeed Eric’s complete shift from shirking responsibility to accepting moral responsibility for his role in oppressing

weaker members of society is important in showing the power the younger generation had to inspire change in society. Priestley uses both his and Sheila's characters to show the theme of the young and the old generations as well as present the promise for change that the younger people held a potential for. While Eric is used to starkly contrast his father who wants "no scandal," Eric is important as he shows the potential that younger people in the upper classes have to effect change by treating the working classes in a more humane way, alleviating their poverty by paying them better wages as well as engaging in kind and charitable acts towards them.

Finally, Sheila's character is important as her values are directly contrasted with the more rigid and traditional values of her mother, Mrs Birling. While Mrs Birling is a genteel, upper class woman who is extremely proud of her reputation protective of her social status, Sheila appears to be more outspoken and less fearful of being perceived as impolite. When Sheila discovers Gerald has been unfaithful to her, she decides to call off their engagement to her mother's dismay: "you and I aren't the same people who sat down to dinner here." While Mrs Birling attempts to dismiss Gerald's unfaithfulness as an acceptable and normal aspect of marriages, Sheila refuses to accept this as she appears less concerned with keeping up social appearances – while her mother is interested in obsessively guarding her social status. This shows that Sheila represents the younger generation of women who are willing to go against society's norms to stay in an unfaithful marriage, instead she is willing to strike out alone. However Mrs Birling represents the older generation as she is concerned with protecting her marriage at all costs so that she can be seen as respectable by outsiders. Contextually, women did not have many rights prior to the First World War – indeed British women only received the right to vote in 1918. Hence Sheila's decision to break off her engagement shows her bravery as she was taking a huge risk on her future, as opposed to Mrs Birling who was more risk averse and willing to accept the social order as rigid. This reveals that Sheila is an important character in the play as Priestley uses her as an admirable example of how women should seek their independence and autonomy, rather than being under the control and domination of men and marriages that do not serve them.

To conclude, the characters of Sheila and Eric are important in the play as they represent the possibility for change that is open to all people – including those in upper class society who were previously unfair and dismissive of the marginalised working classes. This essay has examined in depth the shift in Eric and Sheila's characters as well as how this shift represents the potential for change that many in society have – as a way to create a more equal society for poor people as well as men and women.

Model Answers

How and why does Sheila change in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- how Sheila responds to her family and to the Inspector
- how Priestley presents Sheila by the ways he writes.

In ‘*An Inspector Calls*,’ Sheila serves as a vital character as she represents the ability that people have to change and transform, as well as seek redemption through learning how to give back to those who are poorer in society. We as the audience witness a gradual yet important shift in Sheila because at the beginning of the play, she is presented as spoilt and uncaring - in fact, she appears to use others in the world for her own benefit. However, as the play progresses, Sheila becomes more moral and she develops a sense of social responsibility towards the poorer, disenfranchised members of society. This essay will examine Sheila’s change in detail and the lesson Priestley wishes to impart through her character.

Sheila’s character is initially presented as somewhat of a contrast to her brother, Eric. She is quick witted and strong minded, while Eric appears to be side-lined and consumed by his internal demons. However we witness that Sheila is still willing to play along with the social role that has been assigned to her as a woman of a high social rank. She states “I don’t believe I will... you better be careful.” This shows she is quite direct in her speech and her manner. This could connote she has more power in her life than Eric does, breaking the stereotypes of the early 1900s that many people had of women being passive, as in this case – it seems like Eric is the more passive of the two siblings. However towards the end of the play, she becomes more sensitive and caring for women of lower social status. It appears that she has changed for the better as she is less preoccupied with using her outspoken nature to selfishly benefit herself, instead she uses her power and outspoken nature to help those who are voiceless in society. Hence Priestley uses Sheila to show that women in upper class society can change and that they can care about those in the lower classes.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the play, Sheila acts spoiled and aloof. She appears to enjoy using her power to get what she wants as well as punish those who are weaker than her, including Eva Smith. This is evident when the stage directions tell us that she is “very pleased with life and rather excited.” These stage directions show that she is accustomed to getting what she wants and she is detached from reality. It shows that she has never been told “no” before and she can get anything she wants. Furthermore, the Inspector recalls the incident when Sheila felt extremely jealous of the beauty of Eva Smith when she went into a shop that Eva worked in and tried a dress. Sheila recalls: “It just suited her. She was the

right type for it, just as I was the wrong type. She was very pretty too..." Her jealousy of the beauty of Eva, coupled with her witnessing Eva smirking at her appearance, leads her to use her power to make Eva lose her role. This is a contrast to the end of the play as it seems that Sheila accepts that the Birlings "probably between us... killed her." Sheila accepts moral responsibility for her harsh treatment of the poorer members of society and accepts the fact she helped kill Eva Smith. The theme which develops in this section of the play is the divide in attitudes between the younger generation versus the older generation. The younger generation were different to the older generation who were old fashioned and wished to maintain the same rigid social order. The younger generation, represented through Sheila, wished to see more change and equality. Priestley perhaps believed that they were agents of change as Sheila illustrates the need to shift her attitude to help others and challenge the rigid social hierarchy.

Moreover in Act 1, Sheila's marriage to Gerald is presented as a business deal of sorts - brokered between her father, Arthur Birling and Gerald Croft. This shows that Sheila had little say in this engagement. Indeed, she was used as a pawn by her father to strengthen his business ties to the Croft family. This shows the rigid stereotypes that both women and men had to abide by. Women did not have much power and they could not make many choices for themselves. Sheila appears happy to passively accept this role assigned to her as a woman at the beginning of the play. However at the end of the play, Sheila gives Gerald her ring back. She tells Gerald "you and I aren't the same people who sat down to dinner here." This is incredibly surprising as we can see that she is willing to become more independent and empowered, rather than passive, showing that she wants more power in her life. Hence this is a huge step forward for her in her independence and we find that she has developed a strong sense of maturity and willingness to face the world alone - outside the comforts of a marriage.

At the end of the play, Sheila's change illustrates the theme of social responsibility as she appears to internalise the fact that the rich and the upper class have a duty and a responsibility to the poorer people to look after them. This is evident when she says "but these girls aren't cheap labour - they're people." She speaks like this to Mr Birling because she is angry at the fact that he exploits his power and uses it to treat those who are weaker in an unfair manner. Sheila illustrates her awareness of the stark social divide which existed at the turn of the Century. There were deep divisions in England and people of a lower class as well as women were not treated well. Indeed Eva Smith and Daisy Renton illustrates just how difficult life was for poor women who were often mistreated and exploited. Priestley thus uses Sheila as an example to the wealthier people in English society of how they should look after those who are less fortunate. From the audience's perspective, an audience member in the 1940s when Priestley wrote this play would have been pleased to see this change. Indeed there were many people who advocated for social reforms following the Second World War, hence

people would have been pleased to see that Sheila is reflective of the mood for developing broader social equality.

Moreover at the start of the play, Sheila is presented as extremely immature and childish. When she did not get what she wanted, she reacts in a very vengeful and childish way. However Sheila appears to grow as the play progresses and this culminates when she tells her father “I’m not a child.” Moreover she tells Inspector Goole that she “isn’t living on the moon.” This shift in Sheila’s personality towards maturity and being in closer connection with the outside world, is a direct contrast to the hubris her father shows when he states the titanic can “never” sink. This shows that Sheila is willing to learn and change her ways as a result of her encounter with the Inspector. However her father and mother are far more set in their ways and they refuse to accept any responsibility to look after the poorer and marginalised people in society.

Overall, Sheila is first presented as spoiled and immature, as well as completely out of touch with the realities of life in Britain for those who are poor. However as the play progresses, she is presented as caring and she seems to take a personal responsibility for the welfare of poorer people in society. This is Priestley’s way of showing that even the most sheltered and wealthiest of people can change and that they can think about and help the poorer people in society. This essay has examined in depth the important changes that Sheila experiences throughout this play.

Model Answers

What do you think is the importance of Inspector Goole and how does Priestley present him?

Write about:

- **how The Inspector responds to the Birling family**
- **how Priestley presents the Inspector by the ways he writes.**

Inspector Goole plays a critical role in “An Inspector Calls” as a catalyst for the change that both Eric and Sheila Birling undergo and he also uncovers the social responsibility that the wealthy in society have towards the poorer within society. Although Mr Arthur Birling, Mrs Sybil Birling and Gerald Croft do not seemingly appear to have changed from their encounter with the Inspector by the end of the play, his presence has an unsettling impact on them as it reminds them of the social responsibility they have towards the weaker and marginalised society – otherwise they may risk the wrath of social changes and upheavals. This essay will examine in depth the important role Inspector Goole has in this play.

Firstly, Inspector Goole is significant because he introduces a supernatural element to the play. His name “Goole” which rhymes with “ghoul.” This suggests that he is a ghost - sent from heaven - to remind the wealthy Birling family to atone for their sins, be kinder to the poorer in society or else face the risk of going to hell and facing eternal damnation. Moreover the fact that he is omniscient - he has intricate knowledge about the family - shows that he is a supernatural force that will haunt them if they do not change their ways. He is described in the play as speaking “carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard...” He stares at all of the characters and makes them feel uneasy, creating tension by unnerving them. Inspector Goole does this in order to make them face up to the difficult reality of the horrible actions they have inflicted upon the weaker and poorer in society. Hence he is important as he forces the characters to reflect on their actions and consider how they can better treat the poorer in society.

Secondly, Inspector Goole is important as he gives a voice to the concerns of the working classes. He admonishes the family by telling them that there are “millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths...” This is critical as it shows that the Birling family have a chance of redemption if they help those who are poor and needy but they must change their ways. Additionally, the Inspector gives a voice to the concerns of the poor who are exploited by wealthy industrialists like Mr Birling and he reveals the harsh brutality of the world that they live in. Contextually, the Inspector is important as he reveals the realities of life in Edwardian England for the vast majority of working class people. The play is set prior to the start of the First World War and this was a time when British

society was deeply divided. There was a stark difference between the comfortable and luxurious life that the wealthy families of the rich industrialists as well as the aristocracy enjoyed, in contrast to the vast numbers of poor people who were paid a pittance for their work and labour in these rich industrialists' factories. The Inspector calls this reality into focus by confronting the Birling family – and by extension the wealthy audience members who would be watching Priestley's play – in order to show them the shocking realities that the poor majority face in their daily lives.

Thirdly, the Inspector is important as he is a catalyst for change. In other words, he has a huge impact on both Sheila and Eric who are the younger Birling members and this shows that there is a chance for change and redemption for the younger generation. This is evident when Mrs Birling notes that “you seem to have made a great impression on this child...” This shows the Inspector is a catalyst for change and revolution as he shows that they may challenge the status quo and create a fairer society in England. This is important as contextually, Priestley set this play just prior to the First World War when Britain was on the cusp of huge social shifts that would irreparably alter the country. Inspector Goole appears to be a harbinger - foreshadowing the change and revolution that will soon happen in Britain, including the First World War, the Suffragettes who successfully fought for the rights of women to vote, which was granted in 1918, and much later on the onset of the Second World War in 1939. It seems that he will catalyse the younger generation, including Eric and Sheila, to push for change which will irreparably shift Britain hence the Inspector is important as he seems to be an omen for this unstoppable shift.

Finally, the Inspector is important as he appears to attempt to make the Birling family change to be a better people as they have the power to make enormous contributions to society. The Inspector reveals the theme of social responsibility when he tells the family that they “are members of one body. We are responsible for each other...” The play's primary purpose is to show the importance of social responsibility and the Inspector wishes to illustrate that people should act in a way that helps less privileged people, rather than hurting and exploiting them as social exploitations can sow the seeds for discontent in society. It is interesting to note that Priestley wrote this play after the Second World War when Britain was in the throes of social change: there was the introduction of universal healthcare, social housing as well as the establishment of a minimum wage. One of the lessons that Priestley wishes to impart on the audience is in countries that are too socially divided by class, peace is impossible to establish as poor people are used as fodder for war. However if there is more social responsibility, the need for war will diminish as poor people are less easy to manipulate into forming a war for change.

To conclude, Inspector Goole plays a critical role in “An Inspector Calls” as a catalyst for change as well as a key figure who reminds all the characters that they have a social responsibility to help the weaker and poorer members of society. He appears to play an important role in showing the family – and by extension the audience – that in a deeply divided society, peace and harmony is impossible to achieve. However if there is more social equality, this will therefore reduce the need for social upheavals as well as promote more harmony. This essay has examined in depth the important role the Inspector has within this play.

Model Answers

How does Priestley present the idea of social class in An Inspector Calls?

Write about:

- **the ideas about social class in An Inspector Calls**
- **how Priestley presents these ideas by the ways he writes.**

Priestley presents the idea of social class as a challenge that caused the marginalisation of poor and weak members of society. Priestley contrasts the luxurious life the Birling family leads with the destitution of Eva Smith and Daisy Renton to show that Britain is a deeply divided country with unfair social divides that exist between different groups of people. Priestley explores the need for change in “An Inspector Calls” through using a range of literary techniques to present social class. This essay will examine how social class is presented in “An Inspector Calls” in depth.

Firstly, Priestley opens the play by focusing our attention on the engagement between Sheila Birling and Gerald Croft. He skilfully uses this union to show the great importance that people in Edwardian England placed on social climbing and forming strategic alliances. He places our focus on the Birling family, which is an upper middle class family. Gerald Croft’s marriage to Sheila was an important business alliance between the Croft and the Birling family as this would ensure the Birlings were able to shift into the upper echelons of society and be associated with Britain’s aristocracy. The middle classes as well as the upper classes had an obsession with maintaining a dominance in the social hierarchy and Mr Birling uses using his daughter and her engagement as a way to receive a “knighthood.” Indeed Mr Birling states “it’s one of the happiest nights of my life.” This could suggest that Mr Birling is happy at the fact that the engagement has succeeded and as it means that he will socially progress through his daughter’s connection to a wealthier family. Priestley shows that people in Edwardian England were extremely fixated on their social status, rather than focusing on assisting those who were poorer. Britain was an extremely divided society prior to the First World War and there was a stark divide between the rich and middle classes versus the poor. This divide was made all the more stark as the wealthy did not care for the poorer among them – instead they exploited them. This thus shows that the upper and middle classes only cared about themselves rather than those in need, hence this led to a sharp divide between the social classes in Britain.

Moreover, the character of Mr Birling plays an important role in presenting social class because his dismissive attitude towards Eva Smith’s suicide shows the prejudice and disregard that many in the wealthy classes had against the poor. When Mr Birling is confronted by the Inspector who informs him that Eva Smith

committed suicide, he appears to absolve himself from any responsibility – even if he “discharged her” as a former employer. Mr Birling defensively states that his business “has nothing whatever to do with the wretched girl's suicide... I can't accept any responsibility.” Mr Birling is important as he represents how wealthy industrialists – who profited heavily from the work of his poorer employees – did not pay them a fair wage and they did not care enough about supporting them or improving their lives. Priestley uses his character to show that employers contributed to the stark social divides that existed in Edwardian England as employers at the time felt little responsibility towards their employees and they did not pay them well – hence contributing to their poverty. Contextually, Mr Birling is thus used to represent the uncaring attitudes of the wealthy members of British society who contributed to poverty through their disregard for paying the poor a fair wage.

Moreover Mrs Birling's character is important as she is also used to illustrate the disdain that many women in the elite had towards those of a lower social status. We learn as the audience that Mrs Birling is extremely proud of her reputation and social status. She holds extremely traditional values and she strictly abides by the rules of etiquette as she believes that having a good reputation for being polite will help her improve her family's social status. She is presented as extremely pretentious and hypocritical through her membership of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation. It appears that she uses this charitable organisation not to morally support vulnerable women – but instead to be perceived by women in polite society as being a good woman. This hypocrisy is revealed when we learn that she refused to help Daisy Renton, who claimed that she was pregnant with her grandchild: “I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class...” Mrs Birling represents upper class women who looked down on women from lower classes as their social inferiors, hence Priestley presents social class as extremely pervasive. It is ironic that Mrs Birling, who is a woman that lacked the right to vote or own property, felt less of a kinship to another woman like Daisy Renton and her loyalty lay more to her class rather than her gender.

In addition, Priestley presents how upper class men like Eric abuse their superior social status to objectify and sexually exploit poorer women. His exploitative attitude towards Daisy Renton, whom he had a sexual relationship with, is shown when he causally states that she “was pretty and a good sport.” By the time Eric meets Eva Smith, who has transformed into Daisy Renton, we learn that she has lost all means to support herself and she must resort to prostitution to support herself. However we learn that Eric uses his power as a man as well as his superior social status to force her to have sex with him and he makes her fall pregnant – meaning that she cannot even work as a prostitute as she is pregnant. Eric, who later abandons her, is revealed to have objectified and dehumanised Daisy Renton to a woman that is little more than a “good sport” who he can have

casual sexual flings with. The damaging and insidious effects of social class divisions is presented through Eric's relationship with Daisy as this is Priestley's way of showing that a divided and unequal social class system robs many women of their agency and humanity.

Moreover, Sheila's encounter with Eva Smith is important in showing how highly exposed people in the working classes were exposed to the whims of selfish upper class people. We learn that when Sheila visits a shop and encounters Eva working there, she is instantly jealous of her. Sheila recalls that when she tried on a dress that did not suit her, she knew it would suit Eva: "She was the right type for it, just as I was the wrong type. She was very pretty too..." Sheila uses her power to get Eva unfairly fired as she resents the fact that she catches her smirking at her appearance. Priestley uses Sheila's encounter with Eva to reveal the total power that those in the upper middle classes as well as the elite had over the working classes, as well as the unfair manner in which they exercised this control. This created a high level of damage among working class people who were helpless to their whims, hence Priestley reveals the disproportionate power the rich had over the poorer people in a socially divided class system.

To conclude, Priestley presents the idea of social class as a challenge that caused the marginalisation of poor and weak members of society. He uses the journey as well as the tragic suicide of Eva Smith and Daisy Renton to show how brutally marginalised working women – and by extension working class people – were as well as how upper middle class people as well as upper class people totally disregarded them. This play is used to teach and warn the wealthier in socially divided systems to have more care and regard for the poorer among them, otherwise they can have a tragic impact on these people.

Past Exam Paper Questions

Question 1

What do you think is the importance of Mr Birling and how does Priestley present him?

Write about:

- how Mr Birling responds to Inspector Goole
- how Priestley presents Mr Birling by the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

OR

Question 2

How does Priestley explore the theme of responsibility in An Inspector Calls?

Write about:

- the ideas about responsibility in An Inspector Calls
- how Priestley presents these ideas by the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

Question 1

How does Priestley present Gerald in An Inspector Calls?

Write about:

- how Gerald responds to his family and to the Inspector
- how Priestley presents Gerald by the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

OR

Question 2

How does Priestley show that conflict is at the heart of the Birling family?

Write about:

- the ideas about conflict in An Inspector Calls
- how Priestley presents conflict in the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

Question 1

How and why does Eric change in An Inspector Calls?

Write about:

- how Eric responds to her family and to the Inspector
- how Priestley presents Eric by the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

OR

Question 2

Priestley criticises the selfishness of people like the Birlings. What methods does he use to present this selfishness? Write about:

the ideas about selfishness in An Inspector Calls

how Priestley presents these ideas by the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

Question 1

Question 17 How does Priestley explore different attitudes towards men and women in An Inspector Calls?

Write about:

- Priestley's ideas about men and women
- how Priestley presents these ideas by the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

OR

Question 2

How does Priestley present the theme of the older and younger generation in An Inspector Calls?

Write about:

- the ideas about social class An Inspector Calls
- how Priestley presents these ideas by the ways he writes.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]