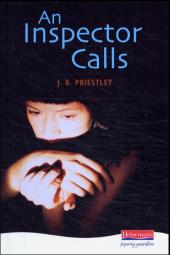


**Reading is Thinking!**

**An Inspector Calls**







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**Suggested Further Videos**

**YouTube**

Mr Bruff – Coverage of Key Themes and Characters

Stacey Raey – Grade7 - 9 Video Tutorials

Further Videos linked to these also usual

**GCSE Pod**

**Doddle Resources**

**Key Vocabulary**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Term** | **Meaning** |
| Aristocratic | The highest class in certain societies, typically comprising people of noble birth holding hereditary titles and offices |
| Bourgeoisie | The middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes |
| Bourgeois | Individual within this class |
| Proletariat | Working-class people regarded collectively |
| Protagonist | A leading character |
| Antagonist | Opposes the protagonist |
| Antagonistic | Showing or feeling active opposition or hostility towards someone or something |
| Epitome / epitomises | An example of something |
| Etiquette | The customary code of polite behaviour |
| Misogynistic | Strongly prejudiced against women |
| Derogatory | A disrespectful attitude |
| Elevation | To rise or move up |
| Epiphany | A moment of sudden and great revelation or realization |
| Catharsis | The process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions |
| Abhorrent | Creates disgust and loathing; repugnant |
| Repugnant | Distasteful and disgusting |
| Prophetic | Accurately predicting what will happen in the future |
| Apocalyptic image/ apocalypse | Describing or prophesying the complete destruction of the world |
| Vacuity | Lack of thought or intelligence; empty-headedness |
| Didactic | Intended to teach, particularly in having moral instruction as an ulterior motive |
| Hyperbole  Hyperbolic | Exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally. |
| Colloquialism | Informal phrase or language |
| Juxtaposition | Two aspects being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect |
| Grotesque | Repulsively ugly or distorted |
| Inextricably | Impossible to disentangle or separate |
| Reification | Idea for when you treat something immaterial — like happiness, fear, or evil — as a material thing |
| Satire | The use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices |
| Bathos | An effect of anticlimax created by an unintentional lapse in mood from the sublime to the trivial or ridiculous |
| Pathos | A quality that evokes pity or sadness |
| Humanitarian | Concerned with or seeking to promote human welfare |
| Antithesis | A person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else |
| Paradox  Paradoxical | A seemingly absurd or contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated may prove to be well founded or true |

**Article 1**

**British Library – Discovering Literature**

**An Introduction to ‘An Inspector Calls’**

JB Priestley’s play An Inspector Calls, first performed in 1945, is a morality play disguised as a detective thriller. The morality play is a very old theatrical form, going back to the medieval period, which sought to instruct audiences about virtue and evil. Priestley’s play revolves around a central mystery, the death of a young woman, but whereas a traditional detective story involves the narrowing down of suspects from several to one, An Inspector Calls inverts this process as, one by one, nearly all the characters in the play are found to be guilty. In this way, Priestley makes his larger point that society is guilty of neglecting and abusing its most vulnerable members. A just society, he states through his mysterious Inspector, is one that respects and exercises social responsibility.

What is social responsibility?

Social responsibility is the idea that a society’s poorer members should be helped by those who have more than them. Priestley was a socialist, and his political beliefs are woven through his work. There are many different types and degrees of socialism, but a general definition is as follows: an ideal socialist society is one that is egalitarian – in other words, its citizens have equal rights and the same opportunities are available to everybody; resources are shared out fairly, and the means of production (the facilities and resources for producing goods) are communally owned.

Therefore, socialism stands in opposition to a capitalist society, such as ours, where trade and industry is mostly controlled by private owners, and these individuals or companies keep the profits made by their businesses, rather than distributing them evenly between the workers whose labour produced them.

It is precisely this difference between a socialist and a capitalist society that Arthur Birling is discussing in Act 1 when Inspector Goole arrives:

But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you’d think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – a man has to mind his own business and look after himself…

The Inspector’s arrival cuts Arthur Birling off mid-sentence, enacting in miniature the clash between two ideological positions that unfolds throughout the rest of the play.

The play’s structure and setting

An Inspector Calls is a three-act play with one setting: the dining room of ‘a fairly large suburban house belonging to a fairly prosperous manufacturer’. The year is 1912, and we are in the home of the Birling family in the fictional industrial city of Brumley in the North Midlands. In the dining room five people are finishing their dinner: four members of the Birling family and one guest. Arthur Birling is a factory owner; his wife Sibyl is on the committee of a charity, and is usually scolding someone for a social mistake. Their adult children are Sheila and Eric, and their guest is Gerald Croft, Sheila’s fiancé, who is from a wealthier manufacturing family than the Birlings. One other person is present: Edna the maid, who is going back and forth to the sideboard with dirty plates and glasses.

Priestley’s description of the set at the beginning of the play script stresses the solidity of the Birlings' dining room: ‘It is a solidly built room, with good solid furniture of the period’. But a later section of this scene-setting – on the walls are ‘imposing but tasteless pictures and engravings’, and the ‘general effect is substantial and comfortable and old-fashioned but not cosy and homelike’ – suggests that although the Birling’s have wealth and social standing, they are not loving to one another or compassionate to others. The setting of the play in a single room also suggests their self-absorption, and disconnectedness from the wider world.

Priestley establishes each of the characters in this opening scene. Arthur Birling is a capitalist businessman through and through, entirely focussed on profit even when discussing the marriage of his daughter:

I’m sure you’ll make her happy. You’re just the kind of son-in-law I’ve always wanted. Your father and I have been friendly rivals in business for some time now – though Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company – and now you’ve brought us together, and perhaps we may look forward to the time when Crofts and Birlings are no longer competing but are working together – for lower costs and higher prices.

His wife Sibyl scolds him, telling him it isn’t the occasion for that kind of talk, establishing her as someone primarily interested in doing things properly and conforming to established social rules. Sheila, at this stage in the play, seems to be preoccupied by the thought of her marriage to Gerald, a privileged and deeply conservative man of 30, while the youngest Birling, Eric, appears more interested in the port going around the table than anything anyone is saying.

Priestley has some fun using this opening section to show how wrong Arthur Birling’s opinions are, thus positioning the play as anti-capitalist. He does this through the use of dramatic irony, having Arthur state opinions that the audience, with the advantage of hindsight, knows to be incorrect. When Eric mentions the likelihood of war – remember that the play is set two years before the outbreak of World War One – but was written and first performed 30 years later – Arthur cuts him off:

… you’ll hear some people say that war’s inevitable. And to that I say – fiddlesticks! The Germans don’t want war. Nobody wants war, except some half-civilised folks in the Balkans. And why? There’s too much at stake these days. Everything to lose and nothing to gain by war.

He goes on to describe an ocean liner that is clearly meant to be the Titanic (which sank in April 1912) as ‘unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable’, and suggests that in time, ‘let’s say, in the forties’, ‘all these Capital versus Labour agitations and all these silly little war scares’ will be long forgotten. In fact, as audiences in 1945 would have been keenly aware, the period between 1912 and 1945 saw a huge number of strikes, including the monumental General Strike of 1926, and not one but two global conflicts, the second of which had only recently ended.

Dramatic irony is rarely a subtle technique, but Priestley’s use of it is exceptionally blunt. This could be considered clumsy, but it underlines the fact that An Inspector Calls is a play with a point to make, and a character whose sole job is to make it.

The Inspector

When Inspector Goole arrives everything changes. He tells the Birlings and Gerald that a young woman, Eva Smith, has committed suicide by drinking disinfectant, and he has questions about the case. Over the course of the next two acts he will lay responsibility for Eva Smith’s death at the feet of each of the Birlings and Gerald Croft, showing how their indifference to social responsibility has contributed to the death of this young woman. Or is it young women? He shows each person an identifying photograph of the dead woman one by one, leading Gerald to later suspect they were all shown photographs of different women.

But who is the Inspector? In the play’s penultimate twist, he is revealed not to be a police inspector at all, yet, as Eric states, ‘He was our Police Inspector, all right’. Details about him are scant. He says he is newly posted to Brumley, and he is impervious to Arthur Birling’s threats about his close relationship with the chief constable ‘I don’t play golf’, he tells Birling. ‘I didn’t suppose you did’, the industrialist replies: a brief exchange that makes a clear point about class, and the battle between egalitarianism and privilege. Beyond these sparse biographical details, the Inspector seems less like a person and more like a moral force, one which mercilessly pursues the wrongs committed by the Birlings and Gerald, demanding that they face up to the consequences of their actions. His investigation culminates in a speech that is a direct expression of Priestley’s own view of how a just society should operate, and is the exact antithesis of the speech Arthur Birling made in Act 1:

We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. 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. We don’t live alone. Good night.

Hypocrisy

Throughout the course of the Inspector’s investigation, and the testimony of Gerald and each of the Birlings, the supposedly respectable city of Brumley is revealed to be a place of deep class divisions and hypocrisy. As Arthur Birling’s behaviour towards Eva makes clear, it is a place where factory owners exploit their workers as a matter of course – part of his ‘a man has to look after himself’ philosophy. Eric accuses his father of hypocrisy for sacking the dead girl after she asked for higher wages, because the Birling firm always seeks to sell their products at the highest possible prices.

This exploitation is not limited to the factories. In the testimony of Gerald, and later Eric, the Palace Theatre emerges as a place where prostitutes gather, and where the supposedly great and good of the town go to meet them. When Gerald first met Eva, as he describes it, she was trapped in a corner by ‘Old Joe Meggarty, half-drunk and goggle-eyed’. Sibyl Birling, scandalised, asks ‘surely you don’t mean Alderman Meggarty?’ An unsurprised Sheila tells her mother ‘horrible old Meggarty’ has a reputation for groping young women: the younger characters are either more knowledgeable or frank about the dark secrets of the city, whereas the older Birlings live in a dream world of respectability, or hypocritically turn a blind eye to any disreputable behaviour by supposedly respectable people.

The play begins with the characters’ corrupt, unpleasant natures safely hidden away (a respectable group in a respectable home, enjoying that most respectable event, an engagement party); it ends with naked displays of hypocrisy. When it is confirmed that Goole is not really a policeman, Arthur, Sibyl and Gerald immediately regain an unjustified sense of outrage. ‘Then look at the way he talked to me’, Arthur Birling complains. ‘He must have known I was an ex-Lord Mayor and a magistrate and so forth’. Once it is confirmed, in the play’s penultimate twist, that there is no suicide lying on a mortuary slab, they forget the immoral, uncharitable behaviour they were recently accused of – things, remember, that they undoubtedly did – and begin talking about getting away with things.

Only Sheila and Eric recognise and resist this hypocritical behaviour. ‘I suppose we’re all nice people now!’ Sheila remarks sarcastically. Earlier she broke off her engagement to Gerald, telling him ‘You and I aren’t the same people who sat down to dinner here’. Likewise, Eric angrily accuses his father of ‘beginning to pretend now that nothing’s really happened at all’. Priestley’s vision is cautiously optimistic insofar as the youngest characters are changed by the Inspector’s visit, while the older Birlings and Gerald appear to be too set in their beliefs to change them.

Eva Smith: Everywoman

The play leaves open the question of whether Eva Smith is a real woman (who sometimes uses different names, including Daisy Renton), or multiple people the Inspector pretends are one. There is no right answer here, and in terms of Priestley’s message it is beside the point: because his socialist principles demand that everyone should be treated the same, in his opinion abusing one working-class woman is equivalent to abusing all working-class women. Eva Smith is, therefore, not an individual victim, but a universal one.

This helps explain the effectiveness of the play’s final twist. Having discovered that Inspector Goole is not a real policeman, and that there is no dead woman called Eva Smith at the Brumley morgue, a phone call announces that a woman has killed herself, and an inspector is on his way to question the Birlings. The invented story Inspector Goole related has now come true. This seems a bizarre coincidence with which to end the play, but if we consider An Inspector Calls as a moral fable, and not as naturalistic theatre, it begins to seem much more like a logical, even inevitable, conclusion. The characters have been confronted with the error of their ways; some have repented, some have not. Now is the time for judgement, and for the watching audience to ask themselves, according to Priestley’s design, are any of these people like me?

**Article 2 - Interview with Director, Alexander Tairov**

**1) At the beginning of his plays Priestley attempted to convince his audience that they were safely with the boundaries of what was real and normal and, once he’d done that, he would then seek to destroy those feelings of reality and transport the audience into a fantastical or mysterious realm. Your approach has been different to this – can you explain why you feel that this approach is more relevant for a 21st Century audience?**

*1935 JB Priestley said:*

*Theatrical characters are themselves like figures from the past or future. Thinking about the Theatre I cling to my belief that in its own time somewhere along the fourth dimension everything still exists; that lift of the voice, that gesture, that look, they’re still there. When I think about Theatre I only wonder when at least some part of our minds will be able to travel in time to recapture the past that has not really vanished at all to see the old velvet curtains rising and falling again to applaud once more the brave players*

*So, I wanted to consider his love of time travelling. He read a lot about it, including some famous essays by Dunne – An Experiment with Time, in particular which discusses precognition.*

*The other thing which influenced my thinking was what he said in 1946:*

*Only an idiot would consider me a naturalistic dramatist. I was a wild one only pretending to be a tame one.*

**2) In Priestley’s original the character of Eva Smith / Daisy Renton is only present in the memories of the characters and the imaginations of the audience. Can you explain why you chose to have the ghost/vision of Eva / Daisy present on stage for this production?**

*It all started with my very first reading of the play. She was a presence that wouldn’t go away. And this carried on and I thought that there must be a reason for this and so I asked myself; “What can I do about this?”*

*When I tried to make sense of this I found myself thinking that she’s is both a symbol and an individual human being. She represents millions of people all around the planet and her story, what happened to her life and the choices she did or did not have, are the stories of many people.*

*She tried her best to survive. But her ability to do so was affected by the consequences of living in what they would have called an industrial system, but what is now called a capitalist economy.*

*When we consider what the characters say about this girl in their descriptions of her, we see not just a weak, beautiful woman, but a woman who tries for the best and who never gives up. She has a true spirit –she is crushed again and again and driven into a corner/ a dead end from which she can see no escape.*

*So, I wanted to make sure that we show that she is not just an idea but that these events happened to a flesh and blood person and we realised that I wanted her present rather than simply represented through the words of the other characters.*

*I knew it was something that would be criticised by people but I’m not concerned about that, I was only interested in the artistic reasons for having her present. When she’s there we can see the other characters’ guilt and their reactions to their memories are more immediate when we can see her with them and we witness their interaction with what’s left of her in their mind’s eye.*

*I think as well putting her on stage is like putting in front of them a whole human being full of dreams and aspirations which none of them had asked about her when they interacted with her.*

*The Effect on the Audience*

*In making Eva Smith a big part of the production I wanted to make sure the audience felt one step ahead of everyone else - with the exception of the Prologue scene. So I was very careful about where I wanted the inserted scenes to be placed; this was to try make the audience feel that they know more than anyone else in the room. Being a step ahead is already written in the text, so what we did in our concept was again highlight it even more, be bold about it.*

*As part of this – the part that Eva plays – is to show that she belongs to the real ‘bigger’ world – outside of the Birling’s Dining Room. There’s the illusion of life that they have within the dining room and the reality of the lives they live beyond the Dining Room.*

*I wanted to use the character of Eva to discuss the Illusion of the Birlings’ lives and disillusion of the real world.*

*So that’s why I selected very specific moments with specific characters where she is seen and these two worlds come together. In this way we can see the individual character’s reactions to her, whether they are sympathetic, remorseful or whether they still reject her and deny any responsibility for her.*

*This convention also leads to a certain and intentional destruction. During the characters’ speeches, as they lose their thread of thinking momentarily shocked by Edna’s presence, the audience is also forced to look away from them and see them in relation to the girl and not just as the protagonists of their speech. The intention was to give the audience space to break out and think what they are looking at rather than always try to empathise with the characters’ confessions.*

**3) How did you approach directing the play with the performers?**

*The Spirit of Eva*

*One of the first things that I wanted to examine with the actors was each of the characters’ relationship with memory / spirit of Eva, and I wanted to understand what the relationship between the Inspector and the spirit was.*

*I worked with the actors on how the inserted elements would work. I had them play their scenes with Eva / Daisy in the moment facing them, from this we had to make the choices of which of the characters registers her and the impact of that moment of seeing her has on the character. This interaction then had a knock on effect of how they respond to the Inspector within the scene at that time. These investigation scenes allowed us to explore in detail how each character was connected to her and how their connection with her informed each character’s journey. For example, Sheila takes it on board and it makes a massive difference in how she sees things, which then influences her responses to the others throughout the rest of the play.*

*The Truth of a Character*

*So, it always starts with the truth, we have to examine what characters say about themselves and about each other. From there we needed to create 3 dimensional characters (not 2 dimensional ones). To do this we needed to examine their thoughts and emotions and to create a past that made them who they are today (in the play). Once we’ve created that we can see how what they experience during the evening affects what they think or do in real time – which is great.*

*We also needed to consider the specific choices of what they respond to in the moment, i.e. what they’re really taking in. When they’re facing each new revelation we had to consider the questions; “Where is their head / what are their primary concerns and thought at this moment? And also; “What’s happening in their heads when they’re not talking or not in the room?”*

*Also, in order to respond truthfully, the actors needed to be fed with information about the concrete realities of the time so that they had a very good foundation to build their character on; actors need the details, so we make them up, we imagine them based on the facts we know from the text and from general research of the period. This is so that they could describe every room in their house, every place that they mention.*

*A glimpse of this, even though unspoken, somehow makes an appearance on stage, in the colour of a word or in a gesture. Some of these nuances will be seen or registered by some members of the audience who will then interpret it individually.*

*In order for the Actors to capture and present coherent and truthful performances we also felt that we needed to answer the following questions;*

* Is there more than one photo?  Are Eva and Daisy the same person?  Is the Inspector’s visit to the Birlings just a hoax?*

*Example 1: Developing the Inspector*

*I also wanted people to consider who the Inspector might be, which has worked as we’ve had some interesting comments from the audience:*

*- A little boy of 8 during one interval said; “it is scary but I like it. . . I just think it was someone who knew everything that was going to happen before it happened?” - Was he this girl’s father - People debating does he exist does he not exist – is he real? - Is he their conscience/ or a social conscience? - Is he a figure of justice come to earth?*

*So when I was considering how to approach the Inspector with the actor, we knew, very early in the process, that we wanted to stimulate the audience to ask these questions. So, we looked at how the Inspector links the worlds presented in the play; Eva’s worlds - the outside world and the supernatural world; and the Birlings’ world. The Inspector straddles all of these worlds and brings them together.*

*When we first meet the Inspector we see him witnessing the last part of the Prologue whilst reading Eva’s diary, the two events appearing on stage did not happen simultaneously. Then he comes into the Birlings’ intimate world, bringing Eva’s diary with him.*

*His entrance was also carefully considered. His impact is greatest because he pays them a visit immediately after Arthur Birling has made his speech in defence of Capital and against Communal Responsibility.*

*When we were considering what was most important for the actor to explore the questions that it seemed important to ask in relation to the Inspector include*

* What’s in the diary? (It’s through the diary that he has learned about her and to know about her life).  What exactly does he know?  Would it be important for the inspector to know about Eric stealing money?  Are there any stakes for him?*

*If we assume he knows everything what does he have to lose?  How can he be a human being if he has this obvious power of knowing everything?  But if he doesn’t know everything, why he doesn’t want them to know this?*

*There were also questions about his relationship with Eva:*

* Assuming he has seen her on the slab and found her diary when is the first moment he sees her spirit become a vision, a presence that drives him even more and where does he get strength from?*

*Example 2: Developing Eric*

*In discussion with the actor about developing the character of Eric we realised that we don’t get to know a lot about him from the text. There are very few facts about his everyday life. So, we decided it would be helpful to examine further the back story we invented based on two lines in the text about his failure at university. We thought it useful that this could be one of the many disappointments that his father has in him.*

*Due to this we developed the understanding that he’s a fragile creature and we wanted to explore more to see where his neuroses came from, why is he hypersensitive? What family relationships resulted in his being a heavy drinker? What changes to those relationships would have given him the potential to be different to how he turned out? We particularly focused the relationship between father and son.*

*We investigated an ordinary day in the lives of Eric and Sheila at each stage of their growing up and then decided what events might have had an impact on them.*

*Example 3: Developing Sheila*

*Likewise with Sheila, we aren’t given the information as to how she met Gerald, so we investigate various versions of who it was who brought them together and how that happened.*

*Within Sheila’s character we identified that she might come out as a very irritating character at times, as she shows passion and uses so many words to express herself. In developing Sheila’s relationship with Gerald we explored how that might be from his side, and we imagined their lives together, and how they interacted with each other.*

**4) What were the biggest challenges for staging the piece?**

*Example 1: The Aftermath*

*One of the most intense moments to rehearse was The Aftermath which takes place once the Inspector has gone. It’s a very long scene and highly emotionally charged which makes it difficult to rehearse in bits because of the rhythm and the flow of it. You could discuss how elements could run together but it was almost impossible to run tiny bits of it. I was particularly interested to make clear the huge gap that evolves gradually and at moments violently between the two generations.*

*So, one of the rehearsal techniques I used was to ask the actors to paraphrase, but stay near to the text. I placed no restriction on movement or what they did to one another. It was purely an exercise. This revealed a lot about how the characters were feeling in that moment. The words/phrases were chosen by the actors very instinctively and quickly. They had to fight for their opinion and try to stop the character they disagreed with or support/protect the character they agreed with.*

* Gerald had a repeated “can’t you see?” which he could use whenever he felt necessary.  Eric swore  Sheila called the others animals  Mrs Birling called her children hysterical  Mr Birling called the children chickens*

*Example 2: The Inspector’s big speech*

*I think that people sometimes misconceive this speech and say that it’s didactic and patronising. Well, one of the things that I try to do when I direct a play is to introduce as much doubt and ambiguity as possible with things that are sometime read as certain. And there is space within Priestley’s text to do that.*

*I think the reason that it has been considered didactic is because you read something direct and in your face which, depending on your background, you may dismiss or make it divine.*

*What I felt is that you can agree or disagree make it as big or little as you wish. There is no doubt, it is a very direct speech, it’s very bold but it’s the opinion, the thought, of one character talking.*

*What I didn’t want to do was either to apologise for it or to make it into a big political speech. That’s always a good start, when you know what you don’t want to do, you can then think about what you do want.*

*So, in rehearsals I had some decisions to make about how to work on it. Whether we saw the speech as a whole chunk, how static / how much movement there should be; how closely the Inspector should refer to each individual; and then, of course, I had to consider how to bring the spirit in to decide how much of the speech is referred to her and to consider the following questions:*

* How do we enable the other characters to see her?  Do we want all of them to see her?  If they do see her, what do they see of her?*

*We tried many different versions, discussed what we take out from each and went for what we thought best for our production. It was another big challenge but, like I said, that’s the best part.*

**5) What themes did you particularly want to draw out in your staging of the play?**

*Capitalism*

*I don’t understand how anyone can discuss this play without talking about capitalism; it’s as if people are afraid of using the word in relation to the play. An Inspector Calls is such a political play, that diminishing this, or try to cover it and just present it as a mystery in the luxurious living room of a well-off family was absolutely out of the question for me.*

*I wanted to give the audience food for thought about capitalism, both during the production and, if they’re up for it, to give them some work to do after the production. However, I didn’t want the audience to leave with a specific message about it.*

*People of different political persuasions and opinions have enjoyed the show for different reasons. You become aware of the different positions when you hear the audience’s chuckles*

*However, one thing we didn’t expect was the laughter of the audience at times, particularly in The Aftermath. Actors find it difficult to hear laughter when it’s an intense moment – I think it’s great because the laughter at this point in the play seems to be about the question; “how much more deluded and awful can you get?”. In all of those moments when people do have a reaction which may be totally unexpected the Actors are still required to completely believe in their character and the things that matter to them. And of course every audience is different, their reactions different and the actors respond to that as well in every show – which makes each experience totally unique*

*Love*

*Another theme can be the question of love – and whether any one of the characters knows what it is. For example The Birlings; why are they together? He’s smart and on the rise and Mrs Birling is one of the least sympathetic and ruthless characters. We found that she’s written as a character who it is quite difficult to have any sympathy for so, in order to explore her as much as we could, we opened up a discussion about whether there was any love in her? What did the two families behind the Birlings think about that relationship? We also took some time to explore her role and position as a mother. If there are maternal feelings how does she show them or not?*

*Humanitarianism/personal and social responsibility*

*I wanted to explore what Priestley says about our responsibility for each other. That we are “part of the same body” is the Inspector’s key message. The core of this play is humanity.*

*Within the play there is a debate about Capitalism and Humanitarianism. The play seems, to me, to imply that they cannot coexist; you cannot use those two together because capitalism is a system which requires exploitation so you have to have people who are exploited and those who exploit. This is the opposite of what humanitarianism is about.*

*There is also a lot to say about each person’s responsibility for one another and about the responsibility that we all bear as a society for one another collectively. But this would be a really long discussion which could explore all the different prisms of Religion, Philosophy and so on.*

*The Supernatural*

*We did have a first chat before rehearsals with the actor playing the Inspector regarding where we should start with him. Obviously, there’s so much written in analytical essays and books about the essence of the supernatural and his other-worldliness and we thought – “why would we go down that road?” There’s no reason in the text obvious enough to do that solidly. So we started him off as a real, living person, and added touches – the supernatural moments to enhance his mystique. They were linked with the presence of Eva; a muted dialogue and a rapport between those two started appearing as the most natural thing during rehearsals.*

*With the supernatural element we wanted to examine the things you cannot put into words, the things we cannot be articulate about, but that we have a sense of.*

*The inspector as a figure is a very human person. But he’s not just a person; he’s a symbol as well, and we needed to strike a balance between portraying a rounded human being and a symbol of humanity. Under the rules of these legends you find visionaries and people who challenge the reality of the time – this is one of the things that the Inspector does. He questions everything taken for granted and called reality/realism of the time.*

*Illusion and Self-Delusion, and Reality*

*The etiquette of the Birlings lives is a social construct. Their morality; their charitable work; their respectability; their aspirations to a higher social class are all about buying into the meta-narrative of the era.*

*However, it’s all a façade. We know by the end of the play that both Gerald and Eric have had affairs outside of marriage, (which was actually quite all right for their class of the period) we know that Eric’s respectability is an illusion and that he’s a drunkard and a thief. Whilst Mrs Birling does charitable work, she is cruel and judgemental. Yet, the Birlings are not concerned with being truthful about their actual existence; they merely want to make every effort to keep up the illusion of respectability.*

*It appears that they present the illusion of the Perfect family unit, the perfect microcosm to thrive in. However, they’re living a lie.*

*We wondered how much Mrs Birling knew about Eric’s drinking, yet didn’t want to know, how much Sheila suspected of Gerald’s affair and yet didn’t address it. These types of self-delusion are also part of what I wanted to explore.*

*So then I started thinking about reality:*

* What is reality?  Who defines reality?  Is it possible to question absolutely everything?*

*It’s easier not to question the overarching rules of a society, because if you do then you may have to take action. These actions may have unintended consequences which you can’t possibly know in advance; it’s a circle.*

*So within the play the characters who are most willing to question the reality and ask whether things have to be that way are the younger characters Eric and Sheila, the older characters are far more willing to maintain the status quo as it has benefited them.*

**6) What is the contemporary relevance? Why did this play need to be staged now?**

*The play is as relevant today, if not more so, as it was when it was first staged.*

*Progress, Consumerism and Illusion*

*Mr Birling talks about his belief in how progress will cure all ills. We get the same message today. We hear that the way out of the current financial downturn is through growth; through making more things for more people to buy.*

*Capitalism relies on consumerism. It’s a very cleverly constructed concept – in fact the ‘American dream’, which we all seem to have bought into, requires us to engage with consumerism and to believe that it’s the path to happiness. Marketing tools employed within consumerism sell you the ideal way of living and tell you about all of the things that are essential for a happy life. Capitalism requires us not to be citizens but to be consumers. It demands from us all to keep buying and tells us that as long as we can keep that going; keep making, keep desiring and buying – there’ll be no need to worry because the economy will keep turning. In addition everyone else needs to buy into the story and to do the same.*

*Philanthropy – the not so good side*

*Whilst we all acknowledge that charity can be altruistic, as we see with Mrs Birling, being charitable brings with it a sense of power and a hint of superiority. If you have something in your pocket you can do something charitable, which means that you’re a good person and you can help others and feel good about yourself at the same time.*

*However, there is also the opportunity for people to develop a very judgemental stance and to feel that only people who ‘really‘ deserve assistance should get it – the deserving poor. At the moment the newspapers bring us stories of the ‘undeserving poor’, those who are skivers not strivers. With this comes the government rhetoric that people who are in receipt of benefits need to do something about their situation, regardless of whether they’re disabled, or ill, and despite the fact that there are simply too few jobs. This position also ignores the fact that most of this government’s benefit bill is spent on ‘in-work’ benefits because capitalist employers are ‘maximising profit’ and paying wages that people can’t survive on.*

*Maximising Profit versus Workers Rights*

*Mr Birling wants to ensure that he is able to pay his workers as little as possible. Capitalism, as an economic system is based on specific principles, with the maximisation of profit at its heart. It’s an exploitative system that works brilliantly. Capitalists claim that if you cannot make profit you cannot sustain the economy; therefore the profit motive is a good one. Profit, in and of itself, may or may not be a problem; it might well be an incentive to companies or individuals to work harder, be creative, and provide the goods that we need. However when a system has the necessity to ‘maximise profit’ this leads to the necessity for ‘maximum exploitation’ of the workers. We see this today and, within the play, this is how Eva falls foul of Mr Birling.*

*The workers within the play are fighting for better employment rights, pay and working conditions; today workers’ rights and working conditions are being eroded with ever more insecure and low paid work becoming the norm. So we exploit the vulnerable and neglect the needy.*

*Some people may believe that, with all of the progress of technology and the achievements of science and the human mind that there is no need for anyone on this earth to suffer. Some people may suggest that each and every person alive today should have all they need to survive from the day they are born and to develop to achieve their full potential during their lifetime on this earth, without having to accept, as fate, the difficulties and the everyday struggle for survival, merely living in the hope of a much better afterlife. Yet anyone who actually propounds that this could indeed happen if governments had this aim at the centre of their agenda is labelled an idealists, a romantic and unrealistic; mad, or dangerous for “society”. In Priestley’s play they are called cranks, or “socialists of some sort”. So yes, the contemporary relevance is obvious and makes it almost necessary for this play to keep being revived and performed.*

**Critical Essays – Charlie Pragnall**

**Essay 1**

**The Significance of the Inspector within ‘An Inspector Calls’**

The Inspector has several functions within the drama. Most of all, he represents moral authority and is intended to show that pursuing money and social importance at the expense of morality will result in a social apocalypse when the working class have their revenge.

Priestley gives the Inspector a semi-comical name, ‘Goole’. Although ostensibly a typical enough surname, it carries obvious and deliberately almost clumsy symbolism of the supernatural – it is this which creates the sense of comedy. This ideas remains in effect undeveloped throughout the play until right at the end, when Gerald deconstructs the Inspector’s authoritarian knowledge and suggests he may be likened more than a con-artist. The audience can’t help but be a little swayed by his reasoning. However, the dramatic twist at the very end of the play when the Birlings are told that a police Inspector is on his way to the house recapitulates the idea of the supernatural. This comes at the conclusion of the play and its dramatic climax. Priestley uses the structure of the play to create a sudden reversal of the earlier semi-comic impact of the name. The associations of ‘ghoul’, such as the dead coming back to haunt the living, are now entirely appropriate and to an extent, horrific. Perhaps the use of a name which seems almost tritely comic is supposed to in effect be a metaphor. We, the audience, give no thought to Inspector Goole’s name and merely laugh at it; this is exactly the reaction of the Birlings to their part in Eva’s death. In the same way, the Birling’s casual dismissal of the Inspector and even mockery of him as a non-golf playing nobody is premature. Ultimately, the comedy gives way to a form of horror, as the consequences of the Birlings’ actions catch up with them with a sense of the supernatural creating a chilling effect.

Priestley draws upon an ancient dramatic convention though the Inspector, that of a ‘deus ex machina’. This idea, of a god coming from the heavens to intervene in human affairs, is what the Inspector’s character ultimately suggests – he is more than simply human. However, Priestley twists this convention to use it for his purposes. The Inspector warns not of a divine apocalypse but of a social revolution. His final speech to the Birlings is almost a sermon. A well-known biblical metaphor is used in referring to the human race as being ‘members of one body’ and his accusatory tone is full of moral exhortation as he speaks to ‘you’ – which is directed at the Birlings but perhaps also supposed to address the audience directly. Even though Sheila has a moral epiphany through the Inspector, her reaction to him is principally one of dread and fear. She warns her mother and the others that they shouldn’t let the Inspector ‘start’ on them, as though he is some kind of terrible antagonist. The exact origin of the Inspector is never explained. These factors all combine to create a sense of awe appropriate to interpreting the Inspector as a semi-divine messenger – a ‘deus ex machina’.

Giving him the role of being an ‘Inspector’ is also of great importance in the dramatic impact of the play. It gives him a social rank ironically beneath that of Birling (the former Lord Mayor of Brumley). Priestley uses this juxtaposition to expose Birling’s social climbing aspirations as petty and shallow. This happens particularly through Birling’s attempts to corruptly dominant him by the threats of sabotaging his career. These are ironic parallels to what follows with Eva. As the drama progresses, the Inspector’s natural authority is increasingly clear, for example, when he overrides Birling’s instructions to Eric not to allow him a ‘drink’ to ‘see him through’ the interrogation. The Inspector’s initial reserved politeness is replaced with a more ‘massive’ presence; thesis not simply dramatic hyperbole, it show Priestley wants the audience to appreciate his natural moral authority. Furthermore, being an Inspector also makes him symbolic of the moral and legal authority of the police force. ‘Inspect(ing)’ carries the idea of sifting carefully through the actions of the Birlings in a detailed and objective manner. Priestley adds objectivity and legal precision to the Inspector’s character, ensuring respect for him and encouraging us to trust his investigation.

However, Priestley counterbalances the authority of the Inspector with moments of more emotive and empathetic humanity. These add depth to his character and ensure that despite possessing a fearful persona, he remains sympathetic to the audience. He speaks ‘gravely’ to Gerald about Eva, this showing that he is emotionally engaged with the severity of the situation. This is further reflected when he emotively suggests that ‘we’ should more often ‘put ourselves in the place’ of those who like Eva have to be ‘counting their pennies’. The use of the first person plural creates a sense of common humanity between the Inspector and the audience, making us bond with him. When Birling is refusing Eric a drink, the Inspector tells Mr Birling to ‘look at him’ and to see the emotional state he is in – the accusation implicit in the imperative is that Birling does not understand his own son, whereas the Inspector does. This creates a sense of the Inspector’s empathy for the weak. Priestley also gives the Inspector humorous lines; he jokes ‘dryly’ about not playing golf (a game which epitomises wealth and leisure), using bathos to Eric saying ‘It’s a damn shame’ to draw a comical wrong conclusion. Priestley thus ensures there is more to his character than mere authoritarianism, which makes the audience warm to him and trust him all the more.

However, perhaps the most crucial factor in making the Inspector seem sympathetic is the juxtaposition of his moral sincerity with the superficial social pretension of the Birlings this is made explicit early on. Birling complains that the Inspector has made a ‘nasty mess’ of his family celebration; the Inspector replies by stating that someone has made a ‘nasty mess’ of Eva Smith’s life. There is considerable dramatic impact to this symbolic parallel; the Birlings’ life revolves round ornate social occasions, in effect paid for by the blood and misery of the working class. This pattern of comparison by juxtaposition continues throughout the play, focusing on the morality of the Inspector and the immorality of the Birlings. The antithesis Priestley creates through this forces the audience to side with the Inspector. The Inspector’s reaction to the Birlings is intended to shape the audience’s reaction to them because we trust the Inspector, we trust his moral verdicts. A rare moment of open anger is enacted through colloquialism, when the Inspector tells Birling to stop ‘stammering and yammering’, saying he has had ‘enough of you people’. Priestley’s use of colloquialism is again effective in terms of humanising the Inspector, and makes his voice seem more working class. By making us side with the Inspector, Priestley ensures that we feel a sense of disgust and revulsion towards the Birlings and those whom they represent at the climax of the play.

Overall Priestley makes the Inspector a figure of drama and awe, whilst ensuing that he is human and sympathetic. We, the audience, are thus prepared fully to accept his moral message, which seems to be Priestley’s didactic intention.

**Essay 2**

**The significance of Birling in ‘An Inspector Calls’**

Birling is the head of a household and the director of a business. These two establishments unite to corruptly result in the death of Eva Smith – who symbolises the ‘thousands’ like her who live in poverty. Birling symbolises materialistic and self-serving capitalism.

Priestley uses Birling’s style of speech to undermine the audience’s respect for him, and to undercut subtly the outward confidence of his ‘easy manner’. He speaks often with interrupted diction, Priestley frequently gives his dashes and pauses and incomplete sentences. For example, he hesitates when referring to Gerald’s parents, ‘Sir George and – er – Lady Croft’. This certainly suggests not only that he is socially out of his depth, but also a sense of intellectual uncertainty, as though Birling lacks the intelligence which more precise diction would imply. His speech about the good economic climate of 1912 and how war will not happen is peppered with dashes and hesitations. The audience is well aware, through dramatic irony, that global conflict in WW1 would soon follow and that Birling is wrong which further undermines his credibility. Here, his broken diction suggests a lack of logic and reason. The overall effect is to suggest that Birling is intellectually weak, and blusters and brags. He is characterised as arrogant and inept. His stumbling manner of speaking is juxtaposed with the confident fluency of the Inspector, who seems all the more trustworthy in comparison.

A key device used by Priestley in the characterisation of Birling is bathos. When speaking of Sheila and Gerald’s engagement says this is ‘one of the happiest nights of (his) life’ – ostensibly entirely appropriate. Love and marriage would naturally bring joy. But within a few lines he goes on to say how it means that Crofts and Birlings will, because of the marriage, be able to ‘work together for lower costs and higher prices’. The explicit focus on the mundane matter of money is at the speech’s climax, making it clear that this is the underlying reason for Birling’s excitement. The transition from love to money is bathetic, and reveals that lurking beneath the fine dinner and ‘easy manners’ of Birling is greed and self-interest. Although at first this is merely comic, it becomes morally significant as the play progresses. The pattern of bathos is repeated throughout. When he discovers that Eric has stolen money, his initial fury seems appropriate – until he reveals that the reason for his anger is how difficult it will be to ‘cover this up’. He seems at first to agree with Sheila that Mrs Birling’s treatment of Eva is ‘cruel and vile’; but it turns out he is concerned because he fears that ‘the Press might take it up’. He is shaken and angry at the end of the play, but ultimately not for moral reasons but because of his fears for his ‘knighthood’. Priestley uses the comical element of the bathos to satirise Birling, and to make him a somewhat ridiculous figure. However, symbolically he represents those at the top of the social hierarchy who have the power to influence the lives of ‘millions’. The hyperbole is sobering for the audience, making the bathos dark and threatening, not merely comical.

If the eponymous Inspector is the protagonist of the play, Birling is the antagonist. Priestley makes him the antithesis of the Inspector. Birling has authority which is based on money and social prestige, whereas the Inspector has authority which derives from morality and justice. The rank of ‘Inspector’ falls socially beneath that of Birling, as former Lord Mayor of Brumley. Class structures are integral to the drama. Birling at first tries to manipulate, corruptly, the Inspector through social rank; he says he should ‘warn; the Inspector that he is an ‘old friend’ of Chief Constable Colonel Roberts, with whom he plays ‘golf’. Golf epitomises leisure and wealth and Priestley shows how the relationships and friendships between the wealthy elite means that they in effect can see themselves as above the law. Birling seeks above all his ‘knighthood’; there is no suggestion that immoral behaviour should prevent him obtaining it, as long as any ‘scandal’ can be hushed up. The continuous juxtaposition between the Inceptor and Birling makes the issues clear; morality and caring for the weak in society is juxtaposed with superficial self-seeking. Through his greater morality, the Inspector is necessarily the protagonist of the play; through his immoral disregard for the socially vulnerable, Birling is equally necessarily the antagonist. Thus, the audience despises him.

Furthermore, the Inspector’s role as a policeman makes him symbolic of the moral authority of the rule of law. ‘Inspect(ing)’ carries the idea of sifting carefully through the actions of the Birlings in a detailed and objective manner. This combines with his moral authority to present Birling as being, by contrast, in effect an outlaw, taking money and life with complete disregard for consequence. The Inspector’s natural authority becomes increasingly clear throughout the play. He overrides Birling’s instruction to Eric to not allow him to drink to ‘see him through’ the interrogation, despite it being, as he points out, Birling’s ‘son’ in his ‘house’. However, Birling losing his authority is not merely built on his immoral behaviour and the Inspector’s legal authority. Priestley’s use of an imperative as the Inspector tells Birling to ‘look at’ Eric implies that Birling can’t ‘see’ his own son clearly. The suggestion that Birling lacks psychological insight into Eric, his own son. Priestley’s use of the stereotypical dysfunctional relationship between father and son is combined with his characterisation of Birling as psychologically and intellectually inadequate. Thus, the Inspector has not only greater moral and legal authority, but greater intellectual and emotional authority also.

It could be argued that Priestley is wishing to show how a desire for greater social standing is in itself an intrinsic evil. Birling breaks subtle codes of social etiquette, praising his own dinner, and speaking of business when he should be celebrating the engagement of his daughter. Sybil Birling expresses her displeasure at this. Although she is a morally abhorrent character, Priestley uses her to draw attention to Birling’s weakness – a desire for social recognition epitomised in the ‘knighthood’. Perhaps this is why Priestley characterises Birling as ‘rather provincial’ – the archetypal image of the northern industrialist who lacks social graces. It could seem to the audience that a sense of social insecurity is what ironically makes Birling so ruthless an inhuman. Thus, the play then becomes a critique of a capitalist society which makes hierarchy a goal in its own right.

Priestley makes Birling the epitome of the unpleasant underbelly of a society which is built on wealth and the corrupt pursuit of social elevation. His lack of humanity makes him an antagonistic figure who the audience eventually loathes.

**Essay 3**

**The significance of the end of the play ‘An Inspector Calls’**

In effect, ‘An Inspector Calls’ has arguably three endings or climaxes. The first is the final speech of the Inspector, before he exits dramatically, walking ‘straight out’. The second is as the family think it may all have been a ‘fake’. The third represents the coming of justice in the final words of the play.

Priestley ensures that the Inspector says little in the way of moral judgement until just before he exits. This in itself increases the dramatic tension – the audience is waiting for a confrontation which is dependent on all the facts of the story finally emerging. His final speech is based on the great moral authority he has gained through the entirety of the play and is in a sense cathartic. As an ‘Inspector’, he is symbolic of the moral and legal authority of the police force. ‘Inspect(ing)’ carries the idea of sifting through the actions of the Birlings in a detailed and objective manner. Priestley adds objectivity and legal precision to the Inspector’s character; thus by the climax of his investigation, we, the audience, instinctively trust his moral conclusions also. There is a sense of relief in hearing the Birlings finally being condemned for their actions.

The Inspector’s final speech is, in tone, almost a sermon. The frequent use of blunt, short diction is combined with imperatives which make him seem almost a preacher or a prophetic figure, as he tells the Birlings to ‘remember this’ and tells them that ‘we are responsible for each other’. Although he uses often the first person plural to emphasise their common humanity, he is also accusatory with his use of ‘you’ as he threatens them with what will come if they fail to learn this lesson. The imagery Priestley draws from is biblical by nature – the Inspector uses the biblical metaphor that we are all ‘members of one body’. The well-known nature of this metaphor makes it seemingly self-evidently true to the audience. The apocalyptic imagery that follows is equally well known, as the Inspector promises ‘fire and blood and anguish’. The tricolon is heavily emphatic and emotive – the Birlings’ rejection of it, which follows swiftly, creates a further sense of their moral vacuity. This sermonic end to the Inspector’s presence on stage makes him seem a didactic mouthpiece for the play – he speaks in effect as much to the audience as to the Birlings. Although it is a relatively brief and restrained speech, nonetheless it is a powerful end – it seems – to the drama.

Birling’s absence of a moral epiphany is enacted in the second ‘ending’ of the play in the ‘huge sigh of relief’ he emits when he discovers that the Inspector is not actually from the police station. He rejects the Inspector’s final words through this stage direction which creates a dramatic hyperbole that it is impossible for the audience to miss. Eva Smith’s name suggests that she represents all the ordinary humanity. Eva suggesting Eve of Genesis, symbolically the mother of humanity, and Smit being a stereotypical working-class surname. Thus Birling’s ‘huge’ indifference is, symbolically, to the suffering of any human being, particularly those who are is socially inferior. Indeed, his estimations of people’s worth have been entirely based on their money or their social connections; early on in the play he attempts at first to threaten the Inspector by explicitly ‘warning’ him that the Chief Constable, Colonel Roberts, is an ‘old friend’ of his. Birling’s ‘relief’ therefore is that his place in society is not damaged after all – even though it is based on corruption and inhumanity towards those who are weaker and more socially vulnerable than him. Thus Birling has learned nothing at all in the play.

Furthermore, Birling is ‘triumphant’ when he decides that the story is nothing more than ‘moonshine’. ‘Triumph’ suggests victory and winning – Birling’s delight is based on his perception that he will not be in any way held to account for his misdeeds. ‘Moonshine’ is a dismissive colloquialism – Priestley uses this to emphasise that there is no emotional impact whatsoever on Birling of the suffering of Eva Smith and those whom she represents. This is accentuated by Mrs Birling’s suggestion that in the morning Eric and Sheila will be as ‘amused’ as they are. The tragedy of what happened to Eva through her circumstances and through the undeserved actions of others is in effect diminished to a joke. Priestley ensures that this anticlimactic interpretation of the play’s events by Mrs Birling is morally repugnant to the audience. The older Birlings and Gerald are villainesque, antagonistic figures.

Sheila is redeemed from the Birling’s’ self-seeking immorality. Sheila’s response to Birling’s ‘relief’ is to accuse him of ‘pretending’ that all is well. This accusation of play-acting creates an ironic role-reversal, as through Birling is the one childishly refusing to engage with reality, and she becomes the parent-figure who rebukes him for his immaturity. The childishness is not an indication of Birling’s innocence, but of his lack of responsibility, but she is the one who is vulnerable to the corruption of her parents, and she lacks meaningful power. Partly also because of her gender, she is, like Eva, the victim of Birling’s philosophy of greed – and yet the awakening of her moral awareness is presented as a coming of age epiphany. She learns to reject the selfishness and inhumanity of her parents as she realises that all working class are intrinsically valuable human beings. She absorbs the relatively complex moral didacticism the Inspector represents with regards to the interconnectedness of human society. This is particularly shown by her quoting the exact words of the Inspector’s apocalyptic list of consequences if the rich fail to heed the social situation: she quotes his words of ‘fire and blood and anguish’. Although she shows no explicit awareness of the social apocalypse of which the Inspector warns, she recalls what ‘he made me feel’. Her emotional engagement is presented in ironic juxtaposition with her parents’ emotional disengagement. Priestley redeems her partly to show the morally repugnant nature of the Birlings’ lack of redemption, through juxtaposing their response with hers.

The unrepentant Birlings are presented by Priestley as grotesque not only through their failure to realise their wrong-doing, but also and more importantly in their seeking of moral superiority over Eva Smith and the workers she represents. The callous self-righteousness they exhibit is best portrayed in Mrs Birling’s rhetorical question, ‘Why shouldn’t we?’; when Sheila asks how they possibly can continue as they were before. The fact she considers the question to need no actual answer indicates her moral blindness – it indicates her assumption that the right of the powerful to abuse the poor is irrefutable and self-evident. Priestley through the drama shows how the structures of capitalist society creates moral indifference to the working class.

This superficiality is also epitomised in Gerald’s statement that ‘Everything is all right now’. This bland cliché becomes ironically extremely emotive for the audience as we know that the lack of a moral compass for the Birlings and Gerald means that others will be treated just as Eva was. The superficiality of this analysis has great dramatic power to repulse the audience – and perhaps to begin to effect the social change Priestley desired.

The third and final ‘ending’ is mysterious. At one level, it satisfies the audience’s hope that there will be justice for Eva. By instructing the actors to look ‘guiltily’ around, Priestley ensures that the moral indifference of the second ending is not the concluding note of the play. Birling speaking on into the phone when the person on the other end has ‘rung off’ indicates also that his social authority is over, creating the sense that there is justice as he has lost what he really cared about. The Inspector’s semi-comical surname, Goole, also seems relevant right at the play’s climax. There is the suggestion that he did indeed in some way represent supernatural forces intervening in the Birlings’ lives to bring justice for Eva. However, the play by its nature ends inconclusively. In effect, we are left on a cliffhanger wondering what the ‘real’ police Inspector will do. Perhaps this reflects Priestley’s desire that the audience should be forced to consider their own conclusions to the drama, and to reflect on its social message. This fits into the structure of false ending following false ending, as though the play remains in some way still unfinished.

The ending of ‘An Inspector Calls’, although inconclusive, is not problematic. It is a strong statement of the guilt of those who seek money and social rank at the expense of humanity and responsibility for those weaker than themselves. It is strongly didactic and powerful.

**Essay 4**

**The significance of the Younger Generation within ‘An Inspector Calls’**

The younger generation represent hope for the future and optimism at the start of the play. They have happiness, marriage and business success set before them. Ultimately, Priestley uses them to show that redemption from guilt is by no means inevitable.

Shelia is presented as the stereotypical young woman who lives an idyllic life. Perhaps in that sense her name is an ironic counterpart to Eva. Eva suggests the biblical figure of Eve, representing all women. The ‘She’ of ‘Sheila’ perhaps therefore is supposed to indicate that Sheila and Eva are both inextricably linked and bound together – one of the principal lessons of the play. Her diction reflects her initial happiness at the start of the play; she speaks in a light, joking voice about ‘these purple-faced old men’ who know all about port and in ‘mock aggressiveness’ to Gerald as to whether he might ‘object’ to joining her family. Her life is mostly full of laughter and happiness.

Priestley steeps Sheila’s initial words and manner in irony. Her playful ‘aggressiveness’ towards Gerald is replaced by real aggression when she discovers his affair with Eva. Then she speaks ‘stormily’ suggesting raging and deep emotions. The joking about drunken old men anticipates the sexual assaults of Alderman Meggarty on Eva with his ‘obscene fat carcass’. The repulsion with which he is described reflects the immorality of his actions and picturing his body as a ‘carcass’ suggests that beneath the social responsibility of his title (which Mrs Birling insist should be used) lies, symbolically, moral death. He is a ‘drunken old sot’ and ‘notorious womanizer’. Sheila’s initial light hearted remarks anticipate Priestley later revealing them to refer, ironically, to a grotesque and turbulent social reality which she has to come to terms with.

In a sense, Sheila is presented initially as contented and happy so that she can be brought low; her happiness is replaced with ‘distress’ and misery. But her agony is redemptive, which is crucial to Priestley’s purposes. The Inspector notes that she is realising that she is ‘responsible’ in what happened to Eva, and is experiencing ‘guilt’. This represents an epiphany of sorts – it is cathartic, purifying her from her previous ignorance and selfishness. She realises the truth of her own words to Birling, seeing that these girls are not merely ‘cheap labour’ – this, she now realises, is an immoral reification. Instead, they are ‘human beings’ and thus linked with her morally and sociologically. Sheila ultimately becomes to the audience Priestley’s example of what to learn from the didacticism and satire of the play. This is confirmed, structurally, at the end of the play when the older Birling’s’ plan to treat it all as a ‘joke’ and go on in the ‘same old way’ leaves her ‘afraid’. Sheila attains redemption through recognising her guilt and therefore forms a crucial part of the didactic element of the play.

Eric follows a similar path to Eva. He is able to empathise with the despair that prompts suicide, crying out ‘involuntarily’ when he hears what the ‘young girl’ did. Priestley uses this adverbial stage direction to suggest that his powers of empathy and emotion come instinctively to him, making him a genuine and humanitarian character from the beginning of the play. Again, Priestley uses anticipation through his ‘uneasy’ manner – the antithesis of Birling’s – to foreshadow that he is indeed guilty and responsible for his part in Eva’s death.

Unlike Sheila, Eric is a paradoxically vulnerable character. He is male, not female and thus is born to power and privilege. He is the heir of a family fortune. Yet, despite these privileges, he is uneasy and emotionally vulnerable. His alcoholism seems almost a tragic flaw – it symbolises human weakness and a desire to escape from a depressing life. This makes us more sympathetic to him. Also, Priestley uses the stereotype of the domineering father who makes the son feel inadequate and lonely to make the audience pity him. Birling is ‘not the kind of father’ who a boy can talk to, and is ruthlessly harsh and domineering towards him throughout. Priestley therefore gives to Eric some of the most emotive lines in the play. It is him, not the Inspector who tells Mrs Birling that she had ‘killed ….(her) own grandchild’. The lack of an epiphany from other characters ‘frightens’ him at the play’s conclusion. Eric’s speech to the Birlings at the play’s climax, reiterating their guilt, is one of the longest in the play. Syntactically informal, nonetheless it is rhetorically powerful, Eric repeating the phrase that each of them ‘did what (they) did’ to emphasise their guilt and ‘responsibility’. This suggests that he is psychologically troubled by what has happened. Along with Sheila, he also shows the audience how Priestley wishes them to respond to the moral and social issues the play raises.

Priestley gives Gerald a range of positive qualities as a character. He is affable and polite, and when he has to admit his affair with Daisy Renton he does so in a way which is ‘honest’. Sheila’s response to this is to comment on his good character and forgive him – as the audience, we feel inclined to follow her lead and do likewise. He has great powers of logic and reason, as he shows by ‘arguing’ persuasively that the Inspector was a ‘fake’. Priestley perhaps makes him symbolic of those who can reason and argue their way out of responsibility. He is also used to show that merely being young is not sufficient to redeem people from immoral behaviour. For him, Eva is Daisy Renton. ‘Daisy’ perhaps suggests a pretty flower, fresh and innocent. ‘Rent’ indicates that for him she is simply something that money can own and use for a short time, as it suits him. As Sheila says, his money made him to her a ‘Fairy Prince’. It is as though Gerald cannot resist casting himself in heroic narratives, his money and his sharp powers of thinking allowing him to do so. His early admission of guilt proves to be a false epiphany and he remains unredeemed as a character.

The Inspector says, mysteriously, when Sheila is upset early on that ‘we’ often make an impact on the ‘young ones’. Sheila and Eric both suggest that youth is an advantage to being able to admit responsibility for actions. Gerald, however, shows that to be young is to be subject to other pressures and temptations also.