

Set Text Guide: An Inspector calls



GCSE (9-1) Drama

Pearson Edexcel Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in Drama (1DR0)

GCSE Drama 2016: An Inspector Calls

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Summary

Act One

The dining room of a fairly large suburban house, belonging to a prosperous manufacturer.

A celebration is underway – Arthur Birling’s daughter, Sheila, has become engaged to Gerald Croft, the son of a successful business owner. The whole family is there: Arthur Birling, his wife Sybil, their son Eric and the happily engaged couple, Sheila and Gerald. The conversation is wide-ranging and indicative of the status the Birlings feel they have in society and how this will be enhanced by marriage with the Crofts.

Edna, the maid, announces that an inspector has called. Inspector Goole enters to bring news of the death of a girl, Eva Smith, in the infirmary. She has swallowed disinfectant.

The Inspector outlines the chain of events that may connect each of the characters present to Eva’s death. He shows each of them a photograph of her and they each recognise her, but they do not all see the photograph at the same time.

It is first revealed that Arthur Birling sacked Eva from his mill because she led an unsuccessful strike for better pay. She found work in a dress shop where Sheila was a customer and, in a fit of jealousy, Sheila used her influence to have her sacked.

At the end of the Act, the Inspector reveals that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. This gains a reaction from Gerald and, in turn, from Sheila.

Act Two

The same

The Inspector forces Gerald Croft to reveal that he had a love affair with Daisy Renton but has not seen her since he ended their relationship. Sheila returns his engagement ring and he leaves to go for a walk.

The Inspector now turns to Mrs Birling who, as a prominent member of a welfare charity, supports worthy causes. Eva Smith asked the charity for help when she found she was pregnant. Mrs Birling used her influence to have the committee refuse to help Eva, as Mrs Birling was of the opinion that the father of the child should be supporting her.

Act 2 ends with attention switching to Eric and his part in Eva’s story.

Act Three

The same

Eric reveals that he met Eva in a bar and kept her as his mistress. When she became pregnant, he stole money from his father’s office, but she refused to take it because it was stolen.

The family is left in shock and the Inspector takes his leave. As each of them starts to blame the others for the events of Eva Smith’s life, only the younger generation – Sheila and Eric – appear to have learned anything from their actions.

Gerald returns from his walk, having met a policeman who told him there was no such person as Inspector Goole. Gerald phones the infirmary and is told there have been no suicides for months. Sheila and Eric recognise that they are all responsible in some way.

The phone rings – it is the police. A girl has died on the way to the infirmary after swallowing disinfectant. A police inspector is on his way to the Birlings’ house to ask them some questions.

Characters

Inspector Goole

The central character, the catalyst for the events that unfold around him. He has an air of authority that cuts through the Birling family façade of respectability to expose how each of them in their own way was responsible for the death of Eva Smith.

The strength of this character lies first in his ability to manipulate the others into believing him about the events at the infirmary and about earlier episodes in Eva Smith's life, and secondly, in persuading each in turn to confess their involvement with her.

There is a sense of what might be described as a stereotypical police inspector in this character, who arrives at an important moment in the life of the Birling family as they are about to be united by marriage to the Crofts and takes control of the situation from the moment he arrives until long after he has left.

Arthur Birling

The head of the household. Arrogant in his success as a wealthy mill owner, he is clearly used to being in charge. He dominates proceedings and, arguably, he has the furthest to fall as Inspector Goole starts to lay bare the family's secrets in relation to Eva Smith. He is a social climber in the sense that he has built up his business to the point where his ambitions for social expansion can only be realised by uniting his family with the Crofts through the marriage of Sheila and Gerald.

Arthur Birling, in his own home, in front of his family, is not used to being questioned in the way he is when Inspector Goole recounts the death of Eva Smith. He struggles to reassert his authority once the connections to Eva are exposed by the Inspector. His sacking of her for attempting to organise a strike at his mill was the beginning of the chain of events. It indicates the type of businessman Birling is – paying low wages to increase profits to keep him and his family in their middle-class lifestyle.

Sybil Birling

Mrs Birling's air of superiority is hardly dented when her role in Eva's death is revealed. She shows no remorse, no regret for her decisions, and is defiant to the end. She effectively represents the 'committee' that made the decision not to help Eva. As such, she is involved in supporting 'good causes', but cannot manage to do so without making moral judgements – as in the case of Eva Smith – about the people she is supposed to be helping. In many ways, Sybil is as ambitious as Arthur and, to some extent, just as ruthless. They are well matched as a couple and represent a generation who see themselves as the keepers of society's morals – maintaining Victorian values by keeping the lower classes 'in their place'.

Sheila Birling

The Birlings' daughter – the next generation – has been brought up in the shadow of her parents. However, she has an opportunity to represent a different view of the world following the Inspector's visit and her realisation of how wrong her attitude towards Eva Smith was. She starts the evening by sowing a seed of uncertainty about her relationship with Gerald, and by the end of the evening she has been changed by the Inspector's revelations about not only her own association with Eva Smith/Daisy Renton, but also that of her brother Eric and her fiancé Gerald.

Although Sheila appears more than happy to enter what is effectively an arranged marriage (not unusual in the kind of society the play depicts), she is able to pull back from committing herself to Gerald as a result of the events that unfold during the evening.

Eric Birling

The Birlings' son, who appears to have inherited some of his father's arrogance and certainly some of his selfishness – stealing money to pay Eva Smith off, rather than facing the consequences of his actions. He has turned to drink and hides behind this instead of facing the world. He, along with Sheila, is changed by the events as described by the Inspector and he realises – and accepts – his part in the death of Eva Smith. There is an air of the rebellious next generation about Eric, who has been stifled under the parentage of Arthur and Sybil and has clearly sought – and found – a more interesting and exciting life away from the family home but, because of his relationship with his parents – again not unusual in the society of the time – he lacks the maturity to deal with the consequences of his actions, and certainly does not have the confidence to discuss this with his parents.

Gerald Croft

At the start of the play, when Mr and Mrs Birling are congratulating themselves for what they have achieved and how the marriage will unite the two great families of the town, it is as if Birling is marrying his daughter off to a younger version of himself.

Gerald has been pursuing this engagement for a while, and his encounter with the Inspector reveals his relationship with Daisy Renton, for which he shows remorse. As the next generation of Crofts, he must be remorseful in order for the premise of the plot to work, and his clinging to hope after his encounter with the police constable is not sufficient to take away the fact that Gerald has been changed by the events and his part in them.

Social, cultural and historical context

This is, without doubt, one of the most important plays of the first half of the 20th century. Although it was written and first performed in 1945, the play is set in 1912. This is no accident – the Edwardian era has ended following the death of Edward VII in 1910, the First World War and all its horrific bloodshed is two years away, and the *Titanic* – a symbol of massive enterprise, skill and hope as well as, for some, opulence and decadence – sank on its maiden voyage.

The play is set in the past and looks to the future, setting out Priestley's arguments for a better future by exposing social inequality in 1912 through the treatment of Eva Smith.

Priestley had left school aged 16 in 1910, and became a junior clerk at a wool firm in Bradford. During this time and until he joined the infantry at the start of the First World War, he mixed with people a lot older than himself and contributed to their conversations on a wide range of topics, including politics. He immersed himself in their socialist views and formed his own judgements, many of which would shape his future writings. Priestley's view of the world would have been greatly expanded between 1914 and 1919, when he left the army and took up a place at Cambridge University.

For the working class before the outbreak of the First World War, life was tough. There were recorded incidents of children dying of starvation and the average life expectancy of a working-class man was 35. There was no 'welfare state' as such, and the poor had to depend on charity – as Eva Smith tried to do in the play. This was a time of little social mobility – if you were born poor, you died poor – but it was also a time when people were struggling for change. The Suffragettes, for example, were fighting for votes for women, and factory workers threatened strikes for better living conditions.

By setting his play in a middle-class household, Priestley deliberately attacked the values of those whose social standing meant they had a duty of care to others less fortunate than themselves. It must be wondered what Edna, the parlour maid, thought of the events of that evening as they unfolded. Priestley does not give her a voice, presumably because she certainly would not have been asked to express it.

Priestley supported the Labour Party in the 1945 general election and, at the time, *An Inspector Calls* was regarded as a political play with a very clear message about the responsibilities we all have for each other in society. The theme of the influence of one individual on others that is so evident in *An Inspector Calls* is one that Priestley had explored previously in at least three earlier works.

The first performance in England was by the Old Vic Company at the New Theatre (now the Albery) in London in 1946, and starred Ralph Richardson as Inspector Goole. The set was as described by Priestley in his very precise stage directions, and the production was staged within a proscenium arch, separating the audience from the characters. The only detail of Priestley's instructions that was not followed in this first production was that the lighting was more naturalistic throughout the performance, not moving from 'pink and intimate' at the start to 'brighter and harder' when the Inspector arrives. This first London production was not well received by critics, mainly because they could not decide who Inspector Goole was, within what appeared to be a naturalistic representation of the lives of these characters in 1912. Whether Priestley's suggested change of lighting when the Inspector arrives would have aided their understanding, it is not possible to say.

This was the year of *Annie Get Your Gun* and *The Winslow Boy* and, following all the uncertainties of the war that had ended the previous year, it seemed that theatre audiences were looking for something that either helped them to escape their everyday lives rebuilding communities, or reminded them of the inherent good there is in all of us.

Following years of disruption to theatre programmes in London's West End, by 1946 things were returning to normal and the status quo was being restored as far as entertainment was concerned. The 'legitimate' theatre of the West End was still seen as something of an elitist pastime, whereas cinemas appeared to offer something for everybody – television was still in its infancy with, in 1947, a reported 57,000 sets in the

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UK and certainly nothing like the 24-hour coverage from multiple channels on multiple platforms that we expect today.

Priestley's play is of its time – written for a box set on a proscenium arch stage. Its structure is traditional – in three acts – and it is a classic example of 'the well-made' play, in that the lives of the characters are changed between the start of the play and its end. What is so important about it, though, is that its call for justice for Eva Smith is still as relevant today as it was then. The issues may not exactly be the same, and the agencies involved may have more powers and support from government and councils, but Eva Smiths are still slipping through the welfare net in our society on a daily basis.

Themes

Social duty

Arguably, the most important theme of the play is social duty. As the Inspector says in his final speech, 'We do not live alone, we are members of one body.' Nobody in society lives in isolation, we are all interconnected and responsible for each other's welfare.

There *is* such a thing as society, and Priestley argues that people need to be more aware and mindful of the effects of their actions on others. The Birlings initially do not think at all about how they might have affected Eva Smith, but they are forced to confront their responsibility as the play unfolds and their individual involvements with her emerge.

Class

Priestley wrote the play from a socialist perspective to offer a view on issues of social class, using 1912 as a turning point in 20th-century history. Class is a factor in the events of the play, such that we never hear the views of Edna the parlour maid, because she would not have been allowed to express an opinion.

Mrs Birling is her husband's social superior, just as Gerald will be Sheila's social superior if they do get married. Priestley also references that Gerald's mother, Lady Croft, disapproves of Gerald's marrying Sheila for precisely this reason.

Arthur Birling makes up for his lack of 'class' by being bombastic and overbearing. He is clearly in charge of his household, as he is the one bringing in the money, but at the same time he is aware that money does not mean 'class'. He is keen for his family to be connected to the socially superior Crofts by marriage.

Mrs Birling says that Eva Smith is a girl 'of that class', almost implying that Eva's lower social rank justifies everyone's treatment of her. Priestley was clearly concerned about how the class system determines the decisions that people make that impact on others, less visible than themselves, in society.

Youth and age

As the events of the play unfold, there are clear differences between the attitudes of the older and younger generations. While Arthur and Sybil refuse to accept responsibility for their actions towards Eva Smith, with Arthur apparently only concerned for his reputation and his potential knighthood, Eric and Sheila are shaken by the Inspector's message and their apparent role in Eva's suicide.

The younger generation is shown to be taking more responsibility, perhaps because they are more emotional and idealistic, but perhaps because Priestley is suggesting a more inclusive socialist future for Britain – the play is set, of course, two years before the outbreak of the First World War, during which idealism and resolve would be tested to the limits.

Responsibility and avoiding it

Though responsibility itself is a central theme of the play, the last act provides an interesting and complex example of how people, when required to face up to their responsibilities, often find ways of justifying their actions to escape, or at least avoid, responsibility. With the Inspector present, all the characters in the room are meticulously dissected and held accountable; as soon as he leaves, the avoidance begins.

One message of the play is that we all should be more socially aware, but this message is not shared by all. Priestley groups together the older Birlings and Gerald, and contrasts their attitudes with those of Sheila and Eric. This explicitly highlights the difference between those who are ready to accept their responsibility and those who are not.

Cause and effect

The Inspector outlines a 'chain of events' that may well have led to Eva Smith's death. Her suicide, as presented to the family, is the result of individuals who she encountered each avoiding, in some way, responsibility for her. While each individual was unaware of the actions of the others, they all, collectively, caused her suicide.

If Birling had not sacked Eva in the first place, Sheila could not have had her dismissed from Milwards, and Eric and Gerald would not have met her in the Palace bar. Had she not met Eric, she would not have fallen pregnant and needed help from the charity commission fronted by Sybil Birling. This series of events is an example of Priestley's fascination with time and the links between apparently random and unconnected actions.

Time

Time is a central theme in many of Priestley's works. He was interested in John William Dunne's theory of time as published in his *An Experiment in Time* (1927), which argued that the past was still present, and that time was not linear as traditionally accepted. Priestley returned to this theme more than once in his writing – most notably in *Time and the Conways* (1937).

An Inspector Calls deals explicitly with the nature of time in its final twist with the phone call and Birling's reaction to it.

There are questions here for the audience – some of which are addressed by knowing about Priestley's fascination with Dunne's writing. Stephen Daldry's National Theatre production addressed the notion of time head-on with its 1940s Inspector travelling back in time to 1912 to help the Birlings see the error of their ways. With its expressionistic style, this production, literally, had the Birlings' world collapse around them in the centre of a wasteland representative of blitzed streets from the Second World War.

The supernatural

The Inspector's name, spelled 'Goole' in the play, is often interpreted through an alternative spelling: *ghoul*, particularly on hearing it, rather than seeing it on the page. In the 1954 film version with Alistair Sim, the name was changed to Poole in order not to lead the cinema audience too readily down the ghost/spirit/supernatural road.

Gerald, on returning from his walk and having bumped into a police sergeant he knew, informs the family that the Inspector is not a real Brumley police inspector. This is confirmed by Birling telephoning the Chief Constable – exploring status again here, Birling does not go to the desk sergeant, he goes to the top. Into the family's various reactions to the news that Inspector Goole does not exist comes the phone call that will set the chain of events in motion again and, presumably, again and again, with the family caught in a cyclical time warp.

Resources

There is a wealth of resources being compiled on the Pearson Edexcel website; many of these are free to download and use.

To support study of the text there are two versions of the play on DVD – the earlier film version with Alistair Sim and the more recent BBC television version with David Thewlis. Extracts are available on YouTube or the full DVDs from Amazon or other suppliers.

The recommended edition of the text contains background information, notes and questions to stimulate discussion and, possibly to structure approaches to practical activities around the text to bring it to life.

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Model Box resources

www.theatre-inabox.com

Other resources

www.theatrebythelake.com

Education Pack

www.aninspectorcalls.com/education

Resources Pack to accompany the ground-breaking Stephen Daldry production

www.eastmidlandtheatre.com

Review of Nottingham Theatre Royal Production from November 2015, with photographs

Practical exploration activities

Performers

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the characters, themes and ideas that are central to *An Inspector Calls*. Some may help performers to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique for considering the 'before and after' life of the play. For example, a useful exercise would be to create a news report where some of the characters are interviewed for the local paper after reporters are 'tipped off' about events surrounding Eva Smith's death. Each character will have a different viewpoint on the revelations of Inspector Goole. This could be particularly useful for developing the structuring of events for individuals who are shown the photograph(s) by Goole. It could also be an opportunity to hear something from Edna.

Past 10 seconds In this activity, take the characters back in time in stages: 10 seconds before the start of the events of the play, then 10 minutes, then 10 hours. Then take them forward again to show how the established events of the evening are shattered by the Inspector's revelations.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method of developing characterisation. It helps performers to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow performers to consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring.

Circle hot-seating is a variation on this. The group sits in a circle with the names of characters on the backs of some of the chairs. If you are on one of the named chairs, you become that character for the time you are there, and answer questions as that character from others on non-named seats. Then, on a signal from the director, everyone moves round one chair, and the next person then has to pick up on the character if they land on a named chair.

A more theatrical way of exploring hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, take an incident described by the Inspector, such as Eva Smith seeking help from Sybil's committee, or refusing money from Eric when he admits he has stolen it from his father – and devise work around it, in order to develop an understanding of the impact the event would have had on Eva.

Gestic props and multi-role are also effective ways of developing details of character. For example, it might be useful in practical workshops to collect a series of props that could be associated with characters. A cigarette case for Eric, a notebook for the Inspector, or a glass for Birling may help the actors to develop sub-text through physical action. Students should be encouraged to explore the range of characters in the play, as this will allow them first-hand experience of how each character might stand, use space, behave in silence and in relation to others, particularly in those moments of revelation from the Inspector as individuals are being interrogated. Small items such as a bow tie for Gerald or a string of pearls for Sheila might help here.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help performers to consider character choices. For example, a voice workshop that explores a range of accents might help to stress an attitude of a specific character. Does it make a difference if Birling speaks with a regional or an RP accent? Does it help to explore a working-class voice for Birling but not for Sybil and Gerald? What accent could the Inspector use, if any?

It is worth considering the theatrical impact of specific accent choices for the characters in the play, particularly as status is so important to the characters. It is sometimes useful to explore a vocal mantra for each character. Finding a line or phrase that is said by each character can help to define their attitudes and emotions.

Exploring the vocal placement of each character can also help performers to define detail and bring a role to life. Key vocal resonators to explore include the nose, the throat, the stomach, the chest and the head. What quality is explored when the voice of the character is placed in a different resonator?

It might be useful to explore different resonators with a key monologue or speech. For example, the opening speech from the Inspector, or Gerald's speech about Daisy Renton.

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? The text offers numerous opportunities to explore physical reactions to the Inspector's revelations that are indicative of what a character is thinking. Non-verbal communication will communicate subtext and detail in the Inspector's first entrance, for example.

Non-verbal details can also develop the mood and atmosphere of a moment, and stage directions often give insight into the non-verbal details of a character's behaviour. This again would be interesting to explore in a practical workshop. For example, Eric's entrance at the end of Act Two and the start of Act Three 'looking extremely pale and distressed' will demand reactions from the others in the room.

Directors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the concepts, characters and themes that are central to *An Inspector Calls*. Some of the suggestions may help directors to consider how key ideas in the play might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting** and pitch for your students – either as one group or in smaller groups, depending on numbers. This will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions.

Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help your students to consider the text in a holistic way. In this model, for example, a group of five could consist of a director, set, costume, sound and lighting designers. The director puts important questions to each member of the team in order to develop a creative concept for a production of the play, then sells a potential 'theatrical' pitch to the teacher (producer or 'dragon') in order to secure funding. It is important that the director has an overall vision for the play in performance, and the design team should question the director about overall approach and theatrical intention.

This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas and contextualise themes and key moments or, probably more effectively, at the end of a scheme of work, as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It is important with this activity that each member of each production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Another useful exercise for a director to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene** with a particular focus and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, it might be useful to explore the moment of the Inspector's entrance when, in the eyes of Birling, the Inspector is clearly of lower status. Try exploring the scene by reversing the levels of status to look at what happens when the Inspector is strong and overpowering compared to a more servile Birling. This would impact on the dynamic of the moment. A director would be encouraging performers to think about appropriate interpretations of characters within the context of the whole play.

A director may **explore the structure of the play** and look at other ways into it. An example might start with the moment in the final act when Gerald returns to tell the Birlings about his encounter with the police officer, then go to the moment just before Birling makes the phone call to Colonel Roberts. This could be followed with a flashback, or the story could go back to the beginning and take the narrative through to the end.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *An Inspector Calls*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each act will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *An Inspector Calls* is set in one location, and a model box design might help students to consider how this space could be created within a number of different stage spaces, either real or imagined.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key moments is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. For example, consider the sounds of the Birling household that might punctuate the narrative and support moments of tension or revelation. What theatrical impact is created when you explore the use of different sound effects at different volumes – the door bell, the servants' bell, sounds from the street, for example? Do music or sound effects underscore the key speeches as each member of the household reveals his or her involvement with Eva Smith?

If you have access to different lighting effects, it might be useful to **explore key moments in different lighting states**. Priestley gives his instructions at the start of the play, and it might be useful to attempt to recreate this or, indeed, to go completely away from it and look at more abstract lighting at moments during the play. Although the play is set in one location, the lighting state in your interpretation does not have to remain unchanged. Research previous productions and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact is a useful activity. If access to lighting is limited, there are computer programmes available that will help you to create a virtual set and lighting grid for a production of the play.

Another useful design consideration is to look at the time of the play and **develop ideas for performance by sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and this will help those who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? How does the performance of an actor playing Sheila change when she wears a small heel or character shoes? A coat or a cardigan or a dress recreating the original time period? It is always interesting for designers to interview performers and discover how costume can reveal insight into characterisation and interpretation.

