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GCSE (9–1) Drama

Prescribed Text Guide

An Inspector Calls, J B
Priestley

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Recommended edition for Component 3

An Inspector Calls, J B Priestley – ISBN 9780435232825 (Heinemann).

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 shows 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.



Context to *An Inspector Calls*

The original performance took place at the Kamerny Theatre, Moscow in 1945 with its first British performance at the New Theatre, London, in October 1946.

Students are required to refer to the context **in which the text was created and first performed** as part of their response to sub-question (b)(i). This could be the social, political, context and/or the context to the **first performance**, which for this text **took place in 1945-6**. Contextual information relating to the setting of this adaptation in the Edwardian England may also be covered in sub-question b (ii) and (c). The following contextual information may be of support to students when preparing for this question.

One of the most important plays of the first half of the 20th century, the play was written and first performed in 1945, but set in 1912. 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.

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. Immediately after the Second World War, when the play was first performed, there was significant poverty in Britain. Priestley, who had broadcasted morale boosting messages to the British people throughout the war, declared, 'we must care for the less fortunate, discard old class assumptions'; he wanted the audience to identify with Eva, but also to take some responsibility for their actions.

The play was first performed in Moscow as there was no London theatre available. Designer Alexander Tairov created a bold and minimal set that made the most of the play's symbolism as well as establishing the Edwardian setting.

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.

Priestley's play was 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, where 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 in *An Inspector Calls*

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.



Time is a central theme in many of Priestley's works. *An Inspector Calls* deals explicitly with the nature of time in its final twist with the phone call and Birling's reaction to it. 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 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, making the supernatural a key theme for the audience



Resources for *An Inspector Calls*

There are a wealth of resources available on the Pearson Edexcel website and these are being added to and updated regularly. These resources, including the [Sample Assessment Materials](#), and [specimen paper and mark scheme](#), are free to download.

The prescribed edition of the text contains background information, a glossary and notes on the text to support students. 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 and the full play versions can be viewed or purchased on a number of streaming services.

Online resources

[Resources Pack](#) to accompany the ground-breaking Stephen Daldry production

[Review of Nottingham Theatre Royal Production](#) from November 2015, with photographs

Resources specific to the text can be found on [GCSE Bitesize](#) although as most of these are aimed at English students, they must be approached carefully.

[Archive information](#) and a contemporary look back at the [reception of the first London production in 1946](#)



Practical activities to help prepare for Component 3

The following suggested exercises may help Students practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *An Inspector Calls*, and to have some practical experience of bringing the text to life.

Students must respond to the text as performers, directors and designers, so practical experience of all of these roles will be useful. However, the questions are grouped into two areas:

- activities for performers and for directors of performers
- activities for designers and for directors of production elements.

1. Performers and Directors of Performers: Questions (a)(i), (a)(ii) and (b)(ii)

There are a number of performance elements which will come up across these three questions:

- vocal skills/voice
- physical skills/movement
- non-verbal communication
- stage space and stage directions.

Best practice would therefore be to ensure that all Students have an understanding of each performance element and how it could be used to enhance the play in performance, as well as a grasp of how to use these elements as a performer and as a director.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. Students might explore moments from the play that the audience does not explicitly see. For example, 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.

Similarly, students might be asked to create a news report where some of the characters are interviewed for the local paper 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. **It would also help** Students to consider the journey of the character in the context of the complete text. This would work well to develop understanding of improvisation work early on in the process, but would also be an excellent practical revision technique for Students

Exploring voice and vocal skills such as volume, pitch, tone, pace, pause, emphasis, accent and dialect can also help performers and directors of performers to consider character choices. How might vocal choices help the audience understand where characters come from? How might they show an understanding of the character at that moment within the play? 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?

Still image and mime are often highly effective in exploring the use of physical skills and non-verbal communication and the use of space. Students could be given the opportunity to look at relationships and emotions within a given moment from the text by creating either a short sequence of mime or a series of still images. Using facial expression, movement, gesture, posture and their proxemics (or position within the performance space) will enhance their understanding of how these characters might be feeling at this moment, or what they might want to achieve. Non-verbal communication will communicate subtext and detail in the Inspector's first entrance, for example. Using small costume items such as a bow tie for Gerald or a string of pearls for Sheila might help performers to 'feel' more like their characters as well as preparing them for making design choices.

Following practical activities, evaluating the ways in which performance skills have been used and asking students to offer reasons for their performance choices verbally after sharing work, will also help Students become more confident with the relevant vocabulary.

Staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus is also a helpful activity for Students. This focus might be the kind of statement to be found in question(b)(ii) for example, 'Gerald questions the Inspector's identity'. Assigning the role of director to one student within each the group and asking the director to verbally justify or give reasons for the choices made when staging the scene, similarly, will help all Students to grasp the role of the director and to feel more confident about responding on paper to question (b)(ii).

2. Designers and Directors of Production Elements: Questions (b)(i) and (c)

There are six production/design elements which will come up across these two questions:

- staging
- set
- props and stage furniture
- costume
- lighting
- sound.



Three of these will be possible options on each question with all six appearing on the paper each year. Best practice would therefore be to ensure that all Students have an understanding of each production/design element and how it could be used to enhance the play in performance. A grasp of how the differences in approaching these elements as a director and as a director will also be valuable.

It might be useful to set up a production meeting and pitch for your students. In this model, for example, a small group of five could consist of a director, set, costume, sound and lighting designers. The director then asks important questions to each member of the production team in order to develop a creative concept for a production of the play and then sells a potential ‘theatrical’ pitch to the teacher (producer or ‘dragon’ in order to secure funding).

The teacher should support students by ensuring that the students all have a good understanding of the text and of appropriate performance styles for this text. Each member of each production team must justify their ideas by referring to key moments from the play. This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It would also make an excellent ‘active’ revision session in time for the written examination.

The play is set in 1912 and although Students may adapt the setting, any such choice must be justified clearly; Students may well choose the Edwardian time period and a naturalistic approach, just as in the first performance. Designers/directors will also need to think about how their chosen performance style will be supported through design and about how design elements will be used to time passing and the increase in tension throughout the play.

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 Students explore the use of different sound effects at different volumes – a clock ticking, the doorbell, 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. **Different** kinds of lamp could also be used to create shadows and suspense, for example during the Inspector’s dramatic speech in Act 3. 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. Researching previous productions and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact is a useful activity.

Creating a model box or stage plan 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 scene or episode will be played in a potential space, and to choose a specific stage. By creating this visually they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas when writing about



set, stage furniture or staging in particular. Priestley provides detailed stage directions at the start of the play about the set and these instructions can be used, or adapted to suit the Students' interpretation, as long as any changes are justified. For example, *An Inspector Calls* was originally staged end on/in a proscenium arch with a detailed and naturalistic set, but Students may choose to change the staging and approach to set.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is designing potential costumes and props. Research is key and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. They might consider how the performance of an actor playing Sheila changes when she wears a small heel or character shoes? A coat or a cardigan or a dress recreating the original time period? Costume designers will need to think about how both the chosen time period, the performance style and characterisation/status will be supported through the style of the costume for each character

Students could be asked to verbally link their intentions with the initial production, as they will need to do in question(b)(i), either because they are adopting a similar approach or because they are developing different ideas.

While the majority of these activities will result in informal sharing within the class, using the set text as the basis for more formal performance work is also worth considering. *An Inspector Calls* is a prohibited text for Component 2. However, students might complete a mock in year10 using extracts from their prescribed text. This will not only support performance and design skills; it will also help students to become confident with staging extracts from the play for an audience.