

Folder O

IGCSE English Literature (Edexcel Pearson)

Modern Drama

How does Priestley present the theme of responsibility within An Inspector Calls?

As a morality play, An Inspector Calls seeks to teach audiences that we must be responsible for the consequences of our actions. The play explores how each character's conscience and sense of responsibility develops. It was written in 1945 after two World Wars had shaken the nation; but they had brought society closer together to work for a common goal and socialists, like Priestley, wanted this to continue. Set in 1912, the upper classes experienced prosperity and were generally contented, regardless of the welfare of the poor. As Mr Birling says: 'A man has to make his own way' - echoing key capitalist ideals.

Priestley uses Mr Birling to represent a derogatory view of capitalism. He thinks highly of his own opinions, indicated by Birling's use of long monologues. Priestley uses dramatic irony when Birling talks about the Titanic as 'absolutely unsinkable'; this ignorance influences his audience to dislike capitalism and is a metaphor for the security of Birling's family. Birling's attitude to responsibility is: 'A man has to ... look after himself and his own', indicating that Birling believes in everyone being justly rewarded for their own merit. However, socialists acknowledged that without a level playing field, meritocratic society is detrimental to those already at a disadvantage. Birling says 'If we were all responsible for everything that happened to everybody we'd had anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn't it?', the rhetorical question implying his reluctance to accept responsibility for the consequences his actions have for others. Birling also fails parentally; he's out of touch, 'not the kind of father a chap could go to'. After the Inspector leaves any responsibility Birling feels dissipates because it won't cause a 'public scandal'; his reputation won't be damaged so 'the whole thing's different now'.

Mrs Birling is used by Priestley to represent social snobbery and aristocracy; she epitomizes everything that Priestley feels is wrong with society. She's Birling's 'social superior' and talks 'reproachfully'. She uses euphemisms, such as 'particular condition', to put on a pretence of respectability, indicating the disparities between public and private behaviour. Near the end of the play her sentences become increasingly fragmented, indicating the breakdown of her confidence and complacency. Sybil says that Eva 'had only herself to blame' implying that she believes everyone should take responsibility for themselves rather than rely on others. She's failing in her parental responsibilities as she didn't address Eric's drinking problem. In her position of responsibility on the board of the Brumley Women's charity, she judges 'deserving' cases - the word itself implying judgement - however she is

prejudiced and ignorant of the lower classes' plight. Therefore she uses her power irresponsibly, blaming 'the young man who was the father' instead of offering help.

perceptive
lang- Eric shows the most social responsibility at the start of the play, challenging Birling's reasons for firing Eva, indicating that he's most in touch with the working class; 'I call it tough luck'. Eric is absent from most of the second act, returning 'looking extremely pale and distressed' to take some responsibility. He was 'rather far gone', and it seems he uses his intoxicated state to mitigate his treatment of Eva and exonerate himself from any responsibility towards her. Priestley uses Eric to portray a disgusting, uncaring upper class, especially as Eric tries to justify his actions with 'she was pretty', contrasting with Goole's earlier statement: 'She wasn't pretty when I saw her today'. Eric's sentences are fragmented, 'my child ... you killed them both - damn you', perhaps representing a man broken by his guilt for Eva's death. However Eric says 'What does it matter now whether they give you a knighthood or not?' showing that he recognises power isn't everything and with power comes responsibility.

structure Through Sheila, Priestley shines a beacon of hope for the younger generation of the upper class. When the Inspector leaves she becomes Priestley's voice within the play. She says 'But these girls aren't cheap labour - they're people' showing that she thinks the lower classes have human rights which the more fortunate in society have a responsibility to support. She accepts the consequences of her actions and wants to change, and she tries to get her family to change too. Sheila says 'he's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves', this violent metaphor symbolises the way Goole skillfully manipulates the characters into confessing their responsibility for Eva's suicide. She says 'So there's nothing to be sorry for, nothing to learn.' This use of sarcasm suggests that she has started to scorn her parents and their views of the world. Sheila starts off with no responsibilities whatsoever, a young girl, 'very pleased with life'. Priestley uses Sheila to show that anyone can change if given the chance.

perceptive
A02 Priestley uses Gerald as a bridge between the generations and to convey how widespread a problem dehumanisation of the lower classes was. Initially Gerald thought he could use money to absolve himself from his responsibilities to Eva; he felt like a 'gallant' knight answering Eva's 'cry for help', this imagery transforming his dubious actions into heroism in his mind. However he describes Eva as 'young and fresh' and 'out of place' exhibiting behaviour associated with sexual predation on the naive and vulnerable and it was clear that he enjoyed having control over her, 'I became ... the most important person in her life'. Gerald uses 'inevitable' to describe how Eva became his mistress, emphasising his sense of entitlement to her love despite his lack of love for her. Goole presses him to take responsibility for Eva's emotional welfare and her ruined reputation as a woman.

Eva's character is absent from the stage, implying that people like her have no voice. She represents the ordinary people that are affected by the actions of the rich. Through Eva, Priestley highlighted the imbalance of power in a capitalist society, as Eva was reliant on

HO 2 members of the ruling class and was greatly affected by their misuse of power. Priestley uses the other characters to build up a picture of Eva, showing their combined responsibility for her death. Tragically, suicide was her only option to take responsibility for her unborn child; Eva wouldn't be able to give the child a life, let alone live herself.

Goole represents Priestley's own beliefs. When he arrives, the lighting becomes 'brighter and harder' like a spotlight that Goole interrogates each of them under. Goole creates 'an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness', this semantic field of size showing his importance in order to lend more authority to Priestley's views. His statement 'Public men ... have responsibilities as well as privileges.' still applies today. Goole also highlights their familial responsibilities, 'Your daughter isn't living on the moon', reiterating his belief that we 'don't live alone'.

HO 2 Goole uses inclusive pronouns like 'we' to convey his belief in unity, contrasting with the Birlings' use of 'I' as they never think of the bigger picture beyond themselves. When Goole says there are 'millions of Eva Smiths ... still left with us', his extended metaphor emphasises to the Birlings how widespread the consequences of their actions are. He goes on to say 'their lives, their hopes and fears, ... all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do.' Like ripples expanding on water, our responsibilities spread ever outwards as our lives collide with the lives of others. The verb 'intertwined' connotes invisible strings of responsibility linking us together. Goole says we are 'members of one body'. This biblical metaphor connotes that we all live and work together; the lower classes are essential to our society and if their lives are compromised, society as a whole is compromised. It also reinforces the sermonic nature of his speech. Goole's penultimate sentence 'if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish' uses list of three and emotive language to bring extra power to the pronouncement. The words could refer to the Russian Revolution, a perfect example of unequal society resulting in bloodshed, or WW2.

Priestley ended the play on a cliffhanger so his audiences would reflect on their own responsibilities. It also represents the cliffhanger British society was facing after WW2 regarding the future. The play reminds us that every person matters and it is our collective responsibility to provide equal opportunities and rights for everyone. Priestley wrote the play as an allegorical condemnation of our society, aiming to inspire a sense of collective responsibility. In 1945, after a surprising landslide victory for Labour, the government started taking more responsibility for its people, e.g social security, the NHS etc. Today, responsibility for each other and the consequences of our actions are lessons we still need to learn; although the context has changed, the message is still very relevant. Priestley wrote this play to inspire others to change so the loops of responsibility spiral ever outwards; responsibility for our lives and the lives of friends and family and the lives of those we have never even met.

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