

## Support for writing about drama as drama on GCSE and International GCSE with 'An Inspector Calls' examples

The document below provides some examples of how literary terminology for drama can be used to write about the play 'An Inspector Calls'. The examples for the play are interspersed between the general guidance notes on writing on drama. Key terminology for writing on drama is highlighted.

### Some key questions to ask about the drama you're studying

- Plot structure: Chronological or non-chronological order? 3 or 5 acts? Resolution or cliff-hanger?

'An Inspector Calls' is written in three acts. Priestley cleverly **structures** the acts so that they end on **gripping cliff-hangers**. There is also a **final climax** and then a twist at the very end. This use of structure helps to build up **dramatic tension** and keep the audience gripped until the very end.

- Layered central conflict: What happens to the main character (protagonist)? Who or what do they come into conflict with? How do they deal with this? Do they succeed?

The **major conflict** is Eva Smith/Daisy Renton's death in which the entire Birling family is implicated. In the **rising action**, the Inspector (or protagonist) arrives, asking questions about a girl's suicide and their culpability in her downfall. In the **dramatic climax** Eric is revealed to be the father of Eva's unborn child.

Priestley shows the conflict in generations: the older generation are arrogant and controlling, as they want to influence the younger generation. Priestley suggests the older generations are overconfident, particularly the men, which causes conflict between Mr Birling and Eva Smith when she asks for more money, and Eric and his father when Eric refuses to be like his father.

- Multi-layered, self-conflicted characters: What other characters (or adversaries) are introduced? How do they interact/ conflict with the protagonist? Are they a dramatic foil for the protagonist? If so, who wins? Do they have inner problems/conflicts of their own? If so, do these affect the action / success of the protagonist?

The Inspector takes on the role of the protagonist: an **omniscient** (all-knowing), moral force for good. Priestley presents his character like an avenging angel. Socialist values are channelled through the Inspector and Priestley uses him as a catalyst for change in upper class perceptions of responsibility.

Mr Birling is the **dramatic foil** for the Inspector. He has made himself very wealthy by being a 'hard-headed' businessman but is uncaring and pompous. He is an active member of the community in Brumley and thinks that he might be in the running for a knighthood but does

nothing for the poorer people. At the start of the play, he comes across as being arrogant and competes with the Inspector for power.

Mrs Birling is a capitalist and a snob who values social class above all else. She is an ignorant character, who doesn't think there are any problems in her family and struggles to believe that Eric drinks heavily or that he is the father of Eva's child.

Sheila Birling is Arthur and Sybil's daughter and is in her early twenties. At the start of the play, she is celebrating her engagement to Gerald Croft and she is a giddy, naïve and childish young lady. Her use of her **idiolect** 'mummy' at the beginning of the play shows her dependence and childish nature towards her parents. As the play progresses the **infantile language** is used less until the audience hear 'mother'. But she is used to represent the younger generation who are beginning to question the capitalistic and uncaring nature of their parents. Priestley gives hope that the younger generation may become the catalyst for change.

Eric is the Birlings' son and is in his early twenties, he is described as being 'not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive'. In other words, he lacks confidence. At points in the play, he tries to stand up to his father but is talked down. He is presented as an uncommendable, slightly drunk and uncomfortable character and this is shown when at the start of the play he suddenly laughs for no apparent reason – "I just had to laugh". He too, though, begins to realise that things need to change in both his family and society when he is forced to face his guilt over Eva/Daisy's pregnancy and subsequent death.

Gerald Croft is described as 'an attractive chap about thirty, rather too manly to be a dandy but very much the easy well-bred young man-about-town'. Mr Birling is very pleased that Gerald is getting engaged to Sheila because his family are upper-class business owners: Mr Birling hopes they can join forces in business. Unlike Sheila and Eric, he has no conscience about his treatment Eva/Daisy once he discovers that the Inspector is not real and is happy to carry on living as he did as long as his reputation is still intact.

- Disguise / deceit: Are the characters reliable or do they deceive others and the audience? Does the playwright use the theme of appearance versus reality to create dramatic tension in the plot? Does the playwright use dramatic irony so that the audience knows more about the characters' motives and feelings than the protagonist? Do we trust the protagonist or is the audience manipulated?

The Inspector **acts as Priestley's voice** to point out the flaws in the family. The Inspector shows the consequences of lies and secrecy and how it had an impact on Eva Smith as well the family's relationships.

Mrs Birling lies about recognising Eva's photo then she says she got the truth out of Eva. This shows that Mrs Birling wants to avoid saying she refused Eva help based on prejudice so as to avoid public scandal.

Gerald's behaviour is far from honourable: he is manipulative and calculating, and was having an affair whilst with Sheila. He has little respect for women. He gives them promises

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then disposes of them when he's finished with them. He is like a young version of Mr Birling - the son that Mr Birling had always wished for. It could be suggested that it was his betrayal of Daisy, to maintain his respected exterior, that placed her in a highly vulnerable position. Gerald's response to the death of Eva Smith suggests that he is perhaps shocked by his own behaviour but he is not changed by the Inspector's visit.

- Unexpected Complications/ outcomes: Does the play end as we expect or is there a turn in events? In a 5 act play this usually happens in Act 4 so that either the conflicts are resolved or left unresolved in Act 5. Does any character change or go through an epiphany which allows the problems to be resolved? Are there any reunions or revelations which allow reconciliation?

There are many **twists in the plot** as past secrets and actions are revealed. The arrival of the Inspector in Act 1, disturbing the Birlings' engagement party is unexpected and many other things are discovered throughout Acts 2 to 4 which cause conflict and build up dramatic tension: Sheila learns that Gerald was having an affair and lied to her about where he was last summer; Mrs Birling learns that Eric was the father of Eva/Daisy's baby; they all learn that their combined actions led to the death of a young girl.

In Act 5, the Birlings are relieved to find out that the 'Inspector' was not real and no-one had died. This **lowers tension** until the unexpected **final twist** when Mr Birling receives a phone call from which he learns that a young woman has just died at the infirmary in a suspected suicide, and that a real Inspector is on his way to ask questions about a young girl's suicide, which leaves the play on a **cliff-hanger**.

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## **Dramatic Techniques**

### **Dramatic Irony**

Occurs when the audience knows a secret, but the characters in a play do not. Therefore, the words or actions of a character carry a special meaning for the audience but are understood differently by the character. The characters are blind to facts, but the audience is not.

### **Dramatic Tension**

Dramatic tension is a state of uncertainty and lack of knowledge, sometimes also referring to the state of waiting. Tension creates a calculated vagueness over the outcome, an uncertain expectation of an event.

### **Dramatic pauses and cliff-hanger**

Dramatic pauses in dialogue create tension for the audience. Cliff-hangers are used not only to build drama, but to give the audience space to contemplate and question their own actions, and opinions on the actions of the characters. For example, in "An Inspector Calls" the ending is unresolved.

### **Dramatic Conflict**

Dramatic conflict is a situation in which characters are involved in conflicts that solicit the audience's empathetic involvement in their predicament.

**Paradox**

Is a device used to attract the audience's attention. It is a statement that seems contradictory or absurd, but well-founded and true at the same time.

**Soliloquy**

Is a speech given by a character in a play when the speaker is alone. This is presented to inform the audience of what is happening in the mind of a character and to give information about the action of the play.

**Pathetic Fallacy**

Is a device used by writers whereby nature mirrors the political condition of society or the characters. Pathos is a situation that elicits pity from the audience.

**Aside**

A speech made by an actor DIRECTLY TO THE AUDIENCE, but seemingly to himself or herself. It is always a true reflection of the character's thoughts. Its function is to reveal character.

**Foreshadowing**

A hint or warning of things to come, making specific events in the plot seem more probable as they unfold.

**Flashback**

A flashback interrupts the chronological sequence, the front-line action or "present" line of the story, to show an audience a scene that unfolded in the past.

**Imagery**

Using images to describe or compare something, so that the audience forms a picture in their mind.

**Dramatic foil**

A dramatic foil, or foil character, is a character with qualities that highlight another character's (usually but not necessarily the protagonist's) quality or qualities, usually by having contrasting qualities.

**Hamartia**

Is an ancient Greek theatre term meaning the error, frailty, mistaken judgment or misstep through which the fortunes of the hero of a tragedy are reversed. Hamartia must express itself through a definite action, or, failure to perform a definite action. Hamartia can result from bad judgment, a bad character, ignorance, inherited weakness, or accident. This error does not always result from an error in character.

**Tragic hero**

The tragedy is about waste, a waste of people and a waste of unrealized potential. Hamlet has high individual potential, which is wasted by an individual weakness that significantly affects others. If Hamlet's potential had been realized, he would have been a hero. Unrealized potential is the difference between a successful versus an unsuccessful quest. Often a tragic hero is battling against his fate which he cannot overcome.

**Nemesis**

Is applied to justice, which comes about when an evil act brings about its own punishment and poetic justice prevails.

## Epiphany

A moment of sudden and great revelation or realisation which leads to a change in viewpoint or character.

## Dramatic Techniques used in 'An Inspector Calls'

In Priestley's 'An Inspector Calls' **dramatic irony, sound and lighting effects and cliff-hangers** are some of the techniques used by Priestley to involve the audience whilst conveying his concerns and put his political message across. **The cliff-hangers are used not only to build drama**, but to give the audience space to contemplate and question their own actions, and opinions on the actions of the characters.

## Dramatic Irony

In Act 1, Priestley uses **dramatic irony** to make Mr Birling look unreliable and foolish as he is wrong about the Titanic, war and labour. Priestley does this to make the audience distrust Mr Birling.

**Dramatic irony** is also displayed in Act 2 when Mrs. Birling condemns Eva Smith for not making better decisions for herself, and for not getting assistance from the father of her child when all the time she is unknowingly criticising her own son: 'I blame the young man who was the father of the child she was going to have. If, as she said, he didn't belong to her class, and was some drunken young idler, then that's all the more reason why he shouldn't escape'. The audience realise that she is describing Eric. This also highlights her hypocrisy to the audience: we know that she would not apply the same standards to her own family.

## Dramatic Tension

Throughout the play Eva Smith/ Daisy is a faceless character: we are never fully shown who she is and only hear about fragments of her life. In this way Priestley **builds dramatic tension** and mystery, making the audience visualise her for themselves.

**Dramatic tension is built up** over Eric's involvement with Eva/Daisy: first, we learn of Eric's relations with Eva Smith and her pregnancy, then Eric's theft of money and Mr Birling's angry reaction. Finally, we see **the tension culminate** in Eric's explosive outburst when he learns of his mother's involvement and refusal to help the girl.

## Contrasts and Juxtaposition

The Inspector is the opposite or **dramatic foil** of Mr Birling. They have contrasting views of society and political values, and compete for power and control of events.

Priestley uses **juxtaposition** (contrasting viewpoints) to illustrate Sheila's socialist tendencies when she openly questions her father. She says 'but these girls aren't just cheap labour – they're people' highlighting that she is adopting a humanist point of view whereby she understands that girls like Eva Smith are also valuable members of society.

The contrasting role of the inspector acts as a **catalyst** for action in the play. The juxtaposition of his character and motive as an interloper in the Birling household creates

more **dramatic tension** as he forces each individual to face their guilt. He is often seen to be speeding the action in the play up and forcing the confessions out of the other characters.

### **Stage Directions and Dialogue**

Stage directions are used by Priestley to give us more information about the characters and the situation. Stage directions can also be found before the characters' dialogue to show the way they speak and their mood/manner.

Stage directions are **used as a dramatic device** to show the importance of the Inspector – he enlightens the characters and the audience about what has been going on in the characters' lives and is presented as a powerful figure throughout the play. His presence immediately has the power to change the light and cheerful atmosphere of the Birlings' dinner party. The lighting changes from "pink and intimate" to "brighter and harder" once the Inspector arrives.

Priestley also uses the following language devices to show the audience the way characters react and behave to the Inspector's interrogation of them: **dramatic pauses, repetition, gasps and interruptions.**

Priestley uses stage directions in Act 1 to show that Sheila speaks to Mrs Birling in a 'half serious, half playful' manner when she says 'I don't believe I will' to her mother's advice on men. This **foreshadows** her surprise later in the play when it is revealed that Gerald had an affair with Eva.

### **Symbolism**

Priestley uses many of the characters symbolically in the play. For example, Eva Smith is used as a symbol to represent the working- class women (and men) who are exploited by capitalists like the Birling family.

The Inspector, **as Priestley's mouthpiece**, is a symbol of Socialism – he wants everyone to look after each other and to view community as very important. He is sent to uncover the family's wrongdoings and to make them see that they should take responsibility for others. Priestley uses Eric to symbolise redemption; no matter the sins he committed in the past, he has the capacity to change and improve. Priestley presents Eric in a sympathetic light through Eric's opposition to Mr Birling's capitalist and individualistic attitudes.

Eva Smith symbolises the suffering of the lower-classes. She is the victim of a patriarchal society and the class inequality which was apparent throughout the social hierarchy of 1912 Britain.

Objects are also used symbolically. The 'sharp ring of the doorbell' is used to **increase the tension** and as **an abrupt prelude** to the inspector's arrival. It also represents the contrast of two political ideologies. Birling is in the middle of his speech expounding the virtues of

Capitalism when the door-bell rings which could symbolise that his views and ideologies are just about to be shaken.

The port and whisky offered to the Inspector by Mr Birling are symbols of their affluent and extravagant lifestyle. When the Inspector rejects them it is symbolic of him rejecting the Birlings' capitalist life style.

The gruesome death of Eva is also symbolic: it shows the horrific truth of how all working-class people are treated and exploited by capitalism therefore providing the audience with the idea that anyone and everyone could be an 'Eva Smith' within a violent conflicted society which cares only for profit.

### **Imagery / Metaphor**

Priestley **uses imagery in the dialogue** used by certain characters. Priestley communicates imagery through the Inspector to create shock. 'Burnt her inside out' to describe Eva/Daisy's painful suicide creates an image that distresses Sheila along with the audience.

The Inspector's final speech uses **imagery** from the Bible. The most important **metaphor** Priestley creates is that of the Old Testament: if we do not learn our lesson it will be taught through 'fire and blood and anguish'. Spoken by the Inspector in his final speech and repeated by Sheila it represents a breakdown in society, whether it be through hatred, war or divine intervention and leaves the audience with the message that they too have a responsibility to play their role in society.

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### **Dramatic structure**

The structuring of the action is commonly described using the following terms: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement.

#### **Exposition (or Introduction)**

The exposition brings the audience up to date as quickly as possible, giving the setting (year, time of day, locale, etc.), the atmosphere (mood) and the main characters.

#### **Rising action (or complication)**

Rising action in literature refers to all the events that happen in a story on the way to the climax. The rising action pushes the plot along, building tension to keep us invested in the story as it moves forward. It is the second stage in the plot, after the initial exposition.

#### **Dramatic Climax**

This is the highest point of tension or drama in the plot. Often, climax is also when the main problem of the story is faced and solved by the main character or protagonist.

**Falling action (or second complication: return or fall?)**

Falling action is everything that takes place immediately after the climax. The purpose of falling action is to bring the story from climax to a resolution. This is the point where the outcome is decided: does the conflict get resolved or is there a second complication which will lead to tragedy?

**Denouement**

The final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved.

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**Types of Drama****Tragedy**

A type of drama of human conflict which ends in defeat and suffering. Often the main character (dignified, noble) has a tragic flaw (weakness of character, wrong judgment) that leads to their destruction. Sometimes the conflict is with forces beyond the control of the character – fate, or evil in the world.

**Comedy**

Comedy is a genre of dramatic performance having a light or humorous tone that depicts amusing incidents and in which the characters ultimately triumph over evil/adversity.

**Farce**

Farce is a comedy that seeks to entertain an audience through situations that are highly exaggerated, extravagant, ridiculous, absurd, and improbable.

**Melodrama**

A sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions. It may be interspersed with songs and orchestral music accompanying the action.

**Romantic drama**

Romantic drama is a genre that explores the complex side of love. The plot usually centres around an obstacle that is preventing love between two people. The obstacles in romantic drama can range from a family's disapproval, to forbidden love, to one's own psychological restraints.

**Tragicomedy**

A tragicomedy might be a serious drama interspersed with funny moments that periodically lighten the mood, or a drama that has a happy ending. Shakespeare's later plays began as tragedies then turned out happily as a reconciliation occurred in acts 3 or 4.

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**Writing about Drama**

When writing about a play you should consider:

**Characterisation**

How the characters have been created and what they might represent/symbolise. How do they introduce and develop the main themes of the play?

How might they represent the playwright's views?

Which do we empathise with?

### **Setting**

Where is the play set? Does it have multiple settings which contrast each other or is the action set in one location?

What might these settings symbolise? Has the playwright used pathetic fallacy to make the settings reflect the moods / feelings of the characters and events?

How does the staging/ lighting affect the atmosphere? How does this change throughout the play?

### **Stage Directions**

Has the playwright used detailed stage directions? If so, what do they tell the audience about the characters and the way they speak/act?

Has the playwright used minimal stage directions so that the audience can judge for themselves?

What do the stage directions tell us about the way the characters interact (entrances and exits/asides to the audience/tone and mood)?

How does the playwright's use of sound effects, lighting and staging affect the dramatic tension on stage?

### **Dialogue**

How do the characters speak and how does this affect the way the audience judges them. For example, do they use dialogue to gain power/ control over others?

How do characters interact with each other? What tone or mood do they use? Do they use any gestures / facial expressions which tell us what they are thinking?

What type of language do they use: formal, colloquial, do they have an accent/dialect (non-standard speech)?

Do they use imagery, sarcasm, hyperbole (exaggeration for effect), humour or double entendre (implied meaning)? How does the way they speak affect the way other characters and the audience view them?

**See if you can answer the questions above about "An Inspector Calls". This will help you to write effective revision notes on the play linked to the dramatic devices used by the playwright.**