

An Inspector Calls

Explore how Priestley presents power in *An Inspector Calls*.

In the play, *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley primarily presents the theme of power through the words and actions of his characters. He constructs the wealthy Birling family and, to a certain extent, the Inspector, to show audiences how power needs to be handled carefully as it can destroy everyone's lives. He clearly shows how the Birling family ruin the lives of the less powerful and privileged, but also how their misuse of power destroys them too.

The first powerful character we are introduced to is Arthur Birling who describes himself to his family as a 'hard-headed, practical man of business'. Priestley uses this description and the alliterative 'hard-headed' to show the audience his view of the bourgeoisie and turns Mr Birling into a representation or caricature of capitalism. Mr Birling shows his 'hard-headedness' at work as he is the owner of a large factory and can therefore exploit his workers. He is always demanding 'lower costs and higher prices' and this shows that he wants to exploit his workers just so he can make more money and therefore rise in power and beat his rival firm, 'Crofts'. He does not think about the impact of his workers and their lives in this rivalry but instead worries about his own power and status as he wants the factory to succeed so he can gain a knighthood. He takes pride in his 'practical' and 'hard-headed' nature and refuses to let emotions influence any of his decisions.

By making Arthur Birling this way, Priestley shows power as a negative, corrupting factor. He is a purely practical man and is terrified of losing power over his workers and his family as it will mean he loses his social status which is his whole life. He explains to the Inspector that he had to fire Eva Smith as she asked for a pay-rise and had 'far too much' to say for herself. This could be seen as an abuse of power and an unhealthy way of trying to retain his power over his workers by setting his wages however he wants. When he is questioned by the Inspector about this, he becomes very defensive and refuses to take any responsibility for the horrible death of Eva Smith.

Although Arthur Birling is very strongly opinionated and has strong, capitalist views about how to run a business and control his workers, it can be argued that the Inspector is just as powerful, but in a different way. Whereas Mr Birling can measure his power by his social status and the amount of money he has, The Inspector is always in control of the room and controls and manipulates people with his powerful words and ordered thinking. From the minute he walks into the Birling home, The Inspector disrupts and controls their lives and their conversations. He has the power of making the family talk in the order he wants them to and make them feel uncomfortable. When they try to interrupt, he tells them sharply that they will take 'one line of inquiry at a time'. He also seems to be omniscient in that he knows Eva is dead before it is actually revealed to the audience and seems to know exactly what each character did to her before he questions them and forces them to give them the answer he wants to hear by using short, direct words at the end of his questions such as 'well'?

The fact that he knows all of these things and the fact that it is revealed at the end of the play that he is not a real inspector leads the audience to believe that he may be a supernatural being. This is further emphasised by his name 'Inspector Goole' which Mrs Birling even spells out 'G-O-O-L-E' so that the audience are left in no doubt about the potential supernatural or 'ghoul' like nature of the inspector. The Inspector has all the power in the play in that he essentially dictates the pace of it. Aside from Mrs Birling, he makes each character feel some sort of remorse, especially Sheila, Eric and Gerald. He ends up having the power to impose his views on Sheila as well, almost making her a surrogate inspector.

It is interesting that Priestley allows two very different characters – with very opposing views – to be powerful in his play. While Mr Birling has the view that 'a man should look after himself and his own', the Inspector has the view that 'we are all part of one body'. Mr Birling therefore has the idea that power can only rest with an individual whereas The Inspector suggests that everyone should work together and every man should be equal to each other. Even though The Inspector himself is a powerful man, he exerts that power for good in that he wants the whole family to take responsibility for what they have done.

The last character I want to focus on in relation to power is Mrs Birling. Whereas it is implied that Mr Birling has worked his way up the social classes through his work and through exerting his power, his wife was born into power and wealth. She uses her perceived social superiority to try and undermine the Inspector and feels he should not be in her house questioning *her*. She calls his questioning 'a trifle impatient' and agrees that his manner was 'so rude – and assertive' which indicates that she expects to be treated differently from everyone else and is not used to be questioned at all.

In the same way that she looks down on the Inspector, she looks down on those of lower class and asserts her power over them. Much like her husband, she does not show any empathy towards anyone she considers to be beneath her and even claims that they have no emotions when she accuses Eva of 'claiming elaborate and fine feelings and scruples' which were 'simply absurd in a girl of her position'. This shows that she did not respect the lower classes, but liked to have power over them as she is head of a charity and in some ways, holds their fate in her hands. She abuses her power as the Chair of the women's charity by declining cases that she doesn't seem worthy. She refuses to help Eva Smith just because she had called herself 'Mrs Birling' and she saw this as a case of 'gross impertinence' and this 'prejudiced' her against the case. However, unlike the others, she is not repentant and even tells the Inspector that 'you have no power to make me change my mind'. However, her children and the audience can clearly see this as an abuse of her power and that it was another element which caused the death of Eva Smith.

To conclude, Priestley uses his characters to show how power is corrupting and it should be used for good. The whole of the Birling family and Gerald grossly abused their power and Priestley was trying to make unsympathetic towards the Capitalist ideas they represent as well as making both his

characters, and the audience aware that misusing power can have major consequences. (1200 words)