

How does Priestley present the theme of power in *An Inspector Calls*?

Priestley presents the theme of power in a number of ways throughout his play. He uses his characters, some key themes and the setting to highlight the importance of power in his play. The play was first performed in 1946 following the Second World War. The play was set in 1912, a time preceding the First World War and a time when the concept of war was daunting and terrifying. Priestley wrote the play with intentions of exposing the social divide and the lack of responsibility within their society.

The theme of power is explored through the setting in *An Inspector Calls*. The play is set in Brumley, a fictional town in the Midlands. Brumley has a mayor which gives the impression that it is a town of some importance. The town is a very industrial location with a lot of factory workers. Priestley uses the town as a way to explore the theme of power. Priestley shows that the town is run by factory owners such as Mr Birling and the owners are very powerful. Mr Birling is a ruthless owner who refuses to raise the wages of his workers. This is shown when he says 'if you give in to them, some people will ask for the world'. This shows how he did not want to give anything extra to anyone in case they asked for more. He is the only authority in the factory which shows how powerful he was. The town of Brumley also shows the theme of power through the hypocrisy of its leaders. Gerald talks about the Alderman Hoggarty. He is a respected figure who has power but is also known as a 'notorious womaniser'. Like Birling, we can see again how the rich and power use their power for their own gains and do not deserve that power.

The theme of power plays a substantial role in the plot of the play. The theme is explored through the characters of Sheila and Mrs Birling and their treatment of Eva Smith. Eva is the victim of the play and we can see how all the characters mis-use their power and this leads to her suicide. After Mr Birling fires her for demanding an increase in wage, she was employed in a dress shop where Sheila and Mrs Birling were regular customers. Priestley explores the theme of power in the scene where Sheila gets Eva fired. Sheila believes that Eva is laughing at her and uses her wealth and status to threaten the store. Sheila's ability to threaten the store come from the power her family has in the community and the wealth and stature that power has produced. Sheila threatens to close their account with the store if Eva is not fired. Mrs Birling also uses her power against Eva (who was then Daisy Renton). Daisy goes to Mrs Birling's charity in order to ask for help as she is homeless and pregnant. Daisy uses the father's name, Birling, when she presents herself. This disgusts Mrs Birling and she turns her away. Mrs Birling exclaims about Eva/Daisy - 'As if a girl like that would ever refuse money!' - and refuses to take any responsibility for her part in Daisy's death. This is a clear indication that Mrs Birling looks down on the 'ordinary' people and this is a way that Priestley is able to explore power and, more particularly, the vulnerability of ordinary people when those in power abuse their power.

The theme of power is also explored through the theme of wealth in the play. Power comes to those who are wealthy and this is explored by Priestley. The Birling family are even affected by the different social classes and looked down on. The Croft family are not present at Gerald's and Sheila's engagement dinner. This is because the Croft family were far more wealthy and powerful than the Birlings. We are told by Mr Birling when he says 'I get the feeling that your parents think you may have done better socially' to Gerald. This is evidence of even the powerful are not powerful enough for some people. The theme of wealth is also used when The Inspector has finished talking to the Birling family. Mr Birling says 'I would give thousands' which shows how Mr Birling wants to use his wealth to cover up the pain that his family have caused to the girl. It is also evident when Mr Birling only begins to get worried about the situation after the mention of a public scandal. Mr Birling is

worried about his image and his social class as well as the potential Knighthood he may receive. The attempted use of wealth as well as the protection of social class is used by Priestley to explore the effects of power on people and their attitudes.

Priestley also explores the theme of power through gender. There are instances in the play where gender affects the power of people. Gerald Croft is the 'well bred man about town'. In his eyes he saves Eva Smith and the play even shows that Priestley sympathises with Gerald. However, when Gerald has treated Eva well, she feels that she owes him something and therefore, seeing as she is not wealthy, she feels she has to sleep with him as this is the only thing a poor woman like her can offer a rich man. Eric Birling is also used to explore the theme of power through gender. Eric is often drunk and even admits to the Inspector that 'I've had a few drinks, including rather a lot of champagne'. Eric uses his gender and power to sleep with Daisy/Eva as she was in no position to say no. Daisy has been oppressed her entire time in Brumley and hence lets Eric sleep with her. The theme of power through gender is even explored in the Birling mansion. The women are ordered off into the drawing room so the men can talk. Sheila and Mrs Birling are accustomed to this and make no complaint. This indicates that men had more power in society than women do. It has even become a customary procedure due to the lack of voice that the women had in society.

To conclude, Priestley presents the theme of power through all of the aspects of the play. Priestly uses the town of Brumley, the characters and gender to show how there are number of different types of power. Some, such as the Birling family, misuse and abuse their power which causes women like Eva Smith to suffer and feel powerless. **[1097 words]**