



Blurb

John Poynton Priestley (1894-1984). A patriotic socialist passionately convinced of the need for social change to benefit poor. During World War 2, his weekly radio shows were highly influential. Inspector Calls was written in 1945.

Background Context

Set in 1912. Rigid class/ gender boundaries ruling class saw no need to change confidence in an 'invincible' attitude. World War 1 on the horizon. Titanic about to set sail. Industrial revolution. Time of great prosperity. Strong distinction between upper / lower classes. Women 'subservient' to men. All a well woman could do was marry with poor women seen as cheap labour. There was a dangerous level of tension between the big European countries in 1912 resulting in the First World War(1914- 1918) costing millions of lives. After the war many British people questioned the leadership given by the upper classes during the war.

Class distinction reduced by the two world wars. World War 1 (1914-1918) & Second World War (1939-1945). After 1918 came a slump, lasting through the 1930's. A General Strike in 1926- 3 million workers stopped working with important industries grinding to a halt .In 1928 all men & women over 21 got the right to vote There had been a global economic slump from 1930 known as the Depression that hit many British Industries leading to greater unemployment & many workers facing terrible poverty. A great desire for social change with most class & gender divisions breached. Millions of people from all classes had fought for Britain & afterwards people wanted to make a better society. The world wars made people question the social structure. Socialism & other Left wing ideas which call for the more equal sharing out of wealth & power became more popular than the Right wing that favoured private ownership & wealth.

Written in 1945.

Priestley set the play when he did at the start of the 20th century to show that a lot had changed between 1912 & 1945 but also shows that many things hadn't improved.

Class Structure

Many things contributed to what class you were in, but it mainly came down to money.

Working Class – Had all the hardest jobs & little money.

Eva/Daisy struggled through life, doing tough jobs, only just earning enough to survive.

Middle Class – Owned factories or were professionals (e.g. lawyers) they had plenty of money & control.

The Birlings own a family business & are wealthy, able to live very comfortably.

Upper Class – Inherited loads of land & money. Were often Lords & Ladies

Gerald Croft's family own land & are socially better than Arthur's. inheriting money had a higher status than trade.

Priestly portrays the upper classes as having a limited sense of social responsibility for those less well off, either didn't know, didn't want to know or didn't care. They overlooked problems of

Prostitution – "I see no point in mentioning the subject" says Mr Birling

Alcoholism - "you don't mean Alderman Meggarty?" Says Mrs Birling

Womanising – "It isn't true" says Mrs Birling when Eric's habit is revealed.

It was easier to ignore unpleasant things, happy living in ignorance.



Films such as Back to the Future, use the idea of intervention by a superior being to bring change to lives of others affecting what has happened in the past. A Christmas Carol shows the miser Scrooge given the opportunity both to look back on his past life & forward to the future so that he is able to change his ways to avoid the tragic consequences of his meanness.



Dramatic form

Detective Play or Whodunit – A novel, play etc. concerned with crime, usually a murder committed by one of a group of people. The culprit discovered by a detective, who uncovers clues & unravels the mystery with the audience trying to solve it along the way.

Morality Play – Is a dramatized allegory (fancy word for a story where characters & events represent a deeper or moral lesson) in which the audience would learn a simple message in terms from right or wrong. Originally written in the Middle Ages they were religious & taught people against the dangers of sin. An Inspector Calls moral judge isn't God but an Inspector, Priestley making his play 'secular' (not religious) but follows the same ideas of pointing out people's sins & getting them to confess & repent.

Dramatic devices

Stage direction / The Inspector – Inspector speaks carefully, weightily. Makes him slightly menacing upsetting the characters & makes the audience interested. Keeping the audience in suspense, creating tension. Also the positioning of the Inspector, e.g. blocking the photo.

Timing – The arrival of the Inspector, interrupting Mr Birling's speech that people should look after themselves & the community nonsense of looking after others. The pace of the Inspector's investigation, & in the ringing of the phone.

Lighting - Opening act the lighting is pink & intimate which clearly points to the dinner celebration to mark the engagement making it informal, friendly & relaxed. Creating a false sense of security. This makes the Inspector's entrance more dynamic. The lighting changing to brighter & harder, changing the whole mood.

Sound Effect – Sharp ring of the doorbell interrupts Mr Birling's solemn speech about community. Pointing towards Priestley's concerns about the attitude of 'people like' Mr Birling when he stubbornly insists "a man has to mind his own business & look after himself & his own-and-" Interrupting Mr Birling mid-sentence as though literally stop him promoting such a prejudiced & irresponsible argument forcing the speech & his views upon the other characters.. "you youngsters" (the young).

Phone ringing

Mr Birling is interrupted in his final speech as mocks the younger generation who had changed their view. Ringing sharply there is a moment of complete silence. Mr Birling answers, putting the phone down slowly panic stricken. "Fire & blood & anguish" is the call due to Mr Birling's non changing view.

Themes

Social responsibility, power, morality. A need for society to change. love & time

It emphasises the need for future generations to act & prevent further bloodshed. It shows that everyone is part of a community, who are responsible for each other. To warn against the selfish attitude of capitalist society to make people think about their actions & the consequences they have on others.

The play also presents a variety of thoughts on love, the nature & different people's interpretation. Sheila & Gerald appear to be in love & seem happy. After each has confessed their behaviour towards Eva/Daisy, Sheila realises that they don't really know each other & that trust is essential in a loving relationship. Mr Birling's attitude towards love is somewhat different, seeing it as a convenient way to progress up the social ladder. Making you wonder if love played a part in his marriage. Gerald & Eric both had a relationship with Eva/Daisy though admitted neither loved her & was merely a physical attraction. Eva/Daisy took up through necessity with Eric but felt a genuine love for Gerald .The Inspector preached love, for people to love one another, this form of love the true 'charity'. Something Mrs Birling although basking in her 'charity' work had no true care in her heart. Priestly was fascinated by theories of 'time'. The play set in 1912 & played to an audience coming out of the Second World War. At the end of the play we are left with a sense that the events will start all over again & whether the characters will act differently. The Inspector arriving before the suicide is a reality. The reflections on the past & possibilities of the future highlight the importance to care for each other. The Inspector's knowledge of each character's past & the events before they happen give him a mystical unworldly quality. The Inspectors departure leaves the characters free to decide their future with the cycle starting all over again.

Naturalistic Play – Is where the playwright Priestley attempts to give a very detailed depiction of 'real life' on the stage, especially with regard to speech, costume & sets. Naturalistic drama often provides detailed & fully researched investigations into unexpected corners of society.

Well-made Play – A play that exhibits a neatness of plot & smooth functioning exactness of action, with all its parts fitting together precisely. An Inspector Calls works through an interlocking series of unexpected disclosures, leading up to a final revelation that is almost a trick ending.

Language Techniques

Dramatic irony – The audience knowing more than the characters on stage. Mr Birling – "Titanic unsinkable" & "isn't a chance of war".(6-7)

The audience experiencing war/losses, Priestley makes the audience feel hostile/resentful towards Mr Birling & side with the Inspector.

Mr Birling also talks about getting a "knighthood" unless there is a "scandal" (8) He jokes 'complacently (as if nothing will happen) but the title of the play reveals to audience that something will, an Inspector will call.

Euphemism – Unpleasant, embarrassing or frightening facts or words can be concealed behind a 'euphemism – a word less blunt or offensive.

"Went on the streets" where she led "another kind of life" with the "women of the town" -- meaning she became a prostitute. "Condition" – meaning pregnant. "Girl of that sort" – meaning lower class girl.

Imagery – Language that creates a strong picture The inspector uses graphic imagery to shock "Burnt her inside out" (11) & "after several hours of agony"(17) creates an image that distresses both 'the young' Eric, Sheila & the audience.

The final speech uses imagery from the Bible. "We are members of one body" is an idea found in the Bible & the Inspector uses similar phrasing to suggest 'sacred' duty to care for one another.

The words "fire & blood & anguish" sound like the end of the world described in the Book of Revelation people are punished for their sins when "fire mingled with blood" rains down. This final speech contains a lot of imagery as Priestley wants the audience to remember it.

Coup de theatre – A sudden & spectacular turn of events in the plot of a play

Dialogue – speech & conversation between characters

Didactic – writing or speech intended to teach or instruct.

Hyperbole – a figure of speech in which emphasis is achieved by exaggeration.

Irony – this consists of saying one thing while you mean another, often through understatement, concealment or indirect statement.

Monologue – a lengthy speech by one person.

Polemic – A piece of writing expressing an argument about important social issues such as religion or politics.

Sarcasm – an extreme form of irony, usually intended to be hurtful.

The unities – In classical Greek drama, plays conformed to the unities of action & time – one complete action happening in a single day or night. The unity of place was added later.

Literary Terms

Thinking

1. How does Priestley show that tension is at the heart of the Birling family?
2. How does Priestley show that Eric and Sheila will become better people as a result of this event and Mr and Mrs Birling are stuck in their ways?
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4. Arthur 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?' How does Priestley present ideas about responsibility in An Inspector Calls?
5. Priestley criticises the selfishness of people like the Birling's. What methods does he use to present this selfishness?
6. How does Priestley present the change in Sheila during the course of the play An Inspector Calls? How do you think this change reflects some of Priestley's ideas?