



# AN INSPECTOR CALLS

## KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

**Context** – *An Inspector Calls* was written by J.B. Priestley, and was first performed in the UK in 1946. However, it is set in 1912.

**J.B. Priestley** – John Boynton Priestley was born in Yorkshire in 1894. He fought in the first world war and came very close to death on a couple of occasions. In the 1930s, Priestley became concerned with the effects of social inequality in Britain, and in 1942 set up a new political party, the Common Wealth Party. It merged with the Labour Party, and was integral in developing the welfare state.



**Pre and Post-War** – Before the First World War, there was deemed to be a general air of complacency regarding the prospect of any war taking place. There were strong distinctions between upper and lower classes, and women were subservient to men in society. After the Second World War ended in 1945, class distinctions had been greatly reduced by the two wars, and women had earned a more valued place in society (they had filled in for men whilst they were away at war). After 1945, there was a greater desire for social change.



**Realism and Postmodernism** – Many see *An Inspector Calls* as a play that combines contrasting styles. Certainly, it contains elements of both realism (popular early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) and postmodernism (which became popular later). The play features very real characters, speaking in common prose in a similar manner to dialogue in a novel. However, with the presence of the Inspector, Priestley introduces elements that are beyond rational reasoning and explanations.



**Socialism** – Socialism is an approach to economic and social systems that is characterised by social ownership, democratic control, and high levels of equity. Socialist regimes are generally concerned with ensuring that disparities between wealth and social status are erased across society. After the two World Wars, British society was far more open to socialist ideas. In *An Inspector Calls*, the Inspector harbours socialist attitudes.



**Social and Moral Responsibility** – Attitudes towards social and moral responsibility changed rapidly in the time between when the play was set (1912) and the time when the play was written (1946). In 1912, the general attitude of those with social and economic sway was towards looking after oneself and one's family. By the mid-1940s, however, Clement Atlee's Labour party won a landslide election, reflecting a wave of enthusiasm towards communal responsibility for everyone in society.



**The Titanic** – RMS Titanic was a British passenger liner that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in the morning hours of 15<sup>th</sup> April 1912. As around 1,500 people died, it was one of the deadliest commercial maritime disasters in modern history. The Titanic was designed to be the pinnacle of both safety and comfort, and due to its enormous size and quality was frequently labelled 'unsinkable.' In *An Inspector Calls*, Birling claims this, thus immediately losing respect from the audience.



### Main Characters – Consider what Priestley intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

**Arthur Birling** – Arthur is the patriarch of the Birling family. He is described as a 'portentous man in his early fifties.' His success as a businessman in the manufacturing industry allows the Birlings to live in upper-middle class comfort. He believes in capitalist principles and rejects socialist ideas of responsibility for one another in society. He considers his daughters engagement as good for business.

**Quote:** "You'll have a good laugh over it yet."

**Sybil Birling** – Sybil is the matriarch of the Birling family. She is often described as being a 'cold' character. It is suggested that Sybil comes from a family of higher social standing than Arthur, and at times she reminds him of proper social etiquette. She serves on a local committee to aid those in need, and seems primarily consumed with protecting the family's public image.

**Quote:** "They're over-tired. In the morning they'll be as amused as we are."

**The Inspector** – The Inspector is (apparently) a representative of the local police force, sent to investigate the events leading up to the suicide of a young woman, who went by the name of both Eva Smith and Daisy Renton. When speaking to the family, the Inspector seems to know the answers to each of the questions that he asks, and appears to offer them a socialist message. After he leaves, the family gather evidence that he does not actually serve on the force.

**Quote:** "We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other."

**Sheila Birling** – Sheila is the daughter of Arthur and Sybil. She is described as being 'in her early twenties' and is engaged to Gerald Croft. Sheila is a sensitive character, who shows a caring side, and thus she is devastated upon hearing about her family's role in the death of Eva Smith. She wonders how others in her family can simply go on as though nothing has happened.

**Quote:** "You're pretending everything's just as it was before."

**Eric Birling** – Eric is the son of Arthur and Sybil Birling, and the older brother of Sheila. Eric works part-time for the family business, and has a drinking problem that he attempts to hide from his family. When it is revealed that Eric has made a woman pregnant, outside of marriage, and has stolen from the family business, the family are finally forced to confront issues surrounding Eric.

**Quote:** "don't forget I'm ashamed of you as well – yes both of you."

**Gerald Croft** – Gerald is the fiancé of Sheila and the son of another prominent manufacturing family. Gerald's family have an elevated social status, and as a result Arthur worries that Gerald's family may feel that he is marrying beneath himself. Although the Inspector criticises Gerald's affair (and subsequent breakup) with Daisy, he seems to suggest that Gerald is the least morally culpable of the family for her death.

**Quote:** "I didn't feel about her as she felt about me."

### Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Responsibility and Guilt** – All of the family are forced to reflect upon their behaviour towards Eva Smith/ Daisy Renton, and consider how responsible they are for her death. Some characters admit responsibility and feel guilt more readily, such as Sheila and Eric. On the other hand, characters such as Arthur and Sybil are more unwilling to accept responsibility for the girl's demise.

**Age** – Priestley uses age to show the different prevailing attitudes in society at the time. The older characters represent an outdated way of thinking; characters such as Arthur and Sybil believe in only looking after themselves in their family. The younger characters (Sheila and Eric) represent new towards caring about others in society.



**Class and Gender** – Class and gender are also predominant themes in the novel. Eva Smith's position in society is severely weakened because she is from a lower class background and she is also a woman. Because of biases related to class and gender, Birling is dismissive of the hundreds of working class girls looking for a pay-rise, whilst Mrs Birling refers to her as 'a girl of that sort' in a derogatory manner.

**The Supernatural** – The presence of the Inspector weaves a supernatural element into the play. His surname (Goole) is certainly a play on the word 'ghoul' (a ghost). He is unheard of by other members of the police force, leading the characters to at first dismiss him as simply a hoaxer, yet he seems to have prior knowledge of the characters' actions, and foresees the suicide before it happens.



### Scene-by-Scene Summary – Alongside key quotations from each scene.

#### Beginning of Act I

The play begins in 1912, with a dinner at the Birling residence. Arthur leads a toast on the future marriage of his daughter, Sheila, to Gerald. Arthur is pleased that the marriage will bring his company closer together with Gerald's family's established company. Sheila lightly teases Gerald about his distant behaviour the summer before. Arthur explains that the world is in a good time, that talk of German aggression should be discounted, and that a new 'unsinkable' ship is being built. Privately after dinner, Arthur tells Gerald that he is up for a knighthood, which will nullify Gerald's mother's fears of him marrying down. Arthur then tells Eric and Gerald of his belief in looking after one's self and one's family – rejecting ideas of socialism. Edna enters and says that an Inspector wants to speak with them.

"I've learnt in the good hard school of experience – that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own"



#### End of Act I

The inspector introduces himself as Goole. Arthur declares that he has never heard of him before. The Inspector states that a girl named Eva Smith has committed suicide by drinking disinfectant. He shows Arthur alone a photograph of her. Arthur admits that he employed her two years before, but dismissed her for striking over wages. He then shows Sheila the photograph, who is shocked. She admits to getting the girl fired from her next job, at a clothes shop, out of jealousy. There she worked under the name Daisy Renton. Sheila is horrified. Gerald becomes aware that this is a girl that he had an affair with.

"Two hours ago a young woman died on the infirmary. She'd been taken there this afternoon because she'd swallowed a lot of strong disinfectant."



#### Beginning of Act II

As the Inspector speaks to Gerald and Sheila, Sybil enters and calls his questions 'impertinent.' Sheila warns Sybil not to fall into the trap of complacency with the Inspector, but Sybil warns her to be quiet. Sybil expresses that Eric has had too much to drink at dinner – to Sybil's embarrassment, Sheila and Gerald admit that this is a steady problem with Eric. The Inspector then questions Gerald, who reluctantly admits that he knows a Daisy Renton. He had protected her in a bar from a lecherous old man, and then put her up in a friend's lodgings. She became his mistress. Eventually it ended, and they lost contact. Sheila explains that she actually respects Gerald now, for telling the truth. However, she says they must start again in their relationship. Gerald is allowed to leave.

"I don't dislike you as I did half an hour ago, Gerald. In fact, in some odd way, I rather respect you more than I've ever done before."



#### End of Act II

The Inspector shows Sybil the photograph of the deceased woman – she lies and says that she does not know her. Sheila pleads with her to tell the truth. It emerges that Sybil refused to give the girl money in her role as a member of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation, out of 'impudence.' She had pretended that she was called 'Mrs Birling.' The Inspector reveals that she was looking for money as she was pregnant (not Gerald's baby). The girl eventually admitted that she was not married, and couldn't take money off the father, as she knew it was stolen. Under pressure from the Inspector, Sybil contends that the man should bear the responsibility of the girl's subsequent death. It is at this point that the other characters realise that Eric must in fact be the father. Sybil pauses in shock, seemingly wishing to retract her past statements. Eric enters the room, with all staring at him.

"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. He should be made an example of. If the girl's death is due to anybody, then it's due to him."



#### Beginning of Act III

Eric confesses that he was very drunk the night that he met the girl, and that he followed her home and convinced her to let him stay over. He began a relationship with her, and she fell pregnant. As she needed financial support, Eric swindled Arthur's company out of money. Arthur is extremely angry when he hears this. With the family now in a state of complete anguish, the Inspector goes through each of them, explaining that they all had a significant part to play in the girl's death. Before leaving, the Inspector states that all people should look out for one another if society is to survive. He notes that the Birlings and Gerald must now live with the repercussions of their actions for the rest of their lives, as recompense for Eva Smith/ Daisy Renton, who lost hers.

"We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and bloody and anguish."



#### End of Act III

Arthur says that Eric is predominantly at fault for the death of the girl, and he worries about the public scandal that will be generated. Eric and Sheila criticise Arthur for worrying about his knighthood when someone has died. In light of what Arthur was discussing before the Inspector came, they begin to suspect that he was a hoax. To Sheila and Eric, this is not important (their actions were still terrible) but to Arthur, it means everything (no public scandal). These suspicions are confirmed, when Gerald returns, having bumped into a police officer on the street – there is no Inspector Goole. Arthur then phones the hospital, who confirm that there has been no suicide. Arthur and Sybil delight in this, whilst their children are horrified that they have forgotten their behaviour (despite no one having actually died) so quickly. Just as Arthur is reveling in the fact that the others were all 'bluffed', the phone rings. A girl has just been transported to hospital, dead. She has committed suicide. An inspector is on the way to the house.

"Birling: (pointing to Eric and Sheila) Now look at the pair of them – the famous younger generation who know it all. And they can't even take a joke"



The telephone rings sharply. There is a moment's complete silence. Birling goes to answer it.//

### Priestley's Dramatic Devices

Priestley's Dramatic Devices		Form – The play fits into three possible forms.		
<b>Dramatic Irony</b>	Arthur Birling suggests that the <i>Titanic</i> is unsinkable, and yet the audience knows that it sank on its maiden voyage.	<b>Well-Made Play</b> -A popular type of drama from the 19 <sup>th</sup> Century -The events build to a climax -Primarily concerned with events that happened before the play -Plot is intricate and complex.	<b>Morality Play</b> -These were most popular during the 15 <sup>th</sup> and 16 <sup>th</sup> centuries -They taught the audience lessons that focused on the seven deadly sins. -Characters who committed these sins were punished.	<b>Crime Thriller</b> -As the name suggests, this involves a gripping tale based around a crime -The audience receives clues and must guess what has happened before the end. -All is revealed by the climax.
<b>Cliffhangers</b>	At the end of Act One, the Inspector appears and says 'Well?' to Gerald, leaving the audience to wonder how Gerald is implicated.			
<b>Stage Directions</b>	The precise directions detailing Gerald 'gravely' stating his involvement with Daisy Renton adds more detail to aid the actor's delivery.			
<b>Dramatic Tension</b>	The audience feels an increase in tension as they await information regarding how each character is implicated in Eva Smith's death.			