

While we wait... Vocabulary

Didactic	Assert social authority	Moral blindness	Supernatural forces intervening	Role-reversal
Morally repugnant	Socially vulnerable	Condemned	Subverted patriarchy	Hierarchical distinctions
Complicit	Dismissive	Compromising position	Rejection of materialistic values	Moralistic figure
Voice of judgement	Product of their parenting	Repentance	Insecure	Attempt to be assertive
Dramatic vehicle for critiquing...	Priestley's mouthpiece	Penitent	Emblematic	Microcosm

An Inspector Calls Revision

A Lesson for **IGCSE Literature in English**

Edexcel 4ET1

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Assessment Objectives

Assessment Objectives

- **AO1:** Demonstrate a close knowledge and understanding of texts, maintaining a critical style and presenting an informed personal engagement.
- **AO2:** Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects.

Past questions

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Past paper questions

An Inspector Calls, J B Priestley

EITHER

- 3 Mr Birling (talking about Eva/Daisy): 'She'd had a lot to say, I remember – far too much.'

What does the audience learn about Eva Smith/Daisy Renton from how other characters treat her in the play?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 3 = 30 marks)

OR

- 4 Explore the differences between the older and younger generations in *An Inspector Calls*.

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 4 = 30 marks)

Past paper questions

An Inspector Calls, J B Priestley

EITHER

- 3** How far do you agree with the view that the ending of *An Inspector Calls* is successful?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 3 = 30 marks)

OR

- 4** Sheila: 'He never seemed like an ordinary police inspector.'

How far do you agree with this view of the Inspector in the play?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 4 = 30 marks)

Past paper questions

An Inspector Calls, J B Priestley

EITHER

- 3** How does the character of Eric Birling change in *An Inspector Calls*?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 3 = 30 marks)

OR

- 4** 'Things are not always what they appear to be in the Birling household.'

Explore the theme of appearance and reality in the play.

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 4 = 30 marks)

Past paper questions

An Inspector Calls, J B Priestley

EITHER

- 3** Explore the significance of the title of the play, *An Inspector Calls*.

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 3 = 30 marks)

OR

- 4** Discuss the presentation of **one** character you sympathise with in the play.

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 4 = 30 marks)

Essay structure

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Option #1

- Introduction
- Before the Inspector comes,
- While the Inspector is there,
- After the Inspector has left,
- Conclusion

Option #2

- Introduction
- At first,
- Then,
- However,
- Conclusion

Option #3

- Introduction
- At first,
- Then,
- Ultimately,
- Conclusion

Context



Key context points:

- Capitalism versus socialism
- Post-war Britain
- The Labour party
- 1912 vs 1945

Capitalism & socialism

- Birling family represents capitalist values of individualism and profit: “a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his family” (Birling)
- Inspector embodies socialist ideals of collective responsibility – a mouthpiece for Priestley’s socialist values: “We are members of one body” (Inspector)
- Eva Smith symbolises exploitation of working class under capitalism
- Play critiques capitalist system and advocates for social reform following destruction of WW2

Post-war Britain

- Written in 1945, reflecting desire for social change after WWII
- Members of upper and working classes fought together side-by-side in war – increased sense of empathy
- Belief in the need for unity and rebuilding a fairer society
- Growing awareness of social inequalities
- Emphasises collective responsibility in rebuilding efforts

The Labour Party

- A more left-wing, socialist party
- Won landslide victory in 1945 general election
- Committed to creating a welfare state – housing, education, healthcare
- Established National Health Service in 1948 – free medical care at the point of use
- Introduced social reforms to reduce poverty and improve living conditions – built affordable social housing

1912 vs 1945



- A complacent 1912 vs a bleak yet hopeful 1945
- 1912 setting reflects rigid class structures of Edwardian era
- Set in 1912, shortly before the First World War, the play was a powerful warning to a 1945 audience still reeling from the horrors of the Second World War: we must learn from our mistakes or they will be repeated
- Similar to cyclical nature of Birlings' mistakes – older generation do not learn from their actions
- Inspector's words warn of violence and destruction: 'If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish'.

Priestley's intentions

Priestley's intentions

- Priestley's "An Inspector Calls" exposes **middle-class hypocrisy**, challenging the audience to confront their own moral failings.
- The play's central message emphasises **collective responsibility**, urging viewers to recognize their interconnectedness within society.
- By implicating nearly all characters, Priestley critiques society for **neglecting** its most vulnerable members.
- Eva Smith's **universal victimhood** symbolises the **systemic abuse of the working class** by those in power.
- Priestley's play serves as a **mirror**, compelling the audience to critically examine their own actions and social responsibilities.

Priestley's intentions

- Through the characters' transformations, Priestley illustrates the **potential for personal growth** and societal progress.
- Priestley uses the Inspector as a **mouthpiece** to advocate for collective social responsibility in post-war Britain.
- Priestley exposes the **dangers of unchecked capitalism** and its impact on vulnerable members of society.

Characters

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Sheila

- **Transitional, sympathetic, compassionate, self-reflective**
- Dramatic vehicle to promote socialism
- Undergoes growth – begins conceited, ends mature
- Highlights changing values of younger generation
- A bartering object for Mr Birling – role of women in Edwardian Britain



Eric



- **Transitional, remorseful, privileged**
- Morally ambiguous – may have raped Eva
- A drunk and often “squiffy”
- Repentant to encourage audience to respect his changing attitudes, telling his parents he’s “ashamed” of them
- Accepts his responsibility at the end of the play – younger generation open to change

Mr Birling

- **Symbol of capitalism, patriarchy**
- “A hard-headed, practical man of business”
- A social climber and a self-made man – “provincial” accent to getting a Knighthood
- Fixed mindset and takes no responsibility
- Encouraged to disagree with his worldview – incorrect predictions about Titanic and war
- Individualist and exploits others for his own gain – even Sheila’s marriage is opportunistic



Mrs Birling



- **Elitist, dismissive, injudicious**
- Dramatic vehicle to criticise capitalism
- Symbolises arrogance of upper classes and ignorance of the older generation
- Morally inferior and detestable to encourage audience to dislike her elitist views
- Comes from old money – part of the establishment
- Although a woman, reinforces patriarchal expectations by not helping Eva or “girls of that class”

Gerald

- **Traditional, wealthy, dismissive**
- Unlike other younger characters, Gerald doesn't change. He is old money and the system directly benefits him
- Duplicitous and untrustworthy – cheats on Sheila and later discards Eva
- Refuses to change or learn his lesson – it is he who investigates the Inspector hoping to find an easy “out” rather than take responsibility
- Wants to resume status quo: “Everything's alright now, Sheila. (Holds up the ring) What about this ring?”



The Inspector



- **Omniscient, prophetic, systematic, God-like, Priestley's mouthpiece for socialist ideals**
- Antithesis of Mr Birling
- Morally superior / God-like
- Audience encouraged to admire his socialist agenda
- His name, 'Goole', suggests he could be a ghost, or perhaps he is a manifestation of our guilt
- Key message: "We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other."
- Absent at beginning and end of the play; Eric and Sheila take on his role in the final section

Eva Smith / Daisy Renton

- **Vulnerable, lonely victim of injustice**
- Dramatic vehicle to represent demonised and neglected working classes to promote socialism
- Moral yet abused character – sympathetic
- Financially, emotionally and physically abused by each member of the Birling family
- Used to show that lower classes aren't just "cheap labour – they're people"
- An everywoman: Eva Smith is not an individual victim, but a universal one.



Genre



Genre

- The three unities
- Whodunnit mystery
- Morality play
- A Christmas Carol

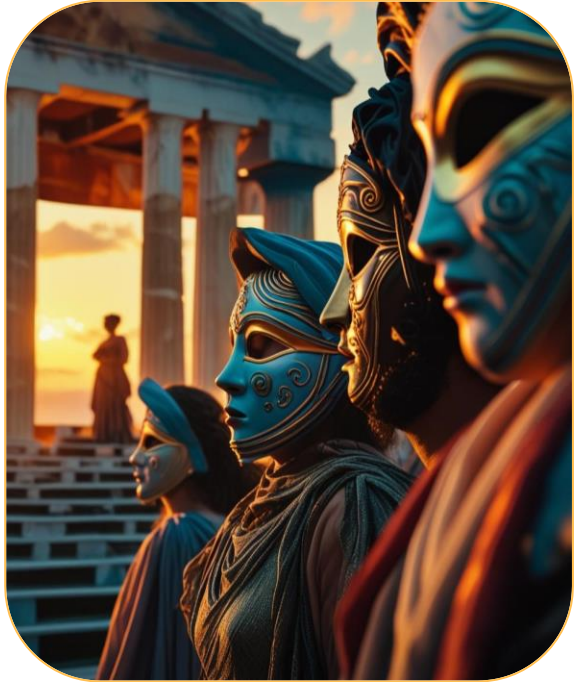
The three unities



Originate from Ancient Greek theatre:

- Unity of Action: One main plot, no subplots or distractions.
- Unity of Time: Events occur within a single day.
- Unity of Place: Single location, no scene changes.

The three unities

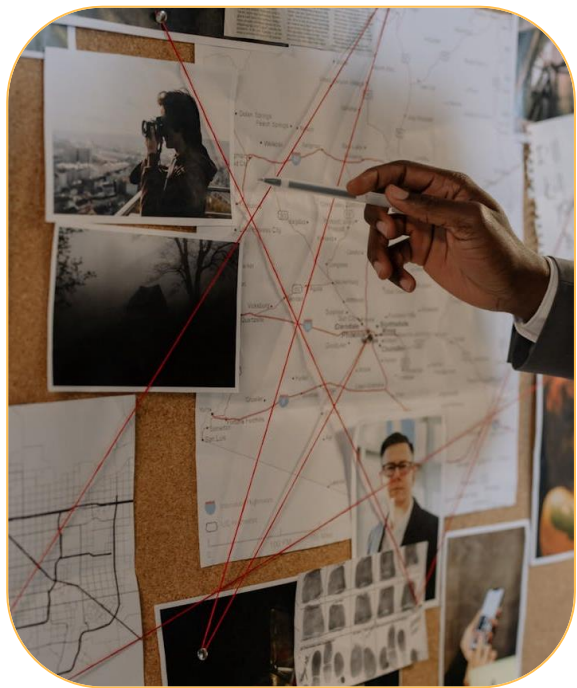


Unities in AIC:

- **Unity of Action:** Focuses solely on the investigation into Eva Smith's death.
- **Unity of Time:** Takes place in real time over a single evening.
- **Unity of Place:** Entire play set in the Birling family dining room.

These unities heighten dramatic tension and maintain audience focus on the moral lessons.

Whodunnit mystery



A whodunit: a plot-driven detective story focusing on solving a puzzle.

- Reader given clues before final reveal.
- Investigation led by an eccentric detective.
- "Golden Age" of whodunits: 1920s-1940s.

Common character types:

- Eccentric detective.
- Arrogant Lord/Lady of the manor.
- Posh, roguish playboy.
- Spoiled, overindulged daughter.

Whodunnit mystery



Typical structure:

- No clear culprit at first.
- Detective uncovers unsavoury events while interviewing suspects.
- Detective gathers everyone to explain motives and crime.
- Final "reveal."

Morality play

- Allegorical drama teaching moral lessons.
- Main character represents humanity or a sinner.
- Personified virtues and vices as supporting characters.
- Central theme: struggle between good and evil.
- Popular in medieval and early Tudor periods.



Sins of the Birlings



- **Arthur Birling:** Greed – Obsessed with wealth and business success.
- **Sybil Birling:** Pride – Arrogant and self-righteous, dismissing responsibility for others.
- **Sheila Birling:** Envy – Jealous of Eva Smith's beauty, causing her to act spitefully.
- **Eric Birling:** Lust – Impulsive and irresponsible in his actions toward Eva.
- **Gerald Croft:** Lust – Indulges in an affair for selfish pleasure.

Morality play disguised as a thriller

AIC is a morality play disguised as a detective thriller

- The morality play is a very old theatrical form, going back to the medieval period, which sought to instruct audiences about virtue and evil.
- Priestley's play revolves around a central mystery, the death of a young woman, but whereas a traditional detective story involves the narrowing down of suspects from several to one, 'AIC' inverts this process as, one by one, nearly all the characters in the play are found to be guilty.
- In this way, Priestley makes his larger point that society is guilty of neglecting and abusing its most vulnerable members.
- A just society, he states through his mysterious Inspector, is one that respects and exercises social responsibility.

Source: <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-an-inspector-calls>

A Christmas Carol

- Both feature supernatural visitors (ghosts/Inspector) who prompt moral reflection.
- The protagonists (Scrooge/Birling) start as selfish capitalists resistant to change.
- Both works critique social inequality and advocate for collective responsibility.
- The texts use a journey of self-discovery to highlight the potential for personal growth.
- Both were written with clear social messages aimed at reforming society.



Themes



Themes

Age	Gender	Social responsibility
Highlights how true change can come from younger generations – a hope for the future. Generational divide shows different attitudes – established elite vs open reflection.	Exposes societal inequality and the need for women's empowerment: both Sheila and Eva are mistreated on basis of gender. Sheila rejecting engagement ring shows rejection of patriarchy.	Interconnectedness of society and consequences of individual actions on collective welfare: "We are members of one body."
Capitalism & socialism	Class	Appearances & reality
Critique of the cruelty of capitalism in favour of a more socially responsible and compassionate socialism. Birling vs Inspector.	Eva Smith as an everywoman who symbolises universal suffering of the working class at the hands of the elite – the Birlings.	Unveils hypocrisy of respectable society, challenging superficial moral standards. Birlings appear upright citizens, but not true.

Form and structure

Form & structure:

- Dramatic irony
- Repetition of key phrases
- Use of setting and lighting
- Cyclical structure
- Three act structure
- Cliffhangers
- Ambiguous ending
- Monologues and length of speaking

Dramatic irony



When the audience knows something the characters on stage do not.

- Mr Birling's overconfident and incorrect predictions – makes audience mistrust him. Titanic is “unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable” and there won't be a war with Europe
- Mr Birling expects to get a knighthood and says, “so long as we behave ourselves. Don't get into the police court or start a scandal – eh?”
- Mrs. Birling forcefully blames “some drunken young idler” for Eva's pregnancy, not realizing she's describing her own son, Eric.

Repetition of key phrases

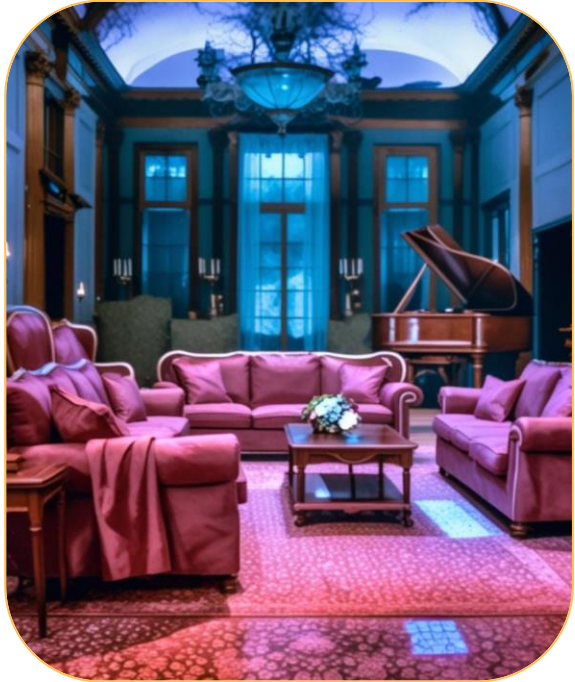
Repetition of responsibility:

- Mr Birling: "a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own."
- Inspector: "we are members of one body, we are responsible for each other"

= cyclicity



Use of setting & lighting



- The setting of the play in a single room also suggests their self-absorption, and disconnectedness from the wider world.
- The walls are 'imposing but **tasteless** pictures and engravings', and the 'general effect is substantial and comfortable and old-fashioned but **not cosy** and homelike' – suggests that although the Birling's have wealth and social standing, they are not loving to one another or compassionate to others.

Cyclical structure

- Priestley was fascinated with circularity, and the play ends as it begins, with a police inspector turning up to investigate the death of a young woman.
- There is a sense that events will repeat themselves, but also that the characters can choose to act differently and change the future for the better.
- However, apart from Eric and Sheila, the characters have not learnt that their actions have consequences for others – and that if they continue to live selfishly, their actions will lead to the deaths of many more Eva and John Smiths.



Three act structure



Play is divided into a three-act structure:

- **Act 1:** Introduction and initial interrogations
- **Act 2:** Further revelations and questioning
- **Act 3:** Climax, resolution, and final twist

Creates suspense and maintains audience engagement with each act ending on a cliff-hanger.

Gradual build-up of dramatic tension and revelations.

Cliffhangers

Cliffhangers at the end of acts:

- **Act 1** – Inspector saying "Well?" to Gerald, leaving the audience in anticipation of Gerald's response.
- **Act 2** – the realisation that Eric is likely the father of Eva's unborn child.
- **Act 3** – the family believes they've escaped consequences, the phone rings; learning another woman died from drinking disinfectant; a real police inspector is on his way to question them about the suicide.

This final twist leaves the audience in suspense and reinforces the play's themes of collective responsibility and the cyclical nature of consequences.



Ambiguous ending



- The play ends with naked displays of hypocrisy.
- When it is confirmed that Goole is not really a policeman, Arthur, Sibyl and Gerald immediately regain an unjustified sense of outrage.
- Once it is confirmed, in the play's penultimate twist, that there is no suicide lying on a mortuary slab, they forget the immoral, uncharitable behaviour they were recently accused of – things, remember, that they undoubtedly did – and begin talking about getting away with things.

Monologues and interruptions

- Birling dominates conversations, highlighting his inflated ego and dismissive attitude.
- Long turns of speaking – unwilling to listen and individualist
- The Inspector interrupts Birling, asserting moral dominance and disrupting his power
- Disruption of family hierarchy: Characters like Eric and Sheila interrupt, signalling challenges to Birling's control and evolving views



Symbols & motifs

Symbols and motifs

- Disinfectant
- Engagement ring
- The Titanic
- Alcohol and champagne
- The phone
- The photograph

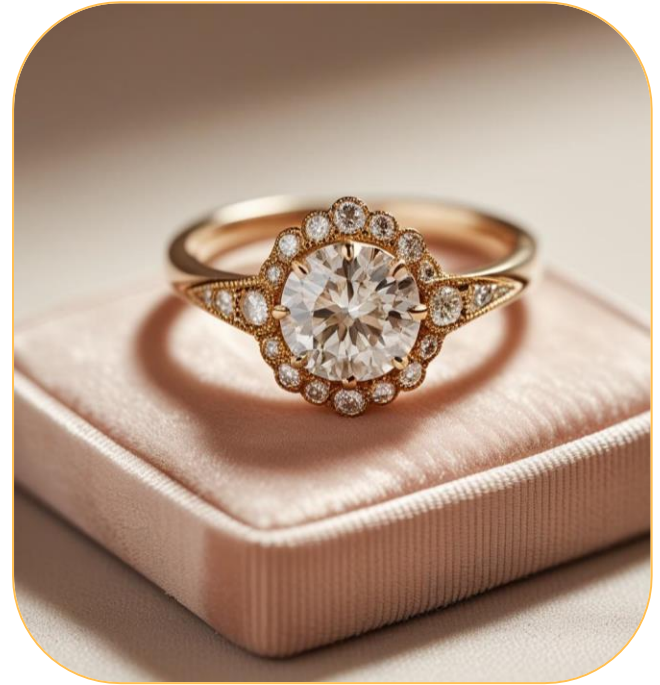
Disinfectant



- Eva's death and cleansing—represents societal purity and the destruction caused by neglect and exploitation.
- "Burned her from the inside out" evokes hellfire and sin.
- Disinfectant itself is used for cleaning. It symbolizes how society has dirtied Eva, both metaphorically through petty capitalistic greed and physically through forcing her to prostitution and sin

Engagement ring

- Superficial relationships and materialism, highlighting the transactional nature of some ties.
- Symbol of Sheila's growth: begins excited by the ring, then gives it away and refuses to take it back.



The Titanic



- Hubris and false confidence in progress—ironic foreshadowing of disaster, reflecting societal arrogance.
- Symbolises Birling's arrogance and overconfidence – as well as his stupidity
- Birlings about to sink just like the Titanic? Foreshadowing?

Alcohol and champagne



- Escapism, indulgence, and the vices of privilege; ties particularly to Eric's moral failings.
- Moral decay
- The numbing of the upper class towards the suffering of the poor
- Champagne – symbol of wealth

The phone

- A symbol of authority and consequence—signals the external world closing in on the Birlings.
- Ring of justice?



The photograph



- A device exposing secrets and unravelling their lies, forcing self-reflection and guilt.
- Inspector's potential deception – none of the Birlings look at the photo at the same time.
- Symbol of the interconnectedness of the characters' actions and the consequences of their decisions.
- Doesn't matter who the photograph is of – the Birlings still committed the same actions

Key quotations

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Key quotations

A heavy looking, rather portentous man...
provincial in this speech
Stage directions - Mr Birling

I did no more than my duty
Mrs Birling

Unsinkable, absolutely, unsinkable
Mr Birling

Community and all that nonsense ...
mixed up together like bees in a hive
Mr Birling

Oh – Gerald – you’ve got it ... Look
mummy, isn’t a beauty!
Sheila

A man has to mind his own business and
look after himself and his family
Mr Birling

Girls of that class
Mrs Birling

Why shouldn’t they try for higher wages?
We try for the highest possible prices.
Eric

Key quotations

She was young and pretty and warm-hearted - and intensely grateful.
Gerald

They're not cheap labour, they're people
Sheila

The point is – you don't seem to have learnt anything
Sheila

I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty
Eric

He creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity, and purposefulness
Stage directions – The Inspector

There are millions and millions and millions of John Smiths and Eva Smiths...
The Inspector

The girl's dead and we all killed her
Eric

He was our police inspector alright
Eric

Key quotations

It's better to ask for the earth than take it
The Inspector

Fire and blood and anguish
The Inspector

The lighting should be pink and intimate
until the INSPECTOR arrives, and then it
should be brighter and harder.
Stage directions – opening

More resources

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Vocabulary

Didactic	Assert social authority	Moral blindness	Supernatural forces intervening	Role-reversal
Morally repugnant	Socially vulnerable	Condemned	Subverted patriarchy	Hierarchical distinctions
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