



AN INSPECTOR CALLS: RESPONSIBILITY DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT MODEL ANSWER

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AN INSPECTOR CALLS DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

Explore How Priestley presents the theme of responsibility in the play.

400 – 450 words minimum

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]





AN INSPECTOR CALLS DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT 100% MODEL ANSWER

Just over 100 years before Priestley wrote 'An Inspector Calls', Charles Dickens published his famous fable, *A Christmas Carol*, which he wrote to educate his society about the evils of an industrialising society – horrendous working conditions in factories, vicious social snobbery, the degradation of the poor, the reckless scramble for money and the maddening inefficiencies of government bureaucracy. While Dickens's hopeful tale provides the archetypal example of how capitalists can right the wrongs that were so prevalent in Victorian society, when Priestley was writing his play in 1945, not only were those very same issues still in full swing, but in Priestley's eyes, at least, the upper classes' lack of social responsibility had plunged the world's major economic powers into their second apocalyptic world war and he was determined that society should learn the lessons of these experiences and become a more caring society.

Nearly every element of the play can be seen as representing Priestley's view that society needs to become more caring; for example, the stage directions state that the play is set in 'an evening in spring, 1912'; the abstract noun 'evening' can be seen as symbolic of Priestley's call for the end of the old, selfish order and the beginning of a new world, a 'spring', where every individual recognises in the words of the Inspector, that 'we are responsible for each other'; he is suggesting, right at the beginning of the play, that hope is still possible. Additionally, Priestley appears to dramatise the end of the Edwardian mindset when 'a sharp ring of a door bell ... stops' Birling mid-speech about how 'a man has to mind his own business and look after himself'; the interruption appears to be a clear rejection of Birling's laissez-faire individualism which Priestley believed created a utilitarian society where human beings were seen through the prism of their financial value and as 'cheap labour' rather than as 'people'. Priestley was convinced that 1945, the year the play was written and first performed was "probably the most crucial period in domestic British politics this century" - a time when people looked back at the Edwardian era – as symbolized by. Mr. Birling - and asked, "Do we want to go back to the Edwardian period, a world ruled by an upper class living in a detached 'pink', rose-tinted world, or to create something vital and new, a romantic vision of the future?". Tony Benn MP believed that Priestley "consciously intended to make [An Inspector Calls] a contribution to public understanding which, in its turn, he hoped might lead to a Labour victory after the war was over" – the audience could learn from the play and vote for a socialist future, in which men don't just "look after their own family" but remember their social responsibility: "we are all responsible for each other".

Even the names Priestley chooses for his characters share a perspective about responsibility; for example, the original Latin name that Sheila comes from is Cecilia, the feminine form of 'blind' in Latin, which a portion of the audience may have picked up on. Priestley certainly presents Sheila as blind to her actions at the start of the play, declaring "I couldn't be sorry for her" when she thinks about getting Eva sacked from Milwards. However, The Inspector appears to completely change Sheila's view by the end of Act 2, remarking that, 'I can't help thinking about this girl – destroying herself so horribly – and I've been so happy tonight'. Additionally, Saint Cecilia was a martyr, sentenced to death for refusing to worship Roman gods, instead worshipping the Christian God. For us, we see the parallel in her refusal to accept her parents view of their responsibility to the working classes – in effect she stops worshipping capitalism, and begins to see the truth of the need to be socially responsible, and remembering that we are all "one body".

Another strategy that Priestley uses is linking his message to Christian beliefs through Christian language – "We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other", thus appealing to his audience's sense of religious duty. Additionally, the simple structure (and language) means that nothing distracts the audience from the action and the central question, which is 'who is responsible?' The place – the Birlings' dining-room – remains constant throughout and the action and dialogue all contribute to the central theme of the play, with nothing extraneous to distract the audience's attention. Priestley said that the play is structured in a simple manner so as to 'provide a wide channel of communication and to reach the widest possible audience' by keeping the focus firmly on the play's progression from ignorance to knowledge. As we observe the divide between the older and younger generations grow, we witness which characters recognise the Inspector's lesson (Sheila and Eric) and





which characters do not – the older Birlings and Gerald, whose failure to learn the lesson of responsibility results in a phone call announcing that, ‘a girl has just died ... and a police inspector is on his way here – to ask some – questions’.

To conclude, the second death carries with it Priestley’s political point that the lessons of World War 1, represented by the death of Eva, were not learnt, so the Birlings now face, in the final word of the play, “questions”. Priestley’s question in 1945 is about how the ruling classes allowed World War 2 to occur, so that millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths lost their lives again. Eric and Sheila, therefore, represent the younger generation who grew up in the interwar years and failed to live up to their responsibility. Priestley’s play reflected the mood of the country, who ousted Winston Churchill and his Conservative government, that had taken them to war and replaced them with the socialist Labour government; it’s not Sheila and Eric, but their children who have learnt the Inspector’s lesson. However, through the ending, Priestley may be telling us that second chances do come, even out of the most unpromising circumstances; and if the vision was lost in 1914, and even in 1945, all may not be lost forever.

