



# JB PRIESTLEY'S BIOGRAPHY AND PURPOSE

Priestley's Purpose

## Table of Contents

<i>THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT</i> .....	3
<i>SELECT ASPECTS OF CONTEXT CAREFULLY</i> .....	3
<i>CONTEXT HELPS US DEVELOP OUR CONCEPTS</i> .....	3
<i>HOW TO WRITE ABOUT CONTEXT IN YOUR ESSAYS</i> .....	3
<i>SAMPLE MCELSTAA GRADE 9 PARAGRAPH</i> .....	4
<i>WHO WAS J B PRIESTLEY?</i> .....	4
<i>EARLY YEARS</i> .....	4
<i>PRIESTLEY'S EXPERIENCE WITH EDUCATION</i> .....	5
<i>WAR EXPERIENCE</i> .....	5
<i>THE IMPRESSION WAR LEFT ON PRIESTLEY</i> .....	6
<i>HOW PRIESTLEY SYMBOLISES HIS WAR EXPERIENCES IN THE PLAY</i> .....	6
<i>PRIESTLEY'S POST-WAR WORK</i> .....	7
<i>POLITICAL VIEWS</i> .....	7
<i>PIESTLEY'S WRITING CAREER</i> .....	7
<i>PRIESTLEY'S RADICALISM VS CONSERVATIVE VIEWS</i> .....	8
<i>PRIESTLEY VS THE CONSERVATIVES</i> .....	8
<i>PIESTLEY'S BROADCASTING CAREER</i> .....	9
<i>PRIESTLEY'S POITICAL MESSAGES IN HIS BROADCASTING CAREER</i> .....	9
<i>PRIESTLEY SILENCED</i> .....	10
<i>PRIESTLEY ENTERS POLITICS</i> .....	10
<i>THE 1941 COMMITTEE ENCOURAGES PUBLIC OWENERSHIP</i> .....	10
<i>1942: PRIESTLEY CO-FOUNDS THE SOCIALIST COMMON WEALTH PARTY</i> .....	11
<i>1943 – 1944: THE CWP TAKES ON THE CONSERVATIVES</i> .....	11
<i>PRIESTLEY, TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY</i> .....	11
<i>THE QUESTION OF RESPONSIBILITY</i> .....	12
<i>RESPONSIBILITY: DICKENS VS PRIESTLEY</i> .....	12
<i>RESPONSIBILITY: AN ESSAY</i> .....	13
<i>CRITICISMS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES</i> .....	13





<i>SETTING: WHY 1912? PART 1</i> .....	13
<i>SETTING: WHY 1912? PART 2</i> .....	14
<i>TIME SETTING</i> .....	14
<i>WHY TRANSMIT THE MESSAGE THROUGH A PLAY?</i> .....	15
<i>PRIESTLEY'S SOCIAL CONCERNS</i> .....	15
<i>SIMPLICITY OF LANGUAGE</i> .....	15
<i>PRIESTLEY THE VISIONARY</i> .....	16
<i>AN INSPECTOR CALLS AND RADICAL EXPRESSION</i> .....	16
<i>PRIESTLEY'S MESSAGE</i> .....	17
<i>AN ALTERNATIVE POINT OF VIEW</i> .....	17
<i>A UNIQUE IDEA: (THANKS MR. SALLES)</i> .....	17
<i>PRIESTLEY'S POLITICAL POINT: A SAMPLE ESSAY CONCLUSION: (THANKS MR. SALLES)</i> .....	18
<i>IMPORTANT QUOTES</i> .....	18
<i>SUMMARY OF PRIESTLEY'S PURPOSES</i> .....	18





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## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

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Stories don't exist in a vacuum. They're a product of their environment, their culture, historical period, location etc

- In order for you to score a grade 9 in GCSE English literature, you must be able to talk convincingly about why the author wrote that text, at least as part of a powerful conclusion.
    - Therefore, understanding the context in which a piece of material was written, is vital to fully appreciate it.
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## SELECT ASPECTS OF CONTEXT CAREFULLY

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The contexts of writing is potentially an extremely vast area to explore

- it encompasses the various "worlds" from which the text originated
    - as well as the "worlds" it generates in the readers' minds
      - For any literature text, it is advisable to start off by simply reading the text because the clues about context are always contained within the text itself
        - Then, you will need to research the author's life while trying to understand how and why the events in his or her life might have shaped their writing
          - The key here is to find connections between events in the author's life and the text itself
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## CONTEXT HELPS US DEVELOP OUR CONCEPTS

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At first, it may be difficult to fully appreciate how people viewed life, politics, education, gender, religion, science etc in the 16th to 20th centuries,

- however, the more we understand about the context, the more informed we can be in our responses.
    - Finally, gaining a deep understanding of context means that we can direct our thoughts and analyses of the text in a logical way so as to avoid nonsensical as well as irresponsible interpretations of the text
      - This doesn't mean there is only one right answer, but your answer must make clear sense to the examiner
        - Context helps us root our analysis in fact and, therefore, makes it more convincing for the examiner
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## HOW TO WRITE ABOUT CONTEXT IN YOUR ESSAYS

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The examiners don't want to see big paragraphs of context in your writing; it's not a history essay

- Instead, they want to see details of context embedded throughout your essay to support your interpretations
    - Use our mnemonic to help you structure grade 9 paragraphs: MCELSTAA
- 





- Methods
- Context
- Effects of methods on the audience/reader
- Link to another part of the text
- Symbolism
- Theme
- Alternative views
- Author's purpose
  - Your points don't have to be in that exact order
  - You also don't have to include all of these details in every paragraph
    - Ensure you follow our 100% essay structure template and that you include all of these details in the entirety of your essay

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## SAMPLE MCELSTAA GRADE 9 PARAGRAPH

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While *An Inspector Calls* is widely regarded as a political play, Priestley leaves the political message, that 'we are members of one body', the counter to Margaret Thatcher's 'there is no society', right for the conclusion, so that the audience engages with the spectacle, story and relationships; the point being that this play is as much about the essence of humanity as it is about politics, but it is crucial that the public leaves the theatre with the moral message in mind. The Inspector's final speech shows that Priestley does not treat responsibility as an obligation (unlike Dickens' *Bleak House*), but as an imperative: '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 blood and anguish.' It can be argued that Priestley more directly answers the question Dickens posed a hundred years before and he goes further than than posing it – he warns us, realistically, the disaster that continued irresponsibility will bring; events in the twentieth century show this to be true.

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## WHO WAS J B PRIESTLEY?

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He was a socialist

- A socialist believes that a society should be organized so that everyone helps one another
  - So we can have unemployment benefit
  - Free health care
  - Free schools
    - From this point of view, it is believed that society works because we all help each other

When Priestley was writing this play, not everyone got welfare

- There was no NHS
  - The NHS is a socialist idea
    - The NHS was founded on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1948

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## EARLY YEARS

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John Boynton Priestley, the only child of Jonathan Priestley (1868–1924), and his first wife, Emma Holt (1865–1896)

- born in Manningham, a suburb of Bradford on 13th September, 1894
  - Despite being the son of an illiterate mill worker, his father became a school teacher.
    - This is often seen as one of the influences that may have driven Priestley to construct *An Inspector Calls* as a lesson, with the Inspector as a teacher
      - We can see this reflected in the didactic tone of the play, and how The Inspector works, trying to teach the Birlings a lesson.
        - Priestley is also trying to teach his audience the same lesson.
          - Priestley's mother died when he was only two years old
            - in 1898 his father married Amy Fletcher, whom Priestley described as a loving stepmother.

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## PRIESTLEY'S EXPERIENCE WITH EDUCATION

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Priestley was educated at Whetley Lane Primary School, and then, on a scholarship, Belle Vue High School.

- Bored with school he left education at the age of sixteen and found work as a clerk for a wool firm in Bradford.
  - He thought he would learn more about the world by experience.
    - This is a similarity with Eva, who also works in textiles. She has probably, like Priestley, begun work there in 1910, because she is tipped for promotion in 1911.
      - Perhaps Priestley's preference for real-world experience is also reflected in his portrayal of Eric, who went to Oxford or Cambridge, and appears to have learned nothing (ironically pointed out by Mr. Birling) until The Inspector arrives to teach him about social responsibility.
        - Birling to Eric: 'It's about time you learnt to face a few responsibilities. That's something this public-school-and-varsity life you've had doesn't seem to teach you.'
          - Priestley joined the Labour Party and began writing a column in their weekly newspaper, The Bradford Pioneer.

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## WAR EXPERIENCE

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When the First World War broke out, Priestley joined the army and only just escaped death on a number of occasions.

- Priestley was sent to France and served on the Western Front.
  - He wrote to his father on 27th September, 1915:
    - "In the last four days in the trenches I don't think I'd eight hours sleep altogether. It is frightfully difficult to walk in the trenches owing to the slippery nature of things, the most appalling thing is to see the stretcher bearers trying to get the wounded men up to the Field Dressing station. On Saturday morning we were subjected to a fearful bombardment by the German artillery; they simply rained shells. One shell burst right in our trench - and it was a miracle that so few - only four - were injured. I escaped with a little piece of flesh torn out of my thumb. But poor Murphy got a shrapnel wound in the head - a horrible great hole - and the other two were the same. They were removed soon after and I don't know how they are going on."





## THE IMPRESSION WAR LEFT ON PRIESTLEY

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Priestley took part in the Battle of Loos and in 1917 he accepted a commission.

- After being wounded later that year he was sent back to England for six months. Soon after returning to the Western Front he endured a German gas attack.
  - Treated at Rouen he was classified by the Medical Board as unfit for active service and was transferred to the Entertainers Section of the British Army.
    - He wrote over 40 years later:
      - "I felt as indeed I still feel today and must go on feeling until I die, the open wound, never to be healed, of my generation's fate, the best sorted out and then slaughtered, not by hard necessity but by huge, murderous public folly."
        - Notice the link here between the word 'folly' and the way Priestley characterizes Birling as foolish, ignorant and out of touch with reality.
          - When the Inspector warns the Birlings about learning their lesson in 'fire and blood and anguish', he is talking from bitter experience of the slaughter in the war.
            - It is probably the war which convinced him to be a socialist.
              - He wrote autobiographically in *Margin Released* (1962) of the stupidity of its upper-class generals:
                - "The British command specialised in throwing men away for nothing ... killed most of my friends as surely as if those cavalry generals had come out of the chateaux with polo mallets and beaten their brains out. Call this class prejudice if you like, so long as you remember ... that I went into that war without any such prejudice, free of any class feeling. No doubt I came out of it with a chip on my shoulder; a big, heavy chip, probably some friend's thigh-bone."

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## HOW PRIESTLEY SYMBOLISES HIS WAR EXPERIENCES IN THE PLAY

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The officer class would have been made up of men like Gerald and Eric and Birling. The way they treat Eva, as a simple casualty of capitalism, is exactly the way he accuses the generals of throwing away the lives of their men, the "John Smiths".

- During the war, he wrote poetry and published an anthology privately. However, when he returned he destroyed most copies.
- Many students assume that writers just write stuff down. In fact, they agonise over every word. As you see here, there was so much to correct in the poems, that he simply destroyed them. Remember this when we analyse particular words and phrases – yes, Priestley really did mean to use exactly those words, and it really is worth asking exactly why he chose them.
  - After the war, he went to Cambridge. He completed his degree in two years instead of three.
    - Arguably this is where he would have met men exactly like Eric and Gerald for the first time. Being older, and having survived the war, he is clearly in a real hurry to make progress in life. We can perhaps see this reflected when The Inspector says, "we haven't much time" and in the way Priestley makes Sheila repeat this.





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## PRIESTLEY'S POST-WAR WORK

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He first performed *An Inspector Calls* in Russia as there were no theatres available in London.

- He still wrote campaigning literature after the war, feeling that a lot of the promise of the 1945 election had not come to fruition in the 1950s.
  - One piece, 'Britain and the Nuclear Bombs' was so critical at the British development of nuclear weapons that it led to a huge response from readers of the *New Statesman*.
    - This led to the setting up of CND, the campaign for nuclear disarmament, and Priestley became its vice president.
      - He was active in the early movement toward a United Nations because he thought it was so important to prevent further wars. He was a delegate to UNESCO, where he met his third wife.
        - We can see in this that he lived out the moral lessons of *The Inspector*, wanted a society based on people looking after each other, and believing that the greatest threat was future war.
          - The ending of the play can be seen is an attack on war, just as much as an attack on the Birlings' exploitation of the working classes.

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## POLITICAL VIEWS

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During the 1930's Priestley became very concerned about the consequences of social inequality in Britain

- Priestley was influential in developing the idea of the Welfare State which began to be put into place at the end of the war
- He believed that further world wars could only be avoided through cooperation and mutual respect between countries
  - so became active in the early movement for a United Nations.

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## PIESTLEY'S WRITING CAREER

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After the war, he gained a degree from Cambridge University (having initially decided against going to university), then moved to London to work as a writer

- He wrote successful articles and essays, then published the first of many novels, *The Good Companions* in 1929
- He wrote his first play in 1932 (*Dangerous Corner*) and went on to write 50 more.
  - Much of his writing was ground-breaking and controversial
    - He included new ideas about possible parallel universes and strong political messages
      - Priestley also became increasingly concerned about social problems.
        - This is reflected in *English Journey* (1934), an account of his travels through England. The author of *J. B. Priestley* (1998) has argued:





- "He travelled from the south to the north of England, brilliantly describing in bitter prose the poverty and unemployment of the time."
- Over the next seven years, Priestley established himself as a leading figure in the London theatre with plays such as *Laburnam Grove*, (1933), *Eden End* (written in 1934, but like *An Inspector Calls*, set in 1912) and *When We Were Married* (1938, a major comic success)
- He continued to write into the 1970s, and died in 1984

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## PRIESTLEY'S RADICALISM vs CONSERVATIVE VIEWS

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This visionary radicalism inevitably got him into trouble with more conservative elements, including Churchill, who felt that talk of postwar reconstruction was premature and raised unrealistic expectations

- and, no doubt, that things were better left to those in charge
  - Priestley, undaunted, was led into one of his occasional bouts of political activism, as chairman of the newly formed and rather ad hoc Common Wealth Party
    - which was to win several wartime by-election victories against Conservative candidates
      - We can see all this as part of the radical political mood of wartime, much debated amongst historians, out of which the reforming Labour government of 1945-51 was to emerge
        - at least, according to some accounts
          - We can see from this how the war increased the public appetite for a more equal society.
            - People could see how unequal society was before the war, and they contrasted this with how massive employment was possible during the war.
              - People started to ask what kind of future was worth dying for. Priestley deliberately wrote a socialist play to answer that question.
                - He thought a society that cared for everyone else in it, where the rich made sure they didn't exploit the poor was worth fighting for. He wrote the play to change society.

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## PRIESTLEY VS THE CONSERVATIVES

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Eventually, Priestley was forced out of broadcasting at the BBC

- He was denied a voice because he was too socialist
  - Churchill questioned the BBC, complaining about Priestley: "He's far from friendly to the government and I should not be too sure about him on larger issues."
    - So, to make his voice heard again and shape and reflect the mood of the nation, he decided to write a play in which he tried to show people what went wrong with society's values,
      - what went wrong with the ruling classes, and how a new generation can make sure that these mistakes are never repeated.
        - because of these factors, he was influential in persuading the country to vote in the socialist Labour government in 1945 to replace the capitalist Conservative party.





- But for Priestley, who campaigned for Labour in 1945 and 1950, these ideas went deeper than the fashionable collectivism of the moment
  - He had grown up in Bradford in the politically turbulent Edwardian years, and his attitudes and beliefs were shaped by the socialist culture of that city, and of his schoolmaster father
    - When in 1930 he finally became successful with his runaway best-seller *The Good Companions*, the world slump was under way, and Priestley used the freedom which his fame and fortune gave him to turn his hand to social criticism
      - Much like Charles Dickens did

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## PIESTLEY'S BROADCASTING CAREER

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Priestley became a political voice.

- He wanted a better world
  - During the Second World War Priestley became the presenter of *Postscripts*,
    - a BBC Radio radio programme that followed the nine o'clock news on Sunday evenings
      - In his radio broadcasts during World War 2 he became the voice of the people
        - Starting on 5th June 1940, Priestley built up such a following that after a few months it was estimated that around 40 per cent of the adult population in Britain was listening to the programme.
          - He was seen by many as the voice of the people after his famous broadcast on Dunkirk:
            - “But now - look - this little steamer, like all her brave and battered sisters, is immortal. She'll go sailing proudly down the years in the epic of Dunkirk. And our great grand-children, when they learn how we began this War by snatching glory out of defeat, and then swept on to victory, may also learn how the little holiday steamers made an excursion to hell and came back glorious.”
              - You can listen to it here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYNv4ozHJDw>
                - We can see here that he is keen to celebrate the ordinary man and woman, and how they can put an end to “hell”.
                  - This is the same message as his play: vote for socialism, not just for a more just society, but to put an end to war.

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## PRIESTLEY'S POITICAL MESSAGES IN HIS BROADCASTING CAREER

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On 21st July, 1940, he argued:





- "We cannot go forward and build up this new world order, and this is our war aim, unless we begin to think differently; one must stop thinking in terms of property and power and begin thinking in terms of community and creation. Take the change from property to community. Property is the old-fashioned way of thinking of a country as a thing, and a collection of things in that thing, all owned by certain people and constituting property; instead of thinking of a country as the home of a living society with the community itself as the first test."

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## PRIESTLEY SILENCED

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Graham Greene pointed out:

- "Priestley became in the months after Dunkirk a leader second only in importance to Mr Churchill. And he gave us what our other leaders have always failed to give us - an ideology."
  - Some members of the Conservative Party complained about Priestley expressing left-wing views on his radio programme.
    - Margaret Thatcher argued that "J.B. Priestley gave a comfortable yet idealistic gloss to social progress in a left-wing direction."
      - As a result Priestley was eventually forced out of public broadcasting and silenced.
        - He made his last talk on 20th October 1940. These were later published in book form as Britain Speaks (1940).

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## PRIESTLEY ENTERS POLITICS

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After being forced out of the BBC, Priestley and a group of friends established the 1941 Committee.

- One of its members, Tom Hopkinson, later claimed that the motive force was the belief that if the Second World War was to be won "a much more coordinated effort would be needed, with stricter planning of the economy and greater use of scientific know-how, particularly in the field of war production."
  - Priestley became the chairman of the committee

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## THE 1941 COMMITTEE ENCOURAGES PUBLIC OWNERSHIP

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In December 1941 the committee published a report that called for public control (a core principle of socialism) of the

- Railways
- mines
- and docks
  - and a national wages policy
    - A further report in May 1942 argued for works councils and the publication of
      - "post-war plans for the provision of full and free education, employment and a civilized standard of living for everyone."





- Public ownership of important facilities and means of production is a core principle of socialism
  - The idea is that private individuals should be able to use basic necessities such as healthcare and education as a means of profiting from individuals
    - Instead, the public benefits collectively from the conservation of these facilities by all contributing to them

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## 1942: PRIESTLEY CO-FOUNDS THE SOCIALIST COMMON WEALTH PARTY

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In 1942 Priestley and Richard Acland (a former-Labour member of parliament) formed the socialist Common Wealth Party (CWP)

- The party advocated the three principles of
  - "Common Ownership"
  - "Vital Democracy"
  - and "Morality in Politics"
    - The party favoured public ownership of land and Acland gave away his Devon family estate of 19,000 acres (8,097 hectares) to the National Trust.

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## 1943 – 1944: THE CWP TAKES ON THE CONSERVATIVES

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The CWP decided to start contesting by-elections against Conservative candidates.

- They needed the support of traditional Labour supporters.
  - Tom Wintringham wrote in September 1942:
    - "The Labour Party, the Trade Unions and the Co-operatives represent the worker's movement, which historically has been, and is now, in all countries the basic force for human freedom... and we count on our allies within the Labour Party who want a more inspiring leadership to support us."
      - Large numbers of working people did support the CWP and this led to victories for Richard Acland in Barnstaple and Vernon Bartlett in Bridgwater.
        - Over the next two years the CWP also had several other victories;
          - George Orwell wrote:
            - "I think this movement should be watched with attention. It might develop into the new Socialist party we have all been hoping for, or into something very sinister."
              - Orwell, like Kitty Bowler, believed that Richard Acland had the potential to become a fascist leader.
                - The CWP eventually supported the Labour Party in defeating the Conservatives in the 1945 general election, bringing in a range of socialist changes such as the introduction of the NHS, free education and social housing.

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## PRIESTLEY, TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY

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One particular theme which Priestley revisited in plays such as *Dangerous Corner*, *I have Been Here Before* (1937) and *Time and the Calways* (1937) that was to feature in *An Inspector Calls* was that of the effects of an individual's actions over time.

- The audience and, to a certain extent, the characters in these plays are shown possible projections of their actions which contrast poignantly with their present conditions
  - A second major theme which occurs is that of responsibility, both individual and collective, for those actions and the consequences

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## THE QUESTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

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the central, simple question the play asks us is: who is responsible?

- It is a question that needs an answer whether we are in 1912, 1945 or 2015
- It's a question repeatedly asked by every generation and a question every generation seeks to answer
  - Most great writers ask too
    - Dickens asked it more than most and it is implicit in much of his work
      - Early in *Bleak House* the frustrated Gridley demands to know who is responsible as his case is once more refused a hearing and his access to justice is blocked
        - Later, when Joe the crossing sweeper dies, Dickens writes these words:
          - 'The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead! Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.'
          - When considering who is responsible for this helpless waif's death Esther Summerson tells Mr Skimpole that 'everybody is obliged to be'

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## RESPONSIBILITY: DICKENS vs PRIESTLEY

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In *An Inspector Calls* Priestley does not treat responsibility as an obligation (unlike Dickens' *Bleak House*), but as an imperative:

- '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 blood and anguish.'

It can be argued that Priestley more directly answers the question Dickens posed a hundred years before

- We need only substitute Eva Smith for Joe, the sweeper
  - And he goes further than posing it – he warns us, realistically, the disaster that continued irresponsibility will bring
    - Events in the twentieth century show this to be true.

As long as that question needs asking and as long as it requires an answer this play will endure.

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## RESPONSIBILITY: AN ESSAY

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The following text, by Dr John Baxendale, is from a programme essay for a production Of An Inspector Calls at the Canadian Shaw Festival, 2008.

- An Inspector Calls is about the death of a young woman
- But it is not a whodunnit – at least, not of the conventional, forensic kind.
- An inspector arrives to investigate the death, but the questions he asks the well-heeled, complacent Birlings are not those of your typical policeman
  - In any case, the death is a suicide: there is no killer to be unmasked
    - Instead, a different kind of culpability is being investigated, as we, and the Birlings, are led through a series of revelations which pass the moral blame for the girl’s death from one family member to another – and, ultimately, to a whole social system and set of values.

## CRITICISMS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES

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He turned down a knighthood and a peerage, as both would be awarded by political parties.

- However, he did accept the Order of Merit in 1977, as this is a gift made entirely by the Queen, without political overtones.
- This allows us to see how critical he would like us to be about the titles in the play:
  - Sir Croft, Gerald’s father is so much of a snob he doesn’t even celebrate Gerald’s engagement to Sheila, who comes from a family he sees as socially inferior.
  - Birling’s craving for a “knighthood”, not having served his community in any way, reveals why we should dislike him.

## SETTING: WHY 1912? PART 1

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if An Inspector Calls is ‘really’ about 1945, why is it set in 1912?

- The Edwardian years had a particular fascination for Priestley
  - They were the years of his Bradford youth
    - a lost arcadia when he was working in a wool merchants’ office and trying to become a writer
    - before enlisting in 1914, aged 20, at the start of the Great War, after which nothing was ever the same again
  - For Priestley, these were years of missed opportunity: there was a fork in history’s path, and the wrong direction was taken
    - Priestley’s first piece of writing was published on 14th of December 1912, when he was 18.
      - 1912 is a key turning point in Priestley’s life, and is therefore a possible reason he fixes on this year as the key turning point in Eva’s life.
        - It is also when Eva herself becomes a writer, writing in the diary which The Inspector uncovers.
          - When he was writing the play in 1944, he believed that 1945 would be “probably the most crucial period in domestic British politics this century” with the general election coming up





- a time when people should be asking, “Do we want to go back to the Edwardian period
  - or to create something vital and new,
    - a romantic vision of the future?”
      - Priestley’s choice of a pre-war Edwardian setting was therefore a calculated attempt to draw a parallel between the experiences of the two world wars. As designer Ian MacNeil explains:

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## SETTING: WHY 1912? PART 2

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“Priestley lived with the First World War, the war to end all wars, survived it against the odds and then found himself in another horrific war

- And so he believed he had the right to ask, ‘If I lived through the war to end all wars, why am I now living through another one?’
  - What got us into this situation?
  - What is the failure of leadership and belief?
  - What brought us to this folly?
    - You can’t have this view of the Edwardians unless you are looking at it from the point of view of people who have just fought a war.
      - “Priestley felt strongly that there’s no point in fighting another war simply to maintain the status quo:
        - the point of this social upheaval is that some good must come of this.
          - We should fight for a better society, not simply demonise the Germans as though badness and selfishness is something that only exists in Germany.”
            - 1912 was a time which Priestley revisited repeatedly in his novels and plays, as well as in his remarkable memoir Margin Released (1962)
              - he wanted us to reflect on a time where society could have taken a different path, one towards a more caring society and to learn from the mistakes of the past so that we could build a better society for the future

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## TIME SETTING

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Perhaps, ever preoccupied with time, as we know from plays like *Dangerous Corner* and *I Have Been Here Before*, he wanted to rewind history to the point where things could have turned out differently

- Arthur Birling is a man of that time
  - He believes in progress, which has put him where he is; he believes in the technological future: aeroplanes, motor-cars, even (a little obviously, perhaps) the Titanic, that great enduring metaphor which is just about to make its first and last voyage; and he believes that progress has made war impossible





- So that when the Inspector, shamelessly invoking the hindsight of the audience, threatens ‘fire, blood and anguish’ if people in 1912 ‘will not learn the lesson’ that we are responsible for each other, we know something the Birlings don’t, and we may well wonder what history has in store for the two young men in the cast
  - This is dramatic irony on a historic scale: unlike the Birlings, 1945 audiences are being told, you’ve had two doses of ‘fire, blood and anguish’: have you learned the lesson yet?
    - And this, remember, was written before Hiroshima.

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## WHY TRANSMIT THE MESSAGE THROUGH A PLAY?

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He wrote as a freelance writer:

- Reviews
- Fiction
- non-fiction
- biography
- anything to get published.
  - He worked for a publisher as a reader
    - and also had four novels published
      - his fourth being most successful, *The Good Companions*, in 1929.
        - This novel is a largely comic portrait of people – while it features the working classes, it taps in to the mood of escapism in the 1920s.
          - He published 50 more plays in his lifetime.
            - We can argue that the attraction of the plays is the ability to engage directly with the public and use social commentary.
              - His writing became much more politically active during The Depression in the 1930s.
                - Perhaps he discovered that the experience of listening collectively and listening in public with other people is a deeper form of receptivity than writing an essay or article

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## PRIESTLEY’S SOCIAL CONCERNS

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His publisher, Victor Gollancz, asked him to tour the country to see the effects of The Depression in 1933

- and the result of this was published as *English Journey*, a massive success.
  - Priestley had a special interest in social reform based on what he has seen of the lives of the working classes and the unemployed.
    - He dramatises this through *Eva*, and also teaches his audience by explicitly relating her to “the millions of *Eva Smiths*, and the millions of *John Smiths*” in the country.

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## SIMPLICITY OF LANGUAGE

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there is nothing difficult about the play

- It is a straightforward three-act play where the action is continuous and the pace brisk.
- Priestley's language is also not difficult
  - His dialogue is composed of what he himself called 'that familiar flat idiom'.
    - He deliberately chose a wide channel of communication and wanted to reach the widest audience possible.
    - Simplicity to Priestley was a virtue.
      - He once wrote that he 'wanted to write something that at a pinch could be read aloud in a bar parlour. And the time soon came when I was read and understood in a 1000 bar parlours'.
      - An Inspector Calls has been heard and understood in thousands of theatres around the world.
      - Its simplicity is therefore a large factor in its enduring appeal.

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## PRIESTLEY THE VISIONARY

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An Inspector Calls is the work of Priestley the socialist

- but even more so of Priestley the visionary
  - Priestley's socialism was never of what he called the 'agenda-programme' kind:
    - he came to think that Labour had lost its way after 1945 in the minutiae of legislation and reform and committee-work, and failed to keep alive the shared vision and creative gusto of wartime
      - The play is not about social reform, better health care or full employment, important though these things are
        - but about a vision of how life could be different if we acknowledge the truth that we are all members of one another

Later in 1945, Priestley recalled for his radio audience the summer of 1940, when 'we had a glimpse of what life might be if men and women freely dedicated themselves, not to their appetites and prejudices, but to some great communal task'

- and amidst the brute threat of war there appeared on the horizon 'the faint radiance of some far-off promised land'
  - Everyone must find their own interpretation of the play's enigmatic ending, but 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
    - Let us hope he is right.

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## AN INSPECTOR CALLS AND RADICAL EXPRESSION

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An Inspector Calls is undeniably a product and expression of the radical moment of 1945

- but it also has roots much deeper in Priestley's life and ideas
  - Brumley, where the play is set, is an industrial town much like Bradford
    - its self-satisfied business elite much like those satirised in Priestley's 'Yorkshire farcical comedy' When We Are Married (1938), and excoriated in English Journey for abandoning the





communities which made them rich, and making their workers live 'like black-beetles at the back of a disused kitchen stove'

Arthur Birling, according to the stage directions 'rather provincial in his speech', has the air of an upwardly-mobile self-made man

- His wife, we are told, is his social superior;
- his daughter is about to marry the scion of a wealthier business family; there may even be a knighthood in the offing
  - All this is the product of a philosophy which holds that 'a man has to make his own way', keeping his business costs down and his workers firmly in their place – and not listening to those cranks, of whom the Inspector turns out to be one, who thinks 'everybody has to look after everybody else', and bangs on about 'community and all that nonsense'

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## PRIESTLEY'S MESSAGE

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In the climactic speech of the play, the Inspector warns the Birlings that 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other', he is echoing Priestley's wartime message,

- and his hopes for the postwar world
  - But he also speaks for the whole English radical and socialist tradition of which Priestley was a part, and its rejection of Birling's laissez-faire individualism
    - It was this tradition that seemed to make the political running during wartime, when collectivism was not just an ideal but a necessity, and which came to power in the 1945 election, when Labour won a landslide victory and formed its first majority government
      - That government went on to found the National Health Service, nationalise key industries, and institute the managed economy based on full employment
        - all of which remained in place for the next three decades, until Margaret Thatcher tried to roll them back in the 1980s
          - Not surprisingly, when the play was revived at Britain's National Theatre in 1992, the production was hailed as an explicit critique of the prevailing Thatcherite – or should we say Birlingite – values.

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## AN ALTERNATIVE POINT OF VIEW

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We could argue that the play doesn't show he is a socialist

- It may show that he is a Christian
  - The idea of helping each other is presented in the language of the church
    - We are all of one body
      - This is because most of the people who went to see his play also went to church
        - He is talking to them in a Christian language that they understand

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## A UNIQUE IDEA: (THANKS MR. SALLES)

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What if the Inspector is a supernatural being who killed a girl in order to teach the Birlings a lesson?

- In this case the idea would be similar to the one about going to war
  - Killing for the greater good
    - This may be a parody of the idea of war, something that the Conservative government and Winston Churchill believed in
      - Ex-journalist and now author, Chris Hedges calls this ‘the myth of purification by violence’

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## PRIESTLEY’S POLITICAL POINT: A SAMPLE ESSAY CONCLUSION: (THANKS MR. SALLES)

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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.

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## IMPORTANT QUOTES

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- ‘we are all respectable citizens’ – Gerald
  - he wants the Inspector to go away
    - the Inspector says, ‘sometimes there’s not as much difference as you think’
      - here, Priestley is trying to suggest that the rich are no better than criminals
        - this is a socialist message
- ‘we are all members of one body, we are responsible for each other’ – the Inspector
  - Christian language
- ‘if men will not learn that lesson then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish’
  - the message here is one about hell and nuclear war
    - this message incorporates both Christian and socialist symbols
      - if we interpret this message as being about nuclear war, then we see how the play contains prophetic messages and is an appeal to lay the foundations for a stable future where we don’t have to go to war anymore
        - the play was written before the climatic events of WWII, before the A-bomb was dropped on Japan

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## SUMMARY OF PRIESTLEY’S PURPOSES

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- To encourage all members of society to take responsibility for each other
  - ‘you talk as if we were responsible -’ – Mr. Birling





- '(miserably) So I'm really responsible?' – Sheila
- 'she feels responsible' – Inspector
- 'we are responsible for each other' - Inspector
- 'he'd be entirely responsible' – Mrs Birling
  - The abstract noun 'responsible' is repeated 14 times throughout the play, from beginning to end
- To force the audience to focus on who is responsible for Eva's death through the following:
  - One setting
    - Follows classical Greek tradition of unities of time, place and action
      - Nothing detracts from the characters, the action on the stage and most importantly, the central message
  - simplicity
    - simple structure
      - 3 acts
        - Short play, full of action and fast-paced to keep us focused on the central message
    - Simple language
      - Creates a wide channel of communication to appeal to a wide range of people
        - Not just for a particular class of people
    - Simple plot
      - Easy for the audience to follow and keep focus
  - Symbolic use of lighting
    - 'Evening in spring 1912'
      - 'Evening' symbolizes the end of an old era
        - In reality it symbolizes the end of a time of peace for Priestley and the world
          - But in the fictional world of the Birlings, he wants to show how society could have taken a different path towards a fairer society
      - 'Spring' symbolizes the beginning of something new
    - 'Pink and intimate' shows delusion
    - 'Brighter and harder' shows the arrival of truth
      - The truth can be hard to accept
        - We wait to see if the Birlings accept the truth and change
  - Use of cliffhangers after each act
    - Gives each revelation real impact and forces us to think about them more
      - This technique extends the moral message of the play by creating suspense
        - We are eager to find out what will happen next and how far the others are responsible
  - 'whodunnit' style
    - Question after question
    - Revelations of secrets
  - Ambiguity
    - Makes us ask the following questions
      - Who was the inspector?
      - Was the inspector a ghost or God?





- Was Eva the same girl as Daisy?
- Who is most responsible in the Birling family?
- Etc
  - In the end we realise that the only things that matter are:
    - Each Birling admits their part in her downfall
    - None of them appear to change their actions
      - Sheila and Eric show signs of change but no real action
- To expose the inequality inherent in a capitalist society
  - Sheila vs Eva
    - Sheila is a foil for Eva
  - The Birlings vs the lower classes
- To ridicule capitalism in order to influence the public towards a socialist vote
  - Characterising Mr Birling through dramatic and proleptic irony
    - This shows that he doesn't understand society and so he should not be in a position of power
  - By showing the Birlings to be a dysfunctional family through:
    - Seating arrangement
      - The parents at either end, Eric isolated
    - Lies
      - Eric steals from his father
    - Secrecy
      - Gerald cheats on Sheila
    - Selfishness
      - Mr Birling appears more interested in the business possibilities through Sheila's engagement to Gerald, than her happiness
      - Mrs Birling encourages Sheila to accept that Gerald will cheat
        - She does this to maintain a respectable social appearance
    - Delusion
      - 'the lighting is pink and intimate'
- To expose the upper classes' delusion
  - Characterising Mr Birling through dramatic and proleptic irony
  - Mrs Birling doesn't know her own children
    - She never suspects that Eric could drink, steal money, rape and father a child with a prostitute, even though Sheila and the audience all figure this out before the revelation
- To persuade the public to learn from the mistakes of the past
  - 'If men will not learn their lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish'
  - The two deaths
    - Time appears to repeat itself
- To create a more caring society for the future
  - 'we are members of one body'
- to draw a parallel between the experiences of the two world wars
  - symbolised through the two deaths in the play
- to generate sympathy for Eva





- she drinks bleach and kills herself and her baby
  - she is making a point about injustice just as Priestley is
    - perhaps an allusion to the Suffragettes and Emily Davison
- she represents everyone
  - he name comes from Eve, the mother of humanity
  - her surname is common, suggesting she is just like us
    - Priestley wants us to put ourselves in her shoes
- to ask the question 'who is responsible for society?'
  - the Inspector says 'it's my duty to ask questions'
    - the final word of the play is 'questions'
- to highlight the importance of caring one another
  - 'we are members of one body'
- To illustrate the consequences of vice through the 7 deadly sins
  - 1. Envy = the desire to have an item or experience that someone else possesses
  - 2. Gluttony = excessive ongoing consumption of food or drink
  - 3. Greed or Avarice = an excessive pursuit of material possessions
  - 4. Lust = an uncontrollable passion or longing, especially for sexual desires
  - 5. Pride = excessive view of one's self without regard to others.
  - 6. Sloth = excessive laziness or the failure to act and utilize one's talents
  - 7. Wrath = uncontrollable feelings of anger and hate towards another person
    - Arthur Birling clearly personifies Greed or Avarice.
      - His position as Lord Mayor is one of responsibility but he uses it to show off instead working for the better of society
        - Paints the upper classes as hypocrites who should not be in positions of power
    - Sheila clearly personifies Envy
      - Priestley shows how envy leads to irrational decisions just like how she got Eva fired from her best job, just because she felt jealous that Eva looked better in a certain dress.
    - Gerald personifies Lust (and capitalist Greed)
      - He uses people for his own gratification
        - He does not really care for their well-being
    - Eric personifies Gluttony (and this causes Lust through his alcohol abuse)
    - Sybil Birling clearly personifies Pride
      - It's about social appearances for her
        - She will sacrifice all reason and dignity just to maintain a certain public face
- To show that further wars could be avoided through cooperation with each other
  - 'we are members of one body'
  - 'learn that lesson'
- To demonstrate his hopes that all may not be lost forever
  - The second death shows that we still have a chance to learn from our mistakes
- to create a character (Eve) who represents everyone in order to show that the upper classes prey on and victimise everyone.
  - her first name, **Eve**, reminds us of "Eve", the first woman on earth (particularly for those follow one of the Abrahamic faiths)
    - and so her name emphasises how "innocent" she is, just like Eve was
      - and this name also represents everybody
        - because we are all descended from Eve

