



SETTING

Notes taken from *VARIOUS SOURCES*

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THE DATE: 1912 AND THE SUFFRAGETTES

Priestley chooses “an evening in Spring, 1912” because it is just before The First World War and he wanted to teach us how it is that society led itself to two world wars

- One way to look at it is that it places the play during the context of women’s campaign for the vote (suffrage), and the Suffragettes
 - For the suffragettes, 1912 was seen as a turning point as they resorted to using more militant tactics, such as the famous window-smashing incident of March 1912
 - Nearly 200 women were arrested as a result of the action taken on this night
 - The context of the suffragettes could provide several other links to the play
 - **Eva kills herself and her unborn baby**
 - **After a series of abuses by the upper classes, she turns to her last hope, which is to take a militant approach to making her suffering visible, by drinking bleach**
 - Priestley may have used the allusion to the militant tactics the suffragettes adopted for the same reason they did: to bring into prominence their fight for a fairer society
 - It may also be a specific allusion to Emily Wilding Davison, who died under the King’s horse on 4th June 1913
 - It was thought that she may have committed suicide as a martyr to the cause but recent analysis appears to discredit that theory, including the fact she had a return train ticket, as well as holiday plans
 - From this perspective, it may be possible to say that Eva gave up her life and that of her baby’s as martyrs to the fight for justice in a society that was being ‘infected’ by the vices of the upper classes.
 - This perspective also explains why she drinks ‘bleach’ rather than any other poison; it symbolises a desperate attempt to disinfect, not only herself, but wider society from the abuses they suffer at the hands of the deluded upper classes.

1912: A TRAGIC SETTING

1912 is also crucial in that he can begin the play with a tragedy,

- the sinking of the Titanic in April of 1912.
 - We know that it is just about to happen, when Birling talks about it being “unsinkable”.
 - Priestley isn’t just trying to discredit Birling for his stupidity:



- the dramatic irony of us knowing the Titanic will sink also invites us to think of the play as a tragedy.

SPRING OF 1912 SETTING

We can also infer that “Spring” is symbolic of...

- rebirth
- optimism,
- and hope.
 - Perhaps he suggests at the beginning of the play that hope is still possible.
 - This is very relevant to his message – the audience can 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”

SETTING: WHY 1912?

He believes that 1945 is “probably the most crucial period in domestic British politics this century”

- a time when people were 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:
 - “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.”

TIME SETTING



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
 - In the ferment of Edwardian ideas – reflected in Birling's contemptuous dismissal of the 'cranks', Bernard Shaw and H G Wells – a more democratic England had seemed to be in the offing
 - but the hope was lost in the mud and blood of Flanders and the monstrous betrayal of the survivors after the war ended
 - These were years 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

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.

THE DINING ROOM SETTING

The aristocratic household and its social gatherings were seen as representative of all that was good about life in the first decades of the 20th century

- However, Priestley wants to highlight the realities that were bubbling beneath the surface
 - In many ways, the Birling dining room setting is reminiscent of utopian literature where a seemingly perfect world is stained by the sacrifice of innocent souls
 - The Birling's dining room symbolizes this
 - Priestley's stage directions state: 'the lighting should be pink and intimate until the inspector arrives and then it should be brighter and harder'
 - The pink and intimate lighting alludes to the saying 'looking at the world through rosey-tinted glasses' which suggests that the Birlings are out of touch with reality and that the inspector is coming to shed light on their ignorance



- Additionally, Mr and Mrs Birling are both characterized through dramatic irony which emphasizes how out of touch with reality they are and their disconnect with reality is not a trivial matter because it results in the suffering of ‘millions and millions of John Smiths and Eva Smiths’ as well as the two world wars, as symbolized by the two deaths in the play
 - The Birlings are completely unaware or unwilling to accept that there are other people who suffer and even die in order for them to live their luxurious lifestyle
 - it is this inherent inequality in the capitalist system that Priestley wanted to expose and change through his writing

A WELL-MADE PLAY

An Inspector Calls is what is known as a well-made play (see A Well-made Play folder)

- Its progression is that from ignorance to knowledge
 - Not only for the audience but also for the characters themselves

Priestley observes the classical unities of time, place and action in his structure

- The time in the play corresponds with the actual time the events presented would take to unfold in real life
 - 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

DRAMA

it is a gripping piece of drama that maintains the shape and atmosphere of a thriller

- It is a play that demands answers to questions that can only be found by continued watching
 - As soon as the Inspector walks into that drawing room, we are hooked
 - Who is this girl Eva Smith?
 - Why did she kill herself?
 - Did each member of this family really have a hand in her demise?
 - What did they do?
 - Why did they do it?
 - Who is this Inspector?
 - Is he a real Inspector or someone or something else?
 - And then of course at the very end the telephone rings bringing more questions and questions about questions.

PRIESTLEY AS A DRAMATIST



Priestley heightens the audience's suspense by his skillful use of climaxes within the carefully controlled plot and by ensuring that the audience is left on tenterhooks at the conclusion of each act

- He structures the play to build on surprises
 - He makes Sybil Birling condemn 'the young man who got Eva pregnant'
 - She emphasizes how he is the guilty party before we find out it was Eric
 - And very cunningly through how she describes this young man stealing money, feeling drunk we gradually understand that it was Eric
 - So does Sheila
 - The audience and Sheila get to understand that it was Eric before the other characters
 - This is dramatic irony / dramatic tension

Another dramatic device the use of the photographs

- He lets Birling see the photographs but he doesn't let Gerald and Eric see it
 - This introduces the possibility that he is manipulating them
 - It is possible that Gerald is right about them not being the same girl
 - All the time, Priestley is thinking as a dramatist

An additional example is the change at the end

- The Birlings think they have got away with everything and that there is nothing to worry about
 - Then suddenly just before the end of the play, there is another phone call
 - Someone else has died
 - We begin to question whether or not the Inspector maybe supernatural

As soon as Birling says 'it was nothing to worry about' there is a new phone call

- Could that just be coincidence?
 - It's not just a new phone call
 - It's the news that a girl has died and an inspector is coming
 - A real person would struggle to arrange that

STYLE OF THE PLAY (1): DETECTIVE THRILLER / WHODUNIT

At first glance the play seems to be that of a straightforward detective thriller

- After the natures of the Birling family and Gerald are established, the inspector arrives with the news of the death by suicide of Eva Smith
 - As the involvement of each of the members of the family is progressively established, the structure becomes that of a 'whodunit', with the inspector slowly unravelling the history of Eva Smith
 - The style of the play is designed to support the main theme of responsibility and the question of who is responsible for the suicide of Eva Smith
 - However, this is one of the more ambiguous aspects of the play because Gerald's questioning of the identity of the girl in the photos leads us to ask the same questions
 - The play ends with the word, 'questions' which appears to represent the number of unanswered questions the audience has:
 - Who is the inspector?
 - Who is the girl in the photo?
 - Did the inspector show the same photo to everyone?



- Was the death at the end of the play the same as the one at the beginning?
- Who is most responsible for Eva's death
- And so on...
 - Priestley uses ambiguity to give the play an intellectual dynamic, most likely to hook the audience
 - But he is also illustrating that in the grand scheme of the play's moral question, 'who is responsible for Eva's death (and symbolically WW1)?', each of the Birlings and Gerald admitted that they played a part in her demise
 - Ultimately that is what matters, that the upper classes take responsibility for their treatment of the lower classes. Priestley shows that because they don't take responsibility, a second death (WW2) happens

STYLE OF THE PLAY (II): MORALITY PLAY

As the inspector's apparent omniscience drives each of them to confession, the play reveals its second stylistic model

- That of a morality play
 - The original morality plays of the middle ages intended to instruct their audiences about condition of man, caught between the religious need for goodness and the temptation of evil
 - Priestley, in a more modern, secular manner, seems similarly concerned to affect his audience

MORALITY AND THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

It is possible to see the Birlings as being guilty of the Seven Deadly Sins

- Pride
- Sloth
- Gluttony
- Envy
- Covetousness
- Lust
- Anger
 - these sins would have ensured damnation for an earlier, medieval audience of morality plays
 - however, his modern audience who were more than familiar with the effects and privations of war, would have been equally receptive to the modern moral which he intended them to take from the play

SUSTAINING AUDIENCE INTEREST

The audience's interest is not only sustained by the progressive revelations



- but by their desire to find out who, ultimately was responsible for driving Eva to her suicide

HEIGHTENING AUDIENCE SUSPENSE

Priestley heightens the audience's suspense by his skillful use of climaxes within the carefully controlled plot and by ensuring that the audience is left on tenterhooks at the conclusion of each act

IMPORTANT QUOTES

- '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

Bibliography

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