



# VARIOUS KEY IDEAS

An Inspector Calls

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE INSPECTOR

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The Inspector is a socialist

- he believes that the profits of business should be used to improve the lives of ordinary men and women
  - either through higher wages
  - or government control
    - The Inspector is a proxy for Priestley's views
      - but he is also the agent who drives the action of the play
        - not just a political figure.

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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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## DRAMA

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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.

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## MORAL TEACHINGS

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The Inspector moves among the Birlings and Gerald Croft like a moral whirlwind, ruthlessly exposing each of them in turn

- Merciless in his pursuit of the truth Goole brings each to account for their social crimes
- His exchanges with Birling represent a collision between two entirely opposite creeds
  - We want to know who will win
    - Even when we know the inspector will win, our own need to see it played out keeps us watching
      - Their exchanges present some of the most powerful lines in the play, few more so than when the Inspector says to Birling ‘it’s better to ask for the earth than to take it’

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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 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.

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## PROPHETIC QUALITIES

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Priestley wrote An Inspector Calls at top speed during the last winter of the Second World War, 1944-5

- Victory was now inevitable
  - but the climactic events of 1945
    - the death of Hitler
    - the A-bomb
    - Labour's landslide election victory
  - were still in the future

At that moment, Priestley was one of Britain's best-known and most admired public figures

- He had already become famous in the 1930s as a best-selling and hugely prolific novelist, playwright and journalist
  - but the war turned him into something more
    - His BBC radio broadcasts, starting in the epoch-making days of June 1940 and continuing through the Blitz, made him a popular propagandist second only to Churchill (and incidentally a regular broadcaster to North America);
      - but there was more to them than mere morale-boosting
        - As Graham Greene (who disliked Priestley's writing) said, 'he gave us an ideology'

Where Churchill invoked a thousand years of history, Priestley spoke of the future

- of how life should be after the war
  - For him, this was a 'People's War', in which survival depended on the spirit and commitment of the ordinary people, who, if they seized the opportunity, could at last enter into their long-denied inheritance





- We were not fighting for a return to the status quo – that was gone forever – but for a new kind of society
  - as he put it, ‘a nobler world in which ordinary, decent folk can not only find justice and security but also beauty and delight’
    - a world in which we could stop thinking in terms of property and start thinking of the nation as a community
      - The war was making people realise, Priestley told his listeners, that we were all in the same boat
        - and it was a boat which could land us in a better world after the war was over.

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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

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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## 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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## TIME SETTING

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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
    - 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.

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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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## HOW THE INSPECTOR CREATES SHOCK

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The Inspector wants to shock

- just as Priestley wants to shock his audience
  - The shock works as a theatrical experience, but also to get across his message –





- the ideologies of the upper classes damages lives.
  - Greed
  - Selfishness
  - Lack of social responsibility
    - This is why he chooses to state that Eva has died a horrifically painful death:
      - “Burnt her inside out, of course” ...
      - “She was in great agony”
        - Concentrating on the pain forces the audience to be more affected by her death
          - and angrier at the cause of it:
            - the characters on stage

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## “SUICIDE, OF COURSE” – EMPHASISING SHOCK

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The Inspector emphasises this again:

- “Suicide of course”
  - The curtailed sentences perhaps mimics her curtailed life
    - However, with the throw away tag “of course” The Inspector suggests it is completely normal for a working-class girl to react this way –
      - the implication being that the oppression of the upper classes leaves them no choice.
        - It also suggests that the manner of Eva’s death is a common occurrence
          - He implies she is just a statistic among many suicides of working-class men and women

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## INSPECTOR GOOLE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

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his name implies, represents the unnatural or spiritual

- The name is a play on the word 'ghoul'
  - which is an evil spirit or a phantom. Furthermore, the word can also refer to a person who has an unnaturally morbid fascination with death or disaster.

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## WHY THE NAME ‘GOOLE’?

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‘Goole’ is a homophone for ‘ghoul’, or ghost

- there is a strong reminder of Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol* here
  - Priestley maybe signposting not just that there may be a supernatural mystery in the play,
    - but that it is didactic, carrying a moral message that the protagonists’ behaviour must change
      - in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge (the protagonist) is met by the ghost of his old colleague Marley whose spirit is doomed to roam the earth because he lived a greedy and selfish life on earth







- his punishment is reminiscent of the Christian idea of purgatory
  - a state of limbo in between death and heaven where the souls of sinners go until they have repented their sins and can go to heaven
    - therefore, by hinting at the Inspector's supernatural qualities, perhaps Priestley is implying that the characters' actions as well as ours have an eternal affect and not just an earthly one

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## DOES THE INSPECTOR KNOW EVERYTHING?

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Priestley provides hints that The Inspector does not know everything

- and is not in full control of events
  - His interest in Gerald does not appear preplanned
    - "I see. Mr Croft is going to marry Miss Sheila Birling... Then I'd prefer you to stay."
      - He clearly doesn't know that Gerald has had any part in Eva's life.
        - Perhaps he needs to prevent this marriage.
          - This will tie in with Priestley's purpose – if she does not marry him, there is a very strong chance that she will be able to change the future,
            - because by the end of the play, she has understood The Inspector's message
              - If she does marry him, whether she has learned the lesson is open to doubt
                - because she will be marrying a man who completely disagrees with The Inspector's teaching.

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## AMBIGUITY – DOES SHEILA *TRULY* LEARN?

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Ambiguity is an important concept in "An Inspector Calls"

- If something is ambiguous, it has more than one single meaning and what is actually happening is open to interpretation.
  - For example, we could ask the following questions:
    - Is the Inspector supernatural?
    - Does he show all the characters the same photograph of the girl?
    - Are Daisy Renton and Eva Smith the same person?
    - Are there 2 death in the play or are they, in fact, the same?
      - With regards, to Sheila, the audience will generally see her as the heroine of the play because her stance against her parents' actions seems so strong
        - We see her as hope for change but when we look at her final words when Gerald offers her the ring back, she simply says
          - "no, not yet. It's too soon. I must think."
            - These statements open up a number of questions such as:
              - What does she mean by "not yet"?
              - What does she mean by "it's too soon"?





- What “must” she “think” about?
- Is she considering taking Gerald back, who is so clearly not willing to change?
- What does that say about her character?
- Are her emotions too spontaneous and therefore not really reliable?
- Is she too easily manipulated?
- Is she strong enough to actually change?
- Is she powerless to change because she is a woman living in a deeply patriarchal society?
- If we cannot rely on her for change, who then, is the real hero?
- Is Eric the real hero?
- Is this the reason why Priestley makes Eric the last one to confess, because he wants to reveal the real hero at the end?
  - These are only some of the unanswered question in the play but the purpose seems to be that Priestley wants us to focus on the most important question of all: ‘who is responsible?’

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## THE INSPECTOR AS A TEACHER OF MORALITY

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Priestley’s father was a teacher

- The Inspector wants to teach the Birlings that:
  - “we were all responsible for everything that happened to everyone”.
    - The Inspector is actually here to teach, not just to discover what has occurred.
      - This is why when Birling objects, saying
        - “how I choose to run my business” is not relevant,
          - The Inspector replies
            - “it might be”
              - clearly signposting that this is a political play, looking at the morality of business.

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## HOW THE INSPECTOR EXPLORES THE EXPLOITATION OF BUSINESS

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One way the Inspector examines this exploitation in business is through the wages Eva and her colleagues are paid,

- defending their right to strike
  - “After all, it is better to ask for the Earth than to take it” observes The Inspector
    - implying that capitalism literally robs people of what should be theirs
      - The metaphor implies that capitalism is in effect a form of theft.





## HOW THE INSPECTOR LOOKS AT THE CHARACTERS

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For this reason, he looks accusingly at each character even before he knows what they have done

- His reaction so far strongly suggests that he does not know any specific crime committed by Gerald
  - However, he still “looks at Gerald, then at Eric, then at Sheila” because he knows that they will all have committed some crime.
    - Why?
      - Because they are part of the ruling classes – it is simply in their nature.
        - This is why he replies to Birling’s claim that they are “respectable citizens, not criminals” with scorn:
          - “Sometimes there isn't much difference as you think.”

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## THE INSPECTOR’S PURPOSE

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is to remind the Birlings, as well as Gerald Croft, that they have a role to play on others' destinies.

- They hold the lives of others in their hands and should, therefore, be more responsible. Furthermore, he makes it clear that none of his audience can be absolved:
  - ‘This girl killed herself - and died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her. Remember that. Never forget it.’
    - He wants to make it pertinently obvious that each one had a role to play in the unfortunate girls' suicide. In each instance, each one was culpable in driving her closer to the edge. The inspector wishes that they would all accept what they had done and not forget it.
      - Inspector Goole is a symbol for humanity's moral conscience.
        - It is our conscience that makes us judges of our own character.
          - Our integrity is based on the level of responsibility we acknowledge for our role in what happens to others.
            - Inspector Goole came not only to remind his immediate audience but also those of us who watch or read the play.
              - We should be guided by a moral compass that reminds us of the evil of prejudice and arrogance.
                - Since his listeners in this regard were careless, manipulative and abusive because they thought themselves better than Eva Smith, they destroyed her.

