

'An Inspector Calls' Knowledge Organiser

Brief Plot Summary

The play takes place in the comfortable dining room of the Birlings, a middle class family from the Midlands. The year is 1912.

Act One: The Birling family are celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling to Gerald Croft. A police inspector arrives and announces that a girl has died. The audience discovers that Arthur Birling (the patriarch of the family) sacked the girl (Eva Smith) from her job because she was striking for better pay and working conditions. Sheila Birling then got her sacked from her next job because she felt the girl laughed at her when Sheila was trying on clothes in a shop. The audience then learns that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. It becomes clear that Gerald Croft knew her and was seeing her romantically at the same time as Sheila.

Act Two: The audience discovers that Daisy was Gerald's mistress for a time. However, he broke it off when she fell in love with him. Sheila breaks off her engagement to Gerald. Sybil Birling then finds that she knew the girl. Daisy/Eva had come to Sybil's charity asking for help because she had fallen pregnant. Sybil Birling refused to help her because Daisy used the Birling name when she visited the charity. Mrs Birling refuses to take any responsibility for what happened to the girl. She says it is the fault of the man Daisy was seeing. Sheila realises that this man is most likely Eric (her brother).

Act Three: Eric confesses to having an affair with Daisy. She told him that she was pregnant and he tried to help her by stealing money. She eventually refused his help when she realised that the money he was giving her was stolen. The Birlings and Gerald Croft begin to reflect on their feelings of responsibility for what happened to the girl. The younger generation (Sheila and Eric) feel much more responsible than the older members of the group. The family then begin to suspect that the inspector was not genuine. Gerald phones the infirmary and finds out that no girl has recently died there. The family begins to rejoice but soon the phone rings. The police are calling to say that a young woman has died in the infirmary and that a police inspector is on his way to visit the family.

Characters

Arthur Birling: Head of the household. Birling is a wealthy business owner. He is rich but still wishes for a higher standing in the community. He strives for acceptance by the upper middle class and wishes for a knighthood.

Sybil Birling: She is the mother of Sheila and Eric. Sybil Birling is quite snobbish and cold-hearted and cares about her position in society above all other considerations.

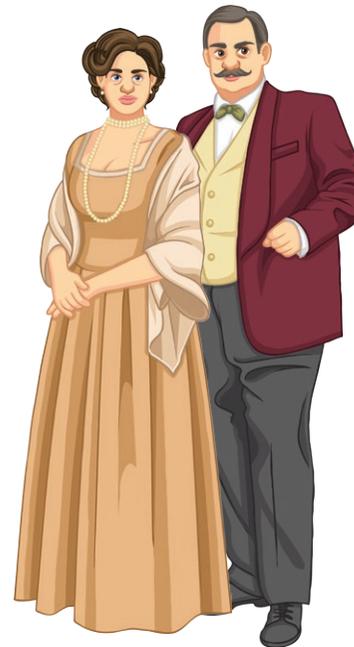
Sheila Birling: She is in her early to mid-twenties and has become engaged to Gerald Croft at the beginning of the play. She is attractive but insecure and is more easily shocked than the rest of the family. She becomes one of the most moral characters in the play.

Eric Birling: He is the younger brother of Sheila and the family worries about his tendency to drink. He clearly seems to be a lost soul at the beginning of the play. He becomes, like Sheila, one of the moral spokespersons in the play.

Gerald Croft: Slightly older than Sheila, he is from a socially and financially secure background (one Arthur Birling strives towards). He is successful in business but also a liar and it is soon discovered that he has been unfaithful to Sheila.

Eva Smith/Daisy Renton: The audience never meets this character – she is the focus of most of the conversation in the play but is never seen. Eva was a worker in Arthur Birling's factory before being sacked from this and another job. She falls on hard times and, by the time the play begins, has died by her own hand.

Inspector Goole: The Inspector is shown to be a 'fake' inspector by the end of the play. He is purposeful and moral and holds nothing back in trying to get the family to confess their sins. When we learn that he is not a real inspector, we are left to wonder who, or indeed what, he is.



Context

The play is set in 1912 but was written in 1945 (just after the Second World War). J. B. Priestley is therefore looking back over the bloody history of both World Wars and the Russian Revolution. He seems to be warning the characters of the consequences of caring solely for oneself.

The setting, in 1912, also allows for Priestley to look back on a social class system he did not agree with. The character of the Inspector is outside this class system and so able to attack its values.

The Titanic is mentioned in the opening moments of the play as a feat of modern engineering. The audience watching the play would be aware of the fate of the Titanic and so laugh or cringe at the comments made by Arthur Birling and Gerald Croft.

J.B. Priestley's politics and beliefs strongly mirrored those he wrote for his character, Inspector Goole.

The finished play was sent originally to Moscow, the home of Communism. It was here that it had its world premiere. Communism was a political movement that fought for the social and political equality for all that Priestley believed in.

Priestley had fought in the trenches in the First World War and was deeply aware of the depths of human suffering.

Key Vocabulary and Techniques:

Act	Setting
Characters	Simile
Dramatic irony	Stage directions
Emotive language	Staging
Play	
Playwright	
Scene	

Themes

Social Class

- The Birlings are comfortably middle class but strive for more.
- The working classes are shown as having little autonomy in the system. They have little opportunity to work for something better. Eva/Daisy represents this class.
- The Inspector is outside of the class system and seeks to attack it by showing its faults.

Conflict between Generations

- Sheila and Eric begin to find their parents old-fashioned and rigid throughout the play.
- The older Birlings still treat Sheila and Eric as children, even though they are grown up.
- Eric and, to a greater extent, Sheila begin to hate their parents' attitudes about society towards the end of the play.

Judgement

- The play functions like a medieval morality play – holding a mirror up to the characters and showing what they have done wrong.
- The judgment here is secular (rather than religious) in keeping with Priestley's socialist interests. The Inspector is from the police – not God.
- Sheila and Eric seem to learn more from the lesson than the other characters. Arthur, Sybil and even Gerald prefer to consider the entire thing a hoax that they can easily forget.

Loss of Innocence

- There is a certain innocence (or lack of understanding) in the Birlings at the beginning of the play. They seem completely oblivious to their actions having any consequences.
- The older generation is seen as rigid and lacking in ability to learn from mistakes. Sheila and Eric are younger and begin to question their own decisions.

Deception

- At one point or another, most of the characters deceive others about their knowledge of Eva/Daisy.
- Sybil Birling is honest about her dealings with Eva/Daisy but deceives herself into thinking that she is not in some way responsible for Eva's fate.
- Some of the characters (Arthur, Gerald and Sybil) continue to deceive themselves about their involvement throughout the play.
- We are never certain of the depth of the Inspector's deception throughout the play. Is Eva/Daisy really dead? Is he really an inspector? Are Eva and Daisy the same person?

Key Quotations:

'In fact, I insist upon being one of the family now. I've been trying long enough, haven't I?' **Gerald, Act One**

'Gerald, I'm going to tell you frankly, without any pretences, that your engagement to Sheila means a tremendous lot to me ... You're just the kind of son-in-law I've always wanted.' **Arthur, Act One**

'Why, a friend of mine went over this new liner last week – the Titanic – she sails next week – forty-six thousand eight hundred tons – forty-six thousand eight hundred tons – New York in five days – and every luxury – and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable.' **Arthur, Act One**

'You seem to be a very well-behaved family to me –' 'We think we are' **Gerald and Arthur, Act One**

'It's the way I like to go to work. One person and one line of inquiry at a time. Otherwise there's a muddle.' **The Inspector, Act One**

'Still, I can't accept any responsibility. If we were all responsible for everything that happened to everybody we'd had anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn't it?' **Arthur, Act One**

'But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people.' **Sheila, Act One**

'Why – you fool – he knows! Of course he knows. And I hate to think how much he knows that we don't know yet. You'll see. You'll see.' **Sheila, Act One**

'You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl. If you do, then the Inspector will just break it down. And it'll be all the worse when he does.' **Sheila, Act Two**

'I suppose it was inevitable. She was young and pretty and warm-hearted – and intensely grateful. I became at once the most important person in her life – you understand?' **Gerald, Act Two**

'If you think you can bring any pressure to bear upon me, Inspector, you're quite mistaken. Unlike the other three, I did nothing I'm ashamed of or that won't bear investigation.' **Sybil, Act Two**

'But just remember this. One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering, and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, with what we think and say and do. 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.' **The Inspector, Act Three**

'That fellow obviously didn't like us. He was prejudiced from the start. Probably a Socialist or some sort of crank – he talked like one.' **Arthur, Act Three**

'It's what happened to the girl and what we all did to her that matters. And I still feel the same about it, and that's why I don't feel like sitting down and having a nice cosy talk.' **Eric, Act Three**

'That was the police. A girl has just died – on her way to the Infirmary – after swallowing some disinfectant. And a police inspector is on his way here – to ask some questions.' **Birling, Act Three**

Symbols and Motifs:

The following can be seen as symbols in the play: the Inspector; Eva/Daisy; the photograph; the 'Titanic'; the engagement ring; the port; golf.

The following motifs recur throughout the play: guilt; uncertainty; deception and truth; secrets; class; possession and greed; ambition.

Key Vocabulary:

cheap labour	gender	provincial
class	Goole/ghoul	respectability
confession	hierarchy	snobbish
confidence	immoral/moral	socialist
deception	inquiry	submissive
emancipation	inter-generational	superficial
engagement	judgement	vulgar
exploitation	male-dominated	