



# RS4 English: An Inspector Calls - Core Knowledge



## 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 were silenced by unfair restrictions and laws that meant they were dependent on the few upper class businessmen who ruled for their own profit. 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.

The play is set in 1912 so Priestley can remind the 1946 audience what pre-war society was like and warn them to not revert back to the capitalist, selfish society that once ruled



### Age

The older Birlings still treat Sheila and Eric as children, even though they are grown up.

Sheila and Eric begin to find their parents old-fashioned and rigid throughout the play.

Sheila and Eric would have been more relatable to the 1945 audience thus their transformation from capitalists to socialists is a way for Priestley to appeal to the upper class members of the audience who could afford a ticket to the theatre when rationing was still enforced. Eric would have resembled the few young men who survived the war and Sheila a modern feminist with the right to vote. Priestley encourages the audience to parallel themselves with the younger generation.

### Responsibility

The play is concerned with both personal responsibility and social responsibility.

In 1942, Priestley helped to set up a new political party, the Common Wealth Party, which later transformed into the Labour party. He was increasingly concerned about the consequences of social inequality and called for greater democracy and public ownership of land so people were more driven to support each other.

Priestley seems to be warning the characters of the consequences of caring solely for oneself.



### Gender

Women are presented as the weaker sex, as they were through history, but Priestley has the Inspector empower Sheila and she becomes the wisest member of the family by the denouement of the play, reflecting the empowerment of women as a result of the franchise and the role they played during WW2.

Even upper-class women had limited choices and were under the control of men.

The vulnerability of women evokes sympathy, which supports Priestley's belief in gender equality and community as 'one body.'

## Characters

1. The character Mr Birling is myopic, obstinate and hubristic.
2. The character Mrs Birling is aloof, hypocritical and supercilious.
3. The character Sheila Birling is entitled, penitent and enlightened.
4. The character Eric Birling is immature, reckless and remorseful.
5. The character Gerald Croft is charismatic, disingenuous and self-serving.
6. The character Eva Smith is emblematic, exploited and voiceless.
7. The character Inspector Goole is authoritative, moralistic and prophetic.
8. The character Edna is submissive, functionary and invisible.

## Context

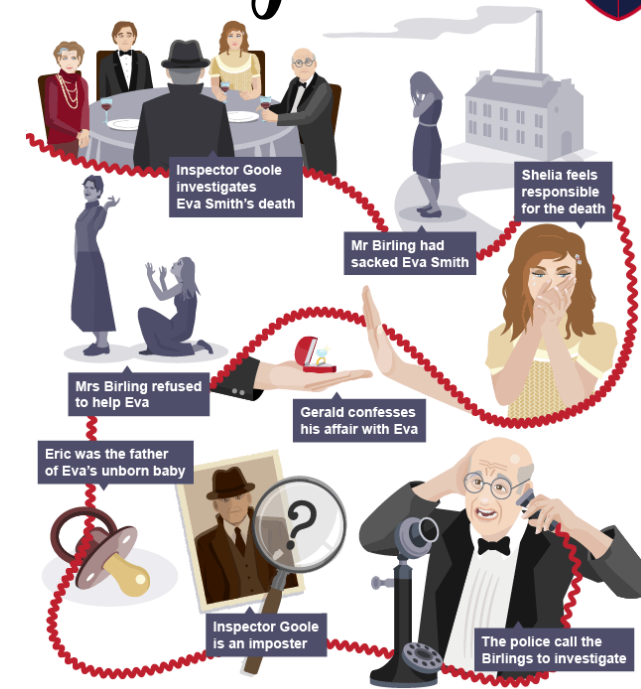
**Edwardian Period:** The play is set in 1912 during the Edwardian period. This is the time between the end of the Victorian era and the start of the First World War in 1914. In this time period class divisions were still very clear with there being virtually no welfare state or benefits in place for the poorer sections of society.

**The Post-War Period:** The play was performed in 1945 (in the Soviet Union and in the UK in 1946). This was a time of significant social, economic and political upheaval after two World Wars that completely altered the make-up of British society.

**WW1 (1914-1918):** WW1 was a watershed moment in European history. Priestley fought in the war and cited the war as the cause for his prejudice against the ruling class.

**Women:** Women in 1912, regardless of social class, were seen as second-class citizens – a fact underlined by their lack of a right to vote. It was the deplorable state of working-class women's lives that prompted Emmeline Pankhurst to found the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. The suffrages fought to bring equality for women.

**The Titanic:** The ship is mentioned in the opening moments of the play as a feat of modern engineering. The audience knows the Titanic sank, and so this is dramatic irony.



## Top 10 Key Quotations

1. **Mr Birling:** 'I'm talking as a hard-headed, practical man of business.' (Act 1)
2. **Mr Birling:** 'as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense.' (Act 1)
3. **Mrs Birling:** 'Girls of that class.' (Act 2)
4. **Mrs Birling:** 'Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility.' (Act 2)
5. **Sheila Birling:** 'But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people.' (Act 1)
6. **Sheila Birling:** '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.' (Act 2)
7. **Eric Birling:** 'I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty.' (Act 3)
8. **Eric Birling:** 'You lot may be letting yourselves out nicely, but I can't.' (Act 3)
9. **Gerald Croft:** 'She was young and fresh and charming.' (Act 2)
10. **Inspector Goole:** 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.' (Act 3)



# RS4 English: An Inspector Calls - Writing a Response



Sophisticated Vocabulary	Definition
bourgeoisie (n.)	The middle class
capitalism (n.)	An economic and political system in trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, not the state
didactic (adj.)	Something intended to teach
hypocrisy (n.)	Pretending to have moral beliefs or principles that one does not actually follow
microcosm (n.)	A smaller version of a bigger thing
misogyny (n.)	Hatred, dislike, or prejudice against women
morality (n.)	Principles concerning right and wrong behaviour.
omniscient (adj.)	All knowing
patriarchy (n.)	A male dominated hierarchy
proletariat (n.)	The working class
socialism (n.)	A political philosophy that and theory that believes the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community

Term	Definition
dramatic irony	When the audience knows something that the characters do not
foreshadowing	an indication of a future event
the fourth wall	an imagined wall that separates the story from the real world
stage directions	an instruction written into the script of a play indicating the movements/behaviours of performers
lighting	lighting can be used to create dramatic effects, such as how the lighting gets 'brighter and harder' when the Inspector arrives

### Killer Openings

**When answering a character-based question:**

- What** impression are we given of the character? (Think: VOCAB)
- How** does Priestley explore this character through the play? (Think: EVIDENCE)
- Why** does Priestley include the character in the play? (Think: INTENT & CONTEXT)

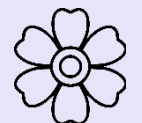



**When answering a theme-based question:**


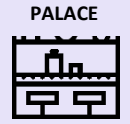


- What** is Priestley trying to say about the theme? (Think: MESSAGE)
- How** does he explore the theme through the play? (Think: CHARACTERS & EVIDENCE)
- Why** focus on this theme? (Think: INTENT & CONTEXT)

*WAGOLL - Eric*

In An Inspector Calls, JB Priestley presents Eric Birling as reckless and troubled at the start, yet remorseful and penitent by the play's conclusion. At first, Eric's irresponsible behaviour and drinking reveal his immaturity and inner conflict. However, as the play progresses, he openly admits his mistakes and shows genuine guilt over his role in Eva Smith's death, demonstrating significant personal growth. Priestley uses Eric to illustrate how capitalism and selfishness cause harm not only to individuals but also to those around them. Moreover, Eric, alongside Sheila, embodies Priestley's hope that the younger generation can drive positive social change through empathy and open-mindedness, rejecting their parents' outdated values.

### Motifs/Symbols





### Writing structure - What/How/Why

**What — What impression does Priestley create?**

- address the question by making a clear, concise point about what Priestley is doing

**How 1 — How do you know this? (quotation)**

- make sure that you select a quotation that you can analyse in detail and embed it into your sentence fully. Crop the quotation as needed.

**How 2 — How can you explore this quotation?**

- explain what the quotation means/implies
- zoom in on a particular word/phrase/technique – say a lot about a little

**Why — Why does the writer give us this impression?**

- focus on Priestley's intention when crafting the text and relate this to the context and/or comment on the effect on the reader

*WAGOLL - Sheila*

Although Sheila does not instantly accept her faults, she rapidly seeks to change her mentality and her view on society, which was most likely obstructed by her over-protective parents' corrupted views on the lower class. Through the lessons from the Inspector she learns the importance of accepting responsibility for her actions, pledging "I will never, never do this again to anybody." The repetition of "never" highlights her remorse and suggests she will intentionally pay attention to avoiding any such incident from occurring again. It also shows how regretful she feels for even allowing it to even occur once. The noun "anybody" highlights the fact that she is inclusive of everyone and will no longer allow class to divide or define her. This is significant due to the stark contrast between her parents' stubborn views as the would never show consideration for someone of a lower class, like Eva Smith. As a young lady, Sheila was ironically able to have the biggest growth of mind from all the characters resulting in her learning to treat all people fairly and equally. Priestly highlights the important role young people play in post war society for bringing changes such as votes for women, the Labour party and a welfare system granting opportunities for the poorer classes, showing his audience that they cannot return to Edwardian values.