

An Inspector Calls: Revision notes



These notes are to help kick-start your revision of the play for the GCSE English Literature examination.

Introduction

There are a number of **references to external events** within the play and these could provide the areas which could be developed further. Among these are:

- _ The Titanic
- _ The emergence of Russia as a world power
- _ The outbreak of World War One
- _ The importance of the Women's Rights movement
- _ The rise of Socialism
- _ The writings of H G Wells

Key Notes:

- ❖ Very **compact structure** to the play, nothing is allowed to distract the audience from the central theme. There is no sub-plot.
- ❖ The play takes place in just **one location**, the action is continuous.
- ❖ Act One begins by **introducing the characters and establishing the idea of a happy and united family** looking forward to the future with a degree of confidence. In retrospect, there are a number of hints that all is not as it seems but these are not particularly obvious until later in the play. There is nothing to warn us of the shock of the Inspector's visit events soon gather speed and it is not long before we are being informed of Birling and Sheila's involvement with Eva Smith
- ❖ **Tensions increase**, firstly as Gerald's affair is unveiled (and the scandal it would cause) and Sheila begins to realise that they are all implicated in some way 'he is giving us rope – so that we'll hang ourselves'.
- ❖ Mrs Birling's attempts to shift the blame for the girl's suicide lead her to blame the father of the unborn child.
- ❖ The **tension is heightened** at this point by the **dramatic entrance** of Eric.
- ❖ With the **departure of the Inspector** it would appear that what follows will be something of **an anti-climax** as **the Inspector's identity is put into doubt** by a series of observations made by the Birling family and Gerald. Even the existence of Eva is called into question.
- ❖ However, **the tension remains** to some extent as the two generations confirm the differences as suggested by the Inspector - **the moral divide** is very great indeed.
- ❖ The **final denouement**, the phone call announcing that a police inspector is on his way to ask some questions about a girl who has just died in the infirmary is **as shocking as it is surprising** and ensures that the audience will leave the auditorium in a state of real shock

Quick Summary

Act I

Sheila Birling has become engaged to Gerald Croft and as a result the Birling family have enjoyed a family dinner together. Mr Birling makes grand speeches giving his views on technology and industrial relations, emphasising his opinion that a man should only care about himself and his family and no-one else. Their evening is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a police inspector by the name of Goole who is making enquiries into the suicide of a young woman called Eva Smith.

The inspector has a photograph of the woman and from it Mr Birling admits that he once employed her in his factory but had sacked her over an industrial dispute over wages. Gerald Croft backs Mr Birling's belief that he acted within reason. Sheila and her brother Eric react differently, feeling that their father was harsh in sacking her. However, upon seeing the photograph herself, Sheila realises that she also sacked the same woman from her job as a shop assistant.

During the course of Act I it becomes clear that the inspector has an uncanny knowledge about the family's dealing with the girl. He then announces that the girl has in fact changed her name from Eva Smith to Daisy Renton. The reaction that Gerald has makes it obvious that he knows the girl also. By the time we reach the end of the act the inspector is already suggesting that many people share the responsibility for the miserable existence of the young girl which prompted her to take her own life.

Important questions & points about this act:

Why is Mr Birling happy about Sheila's engagement to Gerald? It is most likely because Gerald's father had always been his rival.

Birling's outlook of life -> the author thinks B. is wrong and will prove him wrong later in the play.

Eric's attitude to the strike? He would have given the employees the money; to him strikes are something good.

Relationship Sheila - Eric: typically brother-sister relationship, behave rude & unfriendly to each other but in principle like each other very much.

What have Sheila and the Inspector in common? Both of them want to know the truth, both think in a social way and also that Eva's death had been unnecessary.

Relationship Sheila- Gerald: Sheila loves him; to her he's a 'good catch'.

On the other hand Gerald; sees mostly the business aspect of the connection-> no deep feelings!

Why did Eva Smith change her name into Daisy Renton?

She might have had to hide something or might have wanted to start a new, better life.

Act II

There is by now an evident tension between Sheila and Gerald which becomes heightened when he admits that he had had an affair with Daisy Renton in the spring of the previous year. Whilst feeling angry with Gerald for his involvement with the girl she does have a certain respect for his openness and honesty with his admission.

Mrs Birling makes attempts to intimidate the inspector and control the situation.

Despite this, Sheila feels that it is foolish to try and hinder the inspector's enquiries and this appears to be well founded. At the point when Eric is out of the room Mrs Birling is forced to admit that she also has an involvement with the girl. Two weeks earlier she had refused the girl who had come to her seeking help. It is then revealed that the girl was pregnant and the suspicion now points at Eric as being the father of the unborn child.

Important questions & points

The state of the engagement after Gerald confessed his affair: Sheila solved the engagement, she broke up, but actually she isn't very angry anymore but she needs some time to think.

The inspector's behaviour, Sheila stares at him 'wonderingly and dubiously: because he seems to know all answers in advance.

Act III

Eric confesses that he was he who had got the girl pregnant. He also admits to having stolen money from his father's firm in an attempt to support her. When he hears that his mother refused to help the girl he is horrified and blames her for both the death of the girl and of the unborn child. At this point it becomes clear that nay family unity has now dissolved. The inspector has therefore done his job by showing each of them that they had a part to play in ruining the girl's life.

He then goes on to make a speech about the consequence of social irresponsibility which is in direct contrast to the speeches made by Mr Birling at the start of the play. The inspector then leaves. Gerald and Mr Birling begin to have doubts about the Inspector's identity and are gradually able to prove that the man was not a real Police Inspector. This then raises further doubts between them all about whether they have been talking about the same girl or indeed whether any girl had actually killed herself at all. Gerald telephones the infirmary who confirms that they have no record of any girl dying there that afternoon. Naturally there is a general feeling of relief upon hearing this.

Sheila and Eric still feel guilty about their action although they seem to have been changed by the recent events. The others, however, feel a greater sense of relief and their confidence in the rightness of their own actions is

restored. At that point the telephone rings and Mr Birling answers it. It is the police calling to say that a young woman has just died on her way to the infirmary and that an inspector is on his way to make enquiries about her death.

Important questions and points:

Mood in the dining-room: feeling of guilt, wish to learn something.

The growing feeling effect of the evening's events on the Birling family as a whole: they start to feel involved, start arguing amongst themselves, and feel bitter. They make each other responsible for what has happened.

For Sheila it doesn't matter whether the inspector is real or not because what's important to her is that she now knows the truth. But to her parents it's seems to make a big difference because the confession to a real police man would have meant a public scandal.

Sheila & Eric: they learnt from their mistakes, they become more mature and 'real grownups'.

Mr & Mrs. Birling and Gerald come to the point of accepting some responsibility, but not for very long. All in all they haven't learned anything! They want to forget everything, pretend nothing had happened. They become self-confident again and that's why the second phone call takes place: the author wants to prove them wrong!

The Second call: shows the audience clearly the moral of the play, should make think about the play in general.

Characters

Mr Birling



A successful business man, a magistrate and someone who is active in local politics, Mr Birling has also had the honour of being Lord Mayor of Brumley. He hopes that all this will lead to him being given a knighthood and therefore becoming more socially acceptable to Sir George and Lady Croft, particularly considering his humble beginnings. His description is of a 'heavy-looking and portentous man'. This description helps to give an impression of him being of a threatening appearance. He is pleased about the engagement of Sheila to Gerald Croft, as he believes it will be good for his business. It is central to the play that his attitude to business and the fact that a man should 'look after his own' is discredited by the confessions that the inspector brings about.

- Prosperous factory owner, not the social equal of his wife. He is **'a self-made man'**
- First priority is to make money 'It's my duty to keep labour cost down'
- Welcomes Croft into his family as he represents a business link between his firm and that of Gerald Croft's father (a rival).
- Has an honest approach to life, he tells the Inspector that he wouldn't listen to Eva Smith's demand for a wage rise **'I refused, of course'** and is surprised why anyone should question why.
- Strongly believes that **'a man has to make his own way'**. He does not consider the harm he may cause to other people because of his attitude. He is a 'hard headed business man.'
- He is a magistrate and former mayor who is looking forward to receiving a knighthood.
- He is very aware that Gerald's mother is rather against her son's marriage because she believes him to be marrying beneath him socially.

- He is optimistic about the future, yet we know that what he predicts will not become true (NB dramatic irony).
- He refuses to accept any responsibility for Eva's death. He becomes increasingly annoyed by the Inspector's questioning and Eric's unsympathetic attitude. He tries to threaten the Inspector by talking about his friendship with the Chief Constable.
- The most disturbing part of the play for Birling is the scene in which he learns that his own son is shown to be a thief, a drunkard and is responsible for fathering a child. When he learns of all this he exclaims **'You damned fool - why didn't you come to me when you found yourself in this mess?'**
- Eric's reply indicates that Mr Birling was never close to his son 'Because you're not the kind of chap a man could turn to when he's in trouble'. Such a response indicates that things aren't going to improve much after the play ends.
- He represents a very unattractive sort of person. At the end of the play he grudgingly wishes things were better but even here he still thinks in terms of money **'Look, Inspector - I'd give thousands'**
- He continues to ignore the shameful things that his family has done. When it appears that the Inspector might be a hoaxer he is happy to believe that everything is as it was a few hours ago.
- He copies the Inspector and laughs when he remembers the faces of Eric and Sheila and accuses them of being **'the famous younger generation who know it all'**. This is an example of pride coming before a fall, a moment later of course he is panicking as the phone rings again.
- Mr Birling represents Priestley's hatred of businessmen who are only interested in making money. He will never alter his ways and it is left to the younger generation to learn from their mistakes

TASK:

1. Can you find any quotations in the play that show Arthur to be an unkind person?
2. What do you think the people who work at Arthurs business think of him?

Sheila



The Birling's daughter. She is engaged to be married to Gerald Croft. She is in her early twenties and is described as '**pretty**'. The attention surrounding her important engagement gives her great pleasure, showing her to be somewhat self-centred. She thus starts the play as someone whom the audience would regard as superficial however; this changes once she hears of the girl's death and her potential part in it and becomes more caring and sensitive.

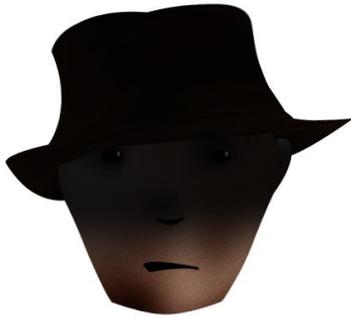
She shows genuine remorse about the fact that it was her who caused the girl to lose her job at the shop. At the start of the play she is 'very pleased with life'. She is young, attractive and has just become engaged. Her happiness is soon to be destroyed as is her faith in her family. Her response to the tragedy is one of the few encouraging things to come out of the play. She is genuinely upset when she hears of Eva's death and learns from her own behaviour. She is very distressed by the girl's suicide and thinks that her father's behaviour was unacceptable. She readily agrees that she behaved very badly and insists that she never meant the girl any harm.

- The Inspector says that she is only partly responsible and later on, when he is about to question Gerald, he encourages her to stay and listen to what he has to say so that she doesn't feel entirely responsible.
- Not only is she prepared to admit her faults, she also appears keen and anxious to change her behaviour in the future, '**I'll never, never do it again**'.
- She is aware of the mystery surrounding the Inspector, yet realises that there is no point in trying to hide the facts from him.
- She is mature about the breaking up of her engagement and remains calm. She won't be rushed into accepting the ring back once the Inspector has left.
- She is unable to accept her parent's attitude and is both amazed and concerned that they haven't learned anything from the episode. Although the Inspector might be a hoax, the family have still behaved in an entirely unsuitable manner.
- She learns of her responsibilities to others less fortunate than herself (the idea of the community) and is sensitive. Her readiness to learn from experience is in great contrast to her parents.

TASK:

1. Do you think that Sheila is a kind person, or an unkind person? Why do you think this?
2. Can you find any quotations to prove that in the end, Sheila is a socialist?

The Inspector



The Inspector, named 'Goole', is described as creating 'an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness'. His role grows as the play unfolds and the story of each character is revealed. Whilst they are broken down he remains solid and despite attempts from the others to distract him from his purpose he stays this way throughout. He is the one who makes things happen in the play. Were it not for him none of the secrets that the others have would be revealed and it is he who demonstrates how people are responsible for the affect they have on the lives of others. His sombre appearance in the play is in direct contrast to the Birling family. There is an air of celebration in the room until he enters bringing with him the news of the dead girl. From then on it is he who controls everything.

TASK:

1. Who do you think the inspector was?
2. What do you think the inspector wanted Gerald and the Birlings to learn?

Mrs Birling

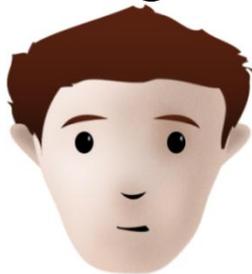


Owing to her coldness and lack of conscience, Mrs Birling is seen as being unsympathetic and out of touch with reality. It is this lack of understanding that leads to her making several snobbish comments and even to be unaware of her own son's heavy drinking. She is described as a **'rather cold woman and her husband's social superior'**. However, she shows signs of weakening when she realises that her actions had resulted in the death of her own grandchild. Once the inspector leaves though, she quickly recovers her old self, emphasising her harsh and uncaring nature.

TASK:

1. Do you think Sybil is an unkind person, or a kind person? Why do you think this?
2. Why do you think Sybil refused to help the girl who asked her charity for money?

Eric Birling



Eric is an opposite of his sister and **'not quite at ease'**. His father does not approve of him and his mother cannot see his faults one of which is a drink problem. He has made the dead girl pregnant and he has also stolen money from his father to support her. Like his sister, however, he feels both a strong sense of guilt and real sympathy towards Eva Smith.

TASK:

1. Why do you think Eric drinks so much?
2. Why do you think that Eric doesn't ask his father for money?

Gerald Croft



Sheila's fiancé and the son of her father's industrial rival, he is respected by Mr Birling with whom he shares an opinion on the way to conduct business. Self-confident and at ease with anyone he comes into contact with are his main traits. He is courteous and tactful towards the Birlings. It comes to light that he has had an affair with the dead girl who had changed her name to Daisy Renton at the time.

TASK:

1. Can you find quotations from the play that show Gerald had been unfaithful to Sheila?
2. Why do you think he was unfaithful?

Eva Smith/Daisy Renton



We never see her but the play revolves around her. She is linked to all the other characters, except for the inspector and Edna, who all seemed to have played a part in her downfall. Her existence and death are in direct contrast with the wealthy lives of the Birlings and Gerald Croft.

Task:

Who is to blame?

Who is to blame for Eva's death? Consider how each of the Birlings and Gerald Croft influences what happens to Eva - what part does each play in the chain of events leading to her death?

Give an account of this chain of events in the order in which each event occurs.

Say how far each character is at fault for what he or she has done to Eva. Then judge how far each is right or wrong in his or her attitude now to what was done - admitting or denying guilt.

In conclusion, try to assess how responsible, and how ready to admit responsibility, each of the five is.

Is there any connection between the age of each character and his or her readiness to accept blame?

The Inspector tells Mr. Birling that Eva Smith/Daisy Renton “**left a letter...and a sort of diary**”.

<u>Year and month</u>	<u>What happens</u>
September 1910	Eva sacked by Birling & Co.
December 1910	Eva employed by Milwards.
Late January 1911	Eva sacked by Milwards.
March 1911	Eva becomes Gerald's mistress.
Early September 1911	Gerald breaks off the affair.
Eva leaves Brumley for two months.	
November 1911	Eric meets Eva.
December 1911/January 1912	Eva finds she is pregnant.
Late March 1912	Mrs. Birling turns down Eva's application for help.
Early April 1912	Eva's suicide/the Inspector calls*

Why 1912?

Setting

There are no recorded interviews with J.B. Priestley which give a direct answer to why Priestley wrote the play in 1946 but set it in 1912. Judging by what we know of J.B. Priestley it is possible to guess. J.B. Priestley fought in WWI, and was a radio newscaster during WWII. He witnessed both of these wars that were being fought in order to save society. In *An Inspector Calls* written just after WWII, J.B. Priestley seems to be asking the question, "Just that kind of society are we fighting to save?" The social issues that were so prevalent in the labour strikes of 1912 were all important in 1946, because the very definition of society means that human beings don't live alone and that each one is responsible for their actions towards the other. By setting his characters in a time of innocence and hope, Priestley can speak even more strongly to his audiences who have lived through a time of despair. The pride and complacency of the Birling's seems all the more foolish to an audience who knows what is about to happen to the English people. The lessons that Eric and Sheila learn are even more poignant when one realizes that very soon all classes in England, upper, middle and lower, will be involved in the same tragic war.

When studying *An Inspector Calls* it is necessary and also highly important to look closely at the setting of it. The play is set in a fictitious industrial city called Brumley. Priestley grew up in the industrial northern city of Bradford and this may have been highly influential to him because in the play, Brumley, although not a real place, has a lot of background information given about it.

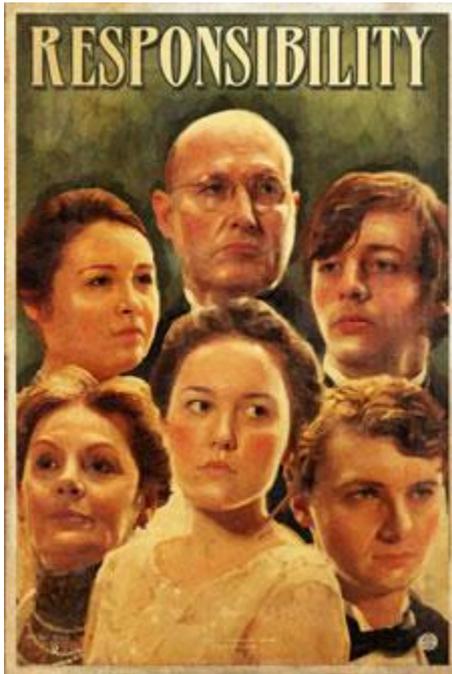
Brumley is a town of some importance. It has a Lord Mayor and a police force that boasts its own Chief Constable. In the play it is mentioned that there is to be a forthcoming visit by a member of the Royal Family and one of the main characters, Arthur Birling, is hoping for a knighthood through his activity in local politics and having once been Lord Mayor of Brumley.

There are clearly a large number of poor and needy women living in Brumley as there is mentioned in the play a place called the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation. Another of the characters, Mrs Birling, is involved with this organisation and this gives us an insight into some historical context. In the time when the play was set a good many of these organisations were in existence and relied mainly upon financial support from wealthy people, such as Mrs Birling, and help was given to individuals at the discretion and decision of those benefactors. Priestley makes other references, apart from the Birlings, towards social injustice.

Themes

In *An Inspector Calls*, the central theme is responsibility. Priestley is interested in our personal responsibility for our own actions and our collective responsibility to society. The play explores the effect of class, age and sex on people's attitudes to responsibility, and shows how prejudice can prevent people from acting responsibly.

So, how does Priestley weave the themes through the play?



The words **responsible** and **responsibility** are used by most characters in the play at some point.

Each member of the family has a different attitude to responsibility. Make sure that you know how each of them felt about their responsibility in the case of Eva Smith.

The Inspector wanted each member of the family to share the responsibility of Eva's death: he tells them, "each of you helped to kill her." However, his final speech is aimed not only at the characters on stage, but at the audience too:

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, and what we think and say and do.

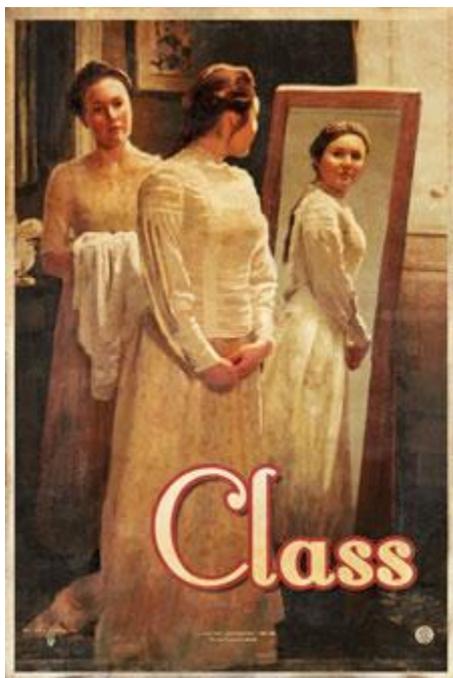
The Inspector is talking about a collective responsibility, everyone in society is linked, in the same way that the characters are linked to Eva Smith. Everyone is a part of "one body", the Inspector sees society as more important than individual interests. The views he is propounding are like those of Priestley who was a socialist.

He adds a clear warning about what could happen if, like some members of the family, we ignore our responsibility:

And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, when they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.

What would Priestley have wanted his audience to think of when the Inspector warns the Birlings of the "fire and blood and anguish"?

Probably he is thinking partly about the world war they had just lived through - the result of governments blindly pursuing 'national interest' at all costs. No doubt he was thinking too about the Russian revolution in which poor workers and peasants took over the state and exacted a bloody revenge against the aristocrats who had treated them so badly.



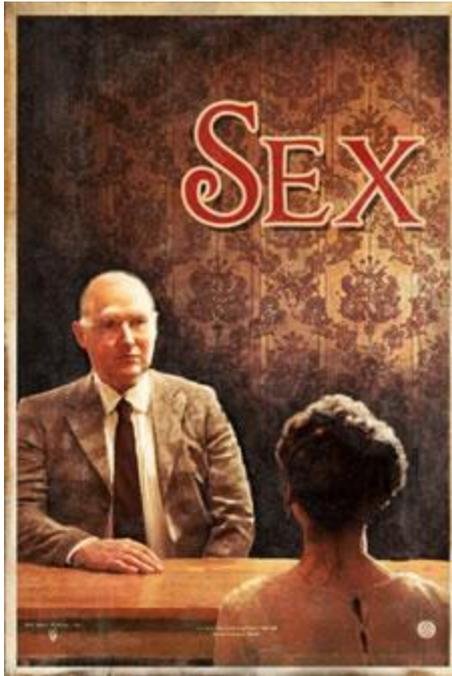
Apart from Edna the maid, the cast of the play does not include any lower class characters. We see only the rich, upwardly mobile Birling's and the upper class Gerald Croft. Yet we *learn* a lot about the lower class as we hear of each stage in Eva's life and we see the attitude the Birling's had for them.

This table looks at the way the Birlings saw lower-class Eva when they came into contact with her, and the way that they see themselves within their own class.

Characters	Attitudes to the lower class:	Attitudes to the upper class:
	At the start of the play, this character was...	To this character, Eva was...
Mr Birling	keen to be knighted to cement his hard-fought rise to the upper class	cheap labour
Sheila	happy spending a lot of time in expensive shops	someone who could be fired out of spite
Gerald	prepared to marry Sheila, despite her lower social position	a mistress who could be discarded at will
Eric	awkward about his 'public-school-and-Varsity' life	easy sex at the end of a drunken night out
Mrs Birling	socially superior to her husband, and embarrassed at his gaffes	a presumptuous upstart

The Palace Variety Theatre was a music hall. It was not seen as quite 'respectable' entertainment - probably not somewhere where Sheila would have gone. The stalls bar of the Palace Variety Theatre, where Eva Smith met both Gerald and Eric, was the bar for the lower classes and a favourite haunt of prostitutes. We could ask what Gerald and Eric were there in the first place! Alderman Meggarty, a local dignitary, also went there a lot.

Priestley is trying to show that the upper classes are unaware that the easy lives they lead rest upon hard work of the lower classes.

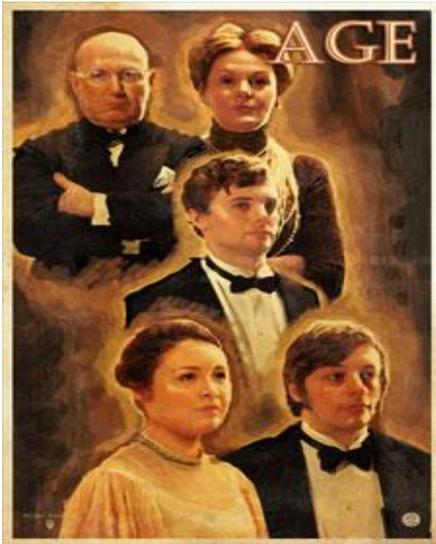


Because Eva was a woman - in the days before women were valued by society and had not yet been awarded the right to vote - she was in an even worse position than a lower class man. Even upper class women had few choices. For most, the best they could hope for was to impress a rich man and marry well - which could explain why Sheila spent so long in Milwards.

For working class women, a job was crucial. There was no social security at that time, so without a job they had no money. There were very few options open to women in that situation: many saw no alternative but to turn to prostitution.

- Look at these quotations, showing the attitude to women of some characters:
- Mr Birling is dismissive of the several hundred women in his factory: "We were paying the usual rates and if they didn't like those rates, they could go and work somewhere else."
- Gerald saw Eva as "young and fresh and charming" - in other words, someone vulnerable he could amuse himself by helping.
- Mrs Birling couldn't believe that "a girl of that sort would ever refuse money." Her charitable committee was a sham: a small amount of money was given to a small amount of women, hardly scratching the surface of the problem.

Why did Priestley decide to hinge his play on the death of a young working class woman rather than the death of a young working class man?



The older generation and the younger generation take the Inspector's message in different ways. While Sheila and Eric accept their part in Eva's death and feel huge guilt about it, their parents are unable to admit that they did anything wrong.

This table looks at these contrasting ideas:

The Old (Mr and Mrs Birling)	The Young (Sheila and Eric)
The old are set in their ways. They are utterly confident that they are right and they see the young as foolish.	The young are open to new ideas. This is first seen early in Act 1 when both Eric and Sheila express sympathy for the strikers - an idea which horrifies Birling, who can only think of production costs and ignores the human side of the issue.
The old will do anything to protect themselves: Mrs Birling lies to the Inspector when he first shows her the photograph; Mr Birling wants to cover up a potential scandal.	The young are honest and admit their faults. Eric refuses to try to cover his part up, saying, " <i>the fact remains that I did what I did.</i> "
They have never been forced to examine their consciences before and find they cannot do it now - as the saying goes, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks.'	Sheila and Eric see the human side of Eva's story and are very troubled by their part in it. They do examine their consciences.
Mr and Mrs Birling have much to fear from the visit of the 'real' inspector because they know they will lose everything.	Sheila and Eric have nothing to fear from the visit of the 'real' inspector because they have already admitted what they have done wrong, and will change.

Gerald Croft is caught in the middle, being neither very young nor old. In the end he sides with the older generation, perhaps because his aristocratic roots influence him to want to keep the status quo and protect his own interests.

Ultimately, we can be optimistic that the young - those who will shape future society - are able to take on board the Inspector's message.

Top Tips

- Use the following structure for all paragraphs:

1. Make a point and find a quote

Curley's wife is consistently left lonely and isolated on the Ranch. This is clear in the quote 'I don't never get to talk to nobody'

2. What does the quote suggest?

This suggests that Curley's Wife is not usually given the opportunity to talk to people.

3. Further analysis

The word 'never' is imperative and further implies that she is not allowed to speak with other people under any circumstances.

4. Alternative interpretation

It could also imply that she causes trouble and is therefore prohibited from speaking to anyone.

5. Writers purpose

Ultimately, Steinbeck creates a sense of pity for a woman who is cut off from any social interaction. This causes the reader to feel sympathy for Curley's Wife as she is often left feeling dejected and ignored.

- Try to memorise 2 short quotations per character and theme, write them on flash cards and get someone to test you on them.

- Always link back to the question! At the end of every paragraph ensure that you have explained how this links to the question.

- Highlight the question to ensure understanding:

How does Mr. Birling change throughout the course of the play?

This clearly asks HOW he changes; it doesn't ask if he does change. Ensure you know what you are being asked to do.

- Breathe. 3 Deep breaths is apparently one of the most effective ways to ensure that your body begins to calm down. This will serve you well when working under pressure.

GOOD LUCK