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Edward Mooney – MA Cantab, PGCE.

*Qualified and experienced teacher, tutor and
examiner.*



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Introduction

(Please note: this is the extended version of this revision guide. A more concise, even more last-minute version is also available from [GCSEEnglish.uk](https://www.gcseenglish.uk).)

This last-minute revision guide is designed to help you prepare for the *An Inspector Calls* question in your AQA GCSE English Literature Paper 2 exam (8702/2).

An Inspector Calls is assessed in Section A of the exam, and you will have 44 minutes to complete your answer. If you have 25% extra time, your total time for this section will be 55 minutes.

You must select one essay question to answer from a choice of two – usually one focused on a character and one on a theme. You will not be given an extract. Your answer must explore the play as a whole, using detailed textual references and analysis.

Since this is a last-minute revision guide, it does not contain every possible piece of information about *An Inspector Calls* or the exam. However, it covers the key elements needed for success, helping you focus on what truly matters in the final days before your exam.

How Many Marks Are Available?

Your *An Inspector Calls* answer is worth 30 marks, with an additional 4 marks available for SPaG (spelling, punctuation and grammar). To maximise your marks, make sure to write clearly and accurately, using a formal academic style and correct punctuation.

The Four Key Revision Tasks

If you are feeling overwhelmed, focus on these four essential revision tasks:

1. **Read the text** – Even if you have studied *An Inspector Calls* in class, take time to re-read key chapters. Understanding the plot, characters, and themes will allow you to engage confidently with any question.
2. **Memorise key quotations** – You need to reference the play accurately in your response. Aim to memorise at least 10 key quotations, ensuring they



cover characters, themes, and key moments. Shorter quotes are easier to remember and can be used flexibly in different essays.

3. **Read model answers** – Studying high-quality example essays, such as those available from [GCSEEnglish.uk](https://www.gcseenglish.uk), will help you understand how to structure your response, use evidence effectively, make links to relevant context and develop your analysis.
4. **Complete timed essay practice** – The best way to prepare for the exam is to practise writing full answers under timed conditions. Use a stopwatch and stick to the allotted time to simulate exam conditions. Practising within time limits will improve your confidence, speed, and ability to structure your ideas clearly.

Note: you should hand write your practise essays on lined A4 paper unless you know that you (or your school) will be typing your exams. If this is the case, practise typing in a blank document with spelling and grammar checking tools turned off.

About the Author

This revision guide was written by Edward Mooney, an experienced teacher, tutor and examiner. He has also written a series of high-quality Grade 9 model answers for the GCSE English exams, which are available for purchase on Amazon and [GCSEEnglish.uk](https://www.gcseenglish.uk).

Final Thoughts




This guide is here to simplify your revision and boost your confidence. While it may not cover every detail, it provides the essential knowledge and skills you need to approach the exam with clarity and focus.

Stay calm, use your revision time wisely, and remember: preparation is the key to success.

Best of luck in your exam!



Revision Checklist

<input type="checkbox"/>	Re-read the text in full.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Watch a good film/theatre adaptation.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember the plot summary.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember the character summaries.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the text's main themes.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the text's form, structure and language.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the text's historical context.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and remember information about the dramatisation of the text.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and memorise key vocabulary.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read and memorise key quotes.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Read model answers.	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Write timed essays using past questions.	



Plot summary

J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* is a morality play set in 1912, just before the First World War, though it was written in 1945, in the weeks after the end of the Second World War. The entire play takes place on a single evening in the home of the wealthy Birling family. It explores themes of responsibility, class, and social justice, unfolding like a detective mystery with a powerful moral message.

The play begins with the Birlings – Arthur, Sybil, Sheila, and Eric – celebrating Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft, whose family owns a rival business. Mr Birling is in an optimistic, self-satisfied mood, giving pompous speeches about business, progress, and the unlikelihood of war. His views reflect a capitalist, individualist mindset. However, his confident predictions are undercut by dramatic irony, since the audience, having lived through two world wars, knows he is wrong about nearly everything.

Their evening is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Inspector Goole, who says he is investigating the suicide of a young woman named Eva Smith. She has committed suicide by drinking disinfectant. At first, the Birlings do not recognise her name, but the Inspector gradually reveals how each of them is connected to her.

Mr Birling is the first to be questioned. He admits that Eva worked at his factory and was sacked after leading a strike for better pay. He shows no sympathy, claiming he did what any businessman would. Sheila is next. She recognises Eva as a shop assistant at Milwards and admits she had her dismissed out of jealousy, feeling that Eva had made her look foolish. Sheila is genuinely upset and accepts blame, marking the start of her moral awakening.

Attention then shifts to Gerald, who initially tries to avoid the truth but eventually confesses to having had an affair with Eva (who was then calling herself Daisy Renton). Gerald gave her shelter and money while she was in need, but he ended the relationship abruptly. Though upset, Sheila respects his honesty. However, she breaks off the engagement, feeling that she can no longer trust him.

Mrs Birling, who runs a charity for women in need, is then questioned. Eva, pregnant and desperate, had gone to the charity for help – using the name "Mrs Birling" – but was coldly rejected. Sybil insists that Eva was dishonest and has only



herself to blame. She says that the man who got Eva pregnant should take full responsibility, unaware that she is condemning her own son.

Finally, Eric is confronted. Under pressure, he admits that he met Eva in a bar and forced himself on her. While the play uses veiled language, it is clear that Eric's behaviour involved a serious abuse of power and lack of consent. He got Eva pregnant and then stole money from his father's business to support her. Like Sheila, Eric is deeply ashamed. He becomes emotional and is the second character to fully accept responsibility for his role in Eva's suffering.

Once the Inspector has finished his investigation, he delivers a powerful final speech about collective responsibility – warning that unless people learn to care for one another, they will be taught the lesson “in fire and blood and anguish.” He then exits, leaving the family stunned.

Afterwards, a divide appears between the generations. Mr and Mrs Birling are relieved that there might not be a scandal and are more concerned with their social reputation than moral learning. Gerald discovers that there is no Inspector Goole registered with the local police. A call to the infirmary confirms that no recent suicide has been reported. The older generation begin to mock the evening's events, treating it as a hoax.

However, Sheila and Eric refuse to dismiss what has happened. Even if the Inspector was not real, they know their actions were wrong. They recognise that the evening has exposed the truth about their behaviour and values. For them, the lesson still stands.

The nature of Inspector Goole remains a mystery. Who was he? How did he know so much about each person's connection to Eva Smith? Was he a real inspector, a trickster, or something more supernatural – perhaps a ghost or a moral force sent to warn them? Priestley leaves the answer open, allowing the audience to reflect on the play's deeper meaning.

Just as the Birlings begin to relax, the telephone rings. Mr Birling answers and is shaken: a girl has just died at the infirmary after drinking disinfectant, and a real police inspector is on his way to question them. The play ends on this dramatic twist, as the cycle appears to be about to repeat – suggesting that actions have consequences, and the truth cannot be avoided forever.



Character summaries

Arthur Birling

Arthur Birling is a wealthy industrialist and the head of the Birling family. He is self-important, ambitious, and determined to rise further in society. A man of “provincial” background, Birling comes from a lower social class than his wife, Sybil, and this insecurity fuels his obsession with status, titles, and business success. He eagerly mentions a potential knighthood and is clearly keen to impress Gerald, whose family is socially superior. Birling is strongly capitalist and dismisses the idea of social responsibility. Priestley presents him as narrow-minded and short-sighted, using him to critique the self-serving attitudes of the upper-middle class.

Sybil Birling

Sybil Birling, Arthur’s wife, is cold, snobbish, and socially superior even to her husband. She chairs a charity for women but hypocritically denies help to Eva Smith, judging her to be dishonest. She refuses to accept blame and insists that the father of Eva’s child is responsible – unaware it is her own son. Like Mr Birling, she is part of the older generation that fails to learn anything by the end of the play. Priestley uses her to expose the cruelty and prejudice of the wealthy classes, particularly towards working-class women.

Sheila Birling

Sheila starts the play as a naive, sheltered young woman but undergoes significant development. After learning how her jealousy led to Eva’s dismissal from Milwards, she shows genuine remorse. Unlike her parents, she accepts responsibility and becomes more mature and self-aware. Sheila represents the younger generation’s ability to change and embrace Priestley’s message of social responsibility. She challenges her parents’ attitudes and ultimately rejects Gerald’s engagement ring, recognising the need for honesty and equality in relationships. Sheila becomes a symbol of hope for the future.



Eric Birling

Eric is the Birlings' troubled son. At the start, he is awkward and secretive, later revealed to have been involved in a predatory relationship with Eva, resulting in her pregnancy. He admits to forcing himself on her while drunk and stealing money to support her. Despite his serious wrongdoing, Eric is clearly remorseful and accepts full responsibility. Like Sheila, he is part of the younger generation willing to learn and change. Priestley uses Eric to show that even those who have caused great harm can grow morally if they take accountability.

Gerald Croft

Gerald is the son of a wealthy industrialist and Sheila's fiancé. Initially charming and polite, he is eventually revealed to have had an affair with Eva (as Daisy Renton). Though he did help her during a difficult time, he ultimately abandoned her. He tries to justify his actions and is more concerned with proving the Inspector was a fraud than reflecting on his behaviour. Gerald is caught between generations: less rigid than Mr Birling but unwilling to fully accept responsibility. His failure to change contrasts with Sheila's growth and highlights Priestley's criticism of moral complacency.

Inspector Goole

Inspector Goole is a mysterious and powerful figure who investigates Eva Smith's death. He forces each character to confront their actions and delivers Priestley's central message about collective responsibility. The Inspector is calm, authoritative, and morally driven. His name and final speech suggest he may not be a real inspector at all – possibly a supernatural or symbolic figure, such as a ghost or a conscience. He represents Priestley's socialist ideals and challenges the audience to consider how their actions affect others, especially the vulnerable. His purpose is to spark change, not just to assign blame.

Eva Smith / Daisy Renton

Eva Smith never appears on stage, but her story drives the entire play. She is a working-class woman who suffers at the hands of each character, losing her job,



her dignity, and eventually her life. Though we never hear her voice directly, she is portrayed as hardworking, dignified, and vulnerable. Priestley uses Eva to represent the wider suffering of the poor and voiceless in society. She becomes a symbol of social injustice and a moral test for each character. Her tragic death forces the audience to confront the consequences of inequality and lack of compassion.

Edna

Edna is the Birlings' maid and the only working-class character who physically appears on stage. Though she has few lines, her presence is significant. She opens the door for the Inspector and reminds the family of their privilege. Edna represents the silent working class – obedient, often ignored, and taken for granted by the wealthy classes. Priestley includes her to highlight how the wealthy rely on the labour of people like Edna while refusing to recognise their humanity. Her quiet role contrasts sharply with the loud moral failings of the Birlings.

Alderman Meggarty

Alderman Meggarty is a local dignitary mentioned during Gerald's confession. Although he holds a respected public position, he is revealed to be a well-known sexual predator who used his status to exploit women like Eva in seedy establishments. His character, though never seen on stage, represents the hidden corruption of the wealthy and the abuse of power behind closed doors. Priestley uses Meggarty to expose the hypocrisy of public respectability. He also acts as a warning: Gerald, who also exploited Eva under the guise of helping her, risks becoming like Meggarty if he refuses to reflect and change.



Themes

Social Responsibility

The central message of the play is that everyone has a duty to care for others, including those beyond their immediate family. Priestley uses the Inspector to deliver this lesson, exposing how each character's selfish actions contributed to Eva Smith's death and suggesting that socialist policies (high tax, welfare, high wages) would have saved her. Sheila and Eric learn this lesson, but Mr and Mrs Birling do not. The play challenges the audience to reflect on their own responsibilities in society, particularly in times of inequality. Priestley, a socialist, uses the play to argue that we are "members of one body" and must take collective responsibility, via the state, for the well-being of others, even if this makes us individually less wealthy.

Class and Social Hierarchy

Class divisions are at the heart of the play. The wealthy, upper-middle-class Birlings abuse their power and look down on those beneath them, such as Eva Smith. Priestley highlights how the working class are exploited, ignored, and silenced. Mr Birling is obsessed with climbing the social ladder and sees his daughter's engagement to Gerald as a business and status opportunity. Meanwhile, the characters most harmed in the play are working-class women. Through the Inspector, Priestley criticises the rigid class system and exposes the cruelty of a society that values status over compassion.

Generational Divide

Priestley presents a stark contrast between the older and younger generations. Mr and Mrs Birling represent the entrenched attitudes of pre-war Britain: they cling to wealth, status, and individualism, refusing to accept blame for others' suffering. Sheila and Eric, by contrast, are more open-minded and self-critical. Priestley places hope in the younger generation's willingness to challenge the status quo and embrace radical reform. "Social change" in the play implies more than mere kindness – it involves a complete restructuring of society, including the expropriation of wealth through heavy taxation of the upper and middle classes, and the threat of uprising if reform does not come. The Inspector's warning of



learning in “fire and blood and anguish” evokes war and revolution, echoing the fate of societies (e.g Russia) that ignore growing inequality.

Gender and Power

The play highlights how gender and class intersect to marginalise women. Eva Smith, a working-class woman, suffers repeated mistreatment at the hands of powerful men and socially superior women. She is fired, sexually exploited, and denied support – ultimately driven to suicide. Sheila’s experience also shows how women are judged by appearance and expected to conform. The behaviour of men like Gerald and Alderman Meggarty, who use women for their own pleasure, goes unchallenged in polite society. Priestley uses these injustices to expose the gender inequalities of Edwardian Britain and to call for greater respect and equality for women.

Guilt and Conscience

The play explores how individuals respond to guilt and how moral judgement comes from conscience rather than religious doctrine. Although the play deals with right and wrong, there is almost no mention of Christianity, the Bible, or God. This absence is striking, given the play’s moral focus and the traditional association between religion and ethics. Instead, the Inspector represents a secular moral force, encouraging self-reflection, empathy, and social responsibility. This reflects Priestley’s own scepticism towards organised religion and mirrors the wider decline of religious authority in 20th-century Britain. He suggests that morality should be rooted in human conscience and social awareness, not fear of divine punishment.



Form and structure

J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* is a carefully crafted play that combines the conventions of the *well-made play*, the crime thriller, and the morality play to deliver a compelling political message. The play's tightly controlled structure builds suspense, reveals character, and encourages the audience to reflect on the consequences of inequality, selfishness, and the abuse of power. Every element of its form and organisation works to support Priestley's call for a more socially responsible society.

A Well-Made Play – Subverted

Priestley draws on the structure of the *well-made play*, a popular 19th-century dramatic form known for its tight plotting, limited settings, rising tension, and dramatic twists. *An Inspector Calls* follows many of these conventions: the action takes place in one location (the Birlings' dining room), unfolds in real time, and revolves around the gradual revelation of past secrets. Information is carefully controlled, with one piece of the puzzle revealed at a time. Each act ends on a dramatic moment or cliffhanger, maintaining suspense and keeping the audience engaged.

However, Priestley also subverts the traditional well-made play. Rather than ending with a comforting resolution or a restoration of order, the final scene introduces a shocking twist: a phone call announces that a girl has just died and a real inspector is on his way. This circular structure – where the events seem about to repeat – leaves the audience in a state of uncertainty. It denies the neat closure expected of a well-made play and instead reinforces Priestley's moral warning: actions have consequences, and they cannot be avoided.

A Modern Morality Play

An Inspector Calls also functions as a modern morality play. In medieval morality plays, characters such as "Everyman" were confronted by personifications of moral forces like Virtue, Vice, and Death, with the goal of teaching the audience a clear moral lesson. In Priestley's version, the Inspector acts as the voice of conscience and social justice. He does not represent religion, but rather a secular, humanist morality grounded in empathy and collective responsibility.



Each character is tested in turn, and the audience watches how they respond to the truth of their actions. Sheila and Eric begin to change, accepting their guilt, while Mr and Mrs Birling reject responsibility. The play thus explores the possibility of redemption – but only if individuals are willing to reflect and reform. Rather than delivering salvation through God, Priestley delivers a political and social message: the survival of society depends on mutual care and accountability.

Crime Thriller Elements

The play also incorporates elements of the crime thriller. The arrival of Inspector Goole at the height of the Birlings' celebration sets the tone for a mystery. The structure of the Inspector's questioning mirrors a criminal investigation, with each character slowly revealed to be more involved than they initially admit. The audience is encouraged to act as detectives themselves, analysing clues, contradictions, and confessions.

However, Priestley uses this familiar structure to challenge expectations. This is not a murder mystery in the conventional sense – there is no single guilty party, no dramatic reveal of a killer. Instead, the “crime” is social in nature: the systematic mistreatment of a vulnerable woman by the rich and powerful. The real focus is on moral accountability, not legal guilt. Priestley transforms the crime thriller format into a vehicle for social critique, urging the audience to consider their own responsibilities.

The Chain of Events

The structure of the play follows a clear “chain of events” – a phrase used by the Inspector to describe how Eva Smith's life was gradually destroyed. Each act reveals a new link in the chain, showing how seemingly small actions – sacking a worker, making a petty complaint, refusing charity, abusing trust – can combine into tragedy. This chronological structure gives the audience a growing sense of inevitability and weight, as they see how every member of the Birling household played a part in Eva's downfall.

This structure also reinforces the play's theme of interconnectedness. Priestley challenges the idea that actions occur in isolation, suggesting instead that society



is bound together. Just as each link in the chain contributes to Eva's death, each individual bears part of the responsibility for social injustice.

Cliffhangers and Tension

One of the most effective structural techniques Priestley uses is the cliffhanger. Each act ends at a moment of heightened tension or suspense, keeping the audience emotionally and intellectually engaged. These cliffhangers also serve a thematic function – they delay resolution and force characters (and the audience) to sit in discomfort and anticipation, mirroring the moral reckoning Priestley demands.

At the end of Act One, the Inspector calmly says "Well?" just after Gerald reacts to the name "Daisy Renton". The revelation that Gerald knew Eva by another name, and his visible discomfort, sets up the next interrogation and exposes cracks in his relationship with Sheila. The act closes on a note of suspense and personal crisis.

Act Two also ends with a cliffhanger. After Sybil Birling coldly declares that the father of Eva's child is "entirely to blame" and ought to be made an example of, the audience hears the front door open and Eric enters to stand in silence. This moment is a masterful example of delayed revelation. The audience immediately understands the terrible irony – Eric is the father – but the full details of his actions are withheld until the next act. The silence and shock are more powerful than any line of dialogue could be.

The Final Twist and Political Warning

The structure of the play builds towards a powerful twist. After the Inspector leaves, the characters begin to doubt his identity and question whether the suicide even occurred. Mr and Mrs Birling are eager to believe it was all a hoax. Just as they regain their smug sense of security, the phone rings. A girl has just died – and a police inspector is on his way.

This twist reinforces Priestley's warning. The consequences of selfishness may be delayed, but they are inevitable. The Inspector's earlier prophecy – that people will learn their lesson "in fire and blood and anguish" – now takes on a new urgency.



The repetition of events implies that without genuine change, history will repeat itself through war, revolution, or personal tragedy.



Language

The language of *An Inspector Calls* is accessible, naturalistic, and purposefully constructed to reveal character, expose hypocrisy, and promote Priestley's central message of social responsibility. Through dialogue, tone, contrasts, and key rhetorical techniques, Priestley shapes how we respond to each character and their values. While the play's setting is Edwardian, the language feels modern, reflecting Priestley's 1945 audience and the timelessness of its moral concerns.

Dialogue and Character Voice

Priestley gives each character a distinct voice that reflects their age, class, and attitudes.

- **Mr Birling's** speech is pompous, repetitive, and full of self-congratulation. He often speaks in long, confident statements – “The Germans don't want war”, “unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable” – which use dramatic irony to undermine his credibility. His language is full of capitalist clichés: “a man has to mind his own business” and “community and all that nonsense”. These phrases reveal his narrow worldview and help Priestley present him as foolish and morally blinkered.
- **Mrs Birling** speaks in a controlled, formal tone. Her language is cold and judgmental – “girls of that class”, “as if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money” – revealing her deep class prejudice. She speaks in generalisations and avoids emotion, preferring to distance herself from the realities of Eva Smith's suffering.
- **Sheila**, by contrast, begins the play with informal, youthful language – “squiffy”, “oh – how horrible!” – which conveys her immaturity. However, as she changes, her speech becomes more serious, thoughtful, and emotionally aware. Her ability to reflect – “I know I'm to blame – and I'm desperately sorry” – shows her moral development and contrasts sharply with her parents.
- **Eric's** speech is often hesitant, emotional, and evasive. His dialogue frequently includes broken syntax, unfinished sentences, and dashes – reflecting his guilt and emotional turmoil, as well as his drunken state. One of his most revealing lines is: “*I was in that state when a chap easily turns*



nasty." This phrase is loaded with avoidance. By using "**a chap**" – an upper-class slang term – Eric speaks about himself in the **third person**, distancing himself from responsibility. He shifts blame onto the situation ("that state"), rather than directly owning his behaviour. The euphemistic, almost casual tone of "a chap" masks the seriousness of what he did to Eva.

- **Gerald** often tries to control the conversation with polite but evasive language. He frequently uses euphemisms – "I didn't install her there so that I could make love to her" – to downplay his actions and protect his image.
- **Inspector Goole** speaks in short, firm, moralistic sentences. His language is plain, direct, and emotionally charged. He avoids euphemism and instead speaks truthfully, using repetition, imperatives, and collective pronouns to emphasise responsibility: "We are members of one body." His speech contrasts with the Birlings' evasive and self-justifying language.

Symbolic and Emotive Language

Priestley uses symbolic language to deepen the moral and emotional impact of the play. Eva Smith's death is described in graphic, emotive terms: she drank "a lot of strong disinfectant" and died "in great agony". The Inspector does not soften this with euphemism. The vivid imagery is designed to shock the audience and prevent the characters (and audience) from dismissing her suffering.

The name **Eva Smith** is itself symbolic. "Eva" suggests "Eve", the first woman in the Bible, while "Smith" is a common surname, making her a symbol of ordinary, working-class women who are easily overlooked and mistreated by society. When she adopts the name **Daisy Renton**, the imagery shifts – "Daisy" evokes something delicate and natural, again highlighting her vulnerability.

The Inspector's final speech is filled with powerful, prophetic language: "*If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.*" This is not just a dramatic conclusion – it is an apocalyptic warning. The phrase draws on the language of war and revolution, but also echoes the Book of Revelation in the Bible, where fire and anguish are associated with divine judgement and the end of days. Priestley, although not a religious writer, deliberately uses this religiously charged, symbolic language to heighten the moral gravity of the Inspector's message. The audience is meant to feel that this



is more than social commentary – it is a moral reckoning on a national and spiritual scale.

At the same time, the speech has clear historical resonance. Written just after the Second World War, the phrase “fire and blood and anguish” evokes the horrors of both world wars and suggests that failure to embrace social responsibility leads to catastrophe on a global scale. Priestley fuses religious and historical imagery to warn that if society does not learn to care for its most vulnerable members, it will face consequences that are both real and symbolic – destructive, inevitable, and potentially redemptive only through genuine change.

Contrast and Conflict in Language

Much of the play’s tension comes from the contrast between how different characters use language – and how they respond to the Inspector’s.

- Mr and Mrs Birling speak the language of status, control, and denial.
- Sheila and Eric shift towards honesty and self-reflection.
- The Inspector challenges every attempt to avoid responsibility.

These contrasting styles create dramatic conflict. When Mrs Birling refuses to accept blame and insists “I’m sorry she should have come to such a horrible end. But I accept no blame for it at all,” the lack of emotional or moral engagement is striking. In contrast, Sheila says, “You’re pretending everything’s just as it was before,” showing her growing awareness and frustration with her parents’ stubbornness.

The Inspector frequently uses **repetition** and rhetorical questions to confront the characters: “*Why did you do that? Why?*” This technique forces characters (and the audience) to confront uncomfortable truths. His refusal to accept shallow answers intensifies the pressure.

Tone and Control

The Inspector dominates the tone of the play through his language. From the moment he arrives, the tone shifts from light and celebratory to serious and interrogative. His tone is measured, persistent, and unshakable. He takes control



of conversations, refusing to be distracted by attempts at small talk or status displays.

The Birlings, in contrast, frequently change tone – from relaxed to defensive, from polite to angry. This shifting tone shows their discomfort as their guilt is revealed. The breakdown in tone also reflects the breakdown of their family image – what begins as a respectable evening ends in exposed secrets, shame, and fractured relationships.



Dramatisation

J.B. Priestley wrote *An Inspector Calls* not simply to be read but to be performed. The play's power lies in how it unfolds live on stage, where every aspect of production – from casting to performance to staging – contributes to its message. Directors and actors make creative decisions that can enhance or shift how characters and themes are understood by the audience. Below are some key considerations for how the play might be dramatised.

Casting Choices

Age and appearance play a key role in how characters are interpreted. The Birlings are an upper-middle-class family, and the way they look, dress, and interact with each other can either emphasise or subtly undermine their supposed respectability.

- **Mr Birling** might be cast as a stout, red-faced man in his fifties or sixties, with a booming voice and forced confidence. His physicality can reflect his status as a self-made industrialist who lacks polish and social finesse. His accent might carry a trace of a provincial or northern background to emphasise his social insecurity and contrast with his wife's upper-class airs.
- **Mrs Birling**, by contrast, might be played by a tall, severe-looking woman with a clipped accent and upright posture. Her performance could highlight her superiority and social snobbery, particularly in contrast to her husband's more blustering, less refined energy.
- **Sheila** and **Eric** must be clearly younger, with more emotional expressiveness. Casting them with actors who can show real vulnerability helps underscore the play's message that the younger generation is more capable of change.
- **Gerald Croft** might be played as handsome, confident, and smooth-talking, but with an underlying smugness or superficial charm. This duality reflects how his charm masks moral weakness.
- **Inspector Goole** should be cast with commanding presence – not necessarily physically imposing, but someone with authority, control, and



moral weight. Some productions cast him as older and calm, while others make him younger and more intense. Either way, the key is that he feels like an outsider – someone who disrupts the status quo.

A more radical production might experiment with non-naturalistic casting – for example, using a non-White cast to challenge traditional assumptions about wealth, class, and power. This could highlight how Priestley's message still resonates across different contexts and societies.

Performance Choices

Actors must make choices about how to deliver lines, use body language, and respond to other characters. These choices shape how the audience views each character's personality, motivations, and development.

- **Mr Birling** might be played with loud certainty and arrogant laughter early on, becoming more defensive and aggressive as his authority is challenged. A performance that shows his desperation – particularly when the knighthood is mentioned – can expose his underlying insecurity.
- **Sheila** might begin the play as light, excitable, and naïve, before gradually adopting a more serious tone and posture. Her transformation should be visible not just in her lines, but in her reactions – her stillness, her eye contact, her refusal to laugh off the situation in Act Three.
- **Eric** should be awkward and uncomfortable from the beginning, foreshadowing his deeper guilt. His breakdown in Act Three can be emotionally raw – showing shame, fear, and a genuine desire to change.
- **Mrs Birling** may be played with icy calm, showing very little emotion throughout. Her refusal to bend even under pressure should come across as rigid and prideful. Alternatively, a director might choose to hint at cracks in her confidence – a flicker of doubt or nervousness that reveals her self-delusion.
- **Inspector Goole** must deliver his lines with quiet intensity or moral authority. He might use silence powerfully, letting characters squirm under his gaze. His final speech can be delivered slowly and deliberately, as if warning not just the characters but the audience directly.



Subtle choices in how characters react – including pauses, glances, shifts in tone – are crucial. Because the action is contained within one room, much of the play’s power depends on tension, atmosphere, and emotional shifts rather than physical movement.

Staging Choices

The original stage directions specify a single setting: the Birlings’ dining room. This limited space reflects their comfortable, self-contained world – one that is soon invaded and exposed by the Inspector’s arrival.

- The set often features heavy Edwardian furniture, polished surfaces, and a sense of order. This visual formality mirrors the family’s desire for control, status, and respectability.
- Lighting is an important symbolic device. At the start, the stage directions describe a “pink and intimate” light, suggesting comfort, wealth, and perhaps self-deception. When the Inspector arrives, the lighting becomes “brighter and harder”, exposing the characters both physically and morally. Directors may further adjust lighting during key moments to reflect rising tension or inner turmoil.
- The use of space on stage also matters. The Inspector may gradually move further into the room, taking control of the space as the Birlings become more unsettled. Characters who once sat comfortably at the table may stand, pace, or distance themselves from others as their relationships break down.
- Sound design is particularly important in the final moments. The ring of the telephone at the end should be abrupt and shocking – a symbol of truth intruding once again. The sound of the doorbell at the beginning, too, should interrupt Mr Birling’s speech sharply, as if Priestley himself is cutting through his capitalist rhetoric.

Some modern productions experiment with expressionistic or symbolic staging. For example, the Birlings’ house might appear physically elevated or separated from the rest of the stage, only to collapse or fragment by the end – a visual metaphor for their loss of control and moral collapse.



Historical context

J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* was written in 1945, just after the end of the Second World War, but it is set in 1912. Priestley's decision to set the play over thirty years before its writing allows him to use dramatic irony to expose the blindness and arrogance of the upper-middle class. The play is both a warning and a call to action – urging post-war Britain to reject the selfish values of the past and to accept high levels of taxation in order to build what Priestley hoped would be a more cooperative, just future.

1912: A World on the Brink

The play's setting – spring 1912 – is rich with significance. This was a period when Britain seemed prosperous and secure, especially for the wealthy classes. Mr Birling is confident that conflict and disruption are things of the past. He declares that war is impossible and the Titanic is unsinkable – statements the audience knows to be tragically false.

Mr Birling's speech about progress and peace echoes the ideas of Norman Angell, a popular writer and eventual Labour politician, whose 1910 book *The Great Illusion* argued that European war was unlikely because it would be economically disastrous for all nations. Angell's views were widely praised – and utterly discredited by the outbreak of war just a few years later. Priestley deliberately reflects these attitudes in Mr Birling's dialogue to ironise and undermine his character. His misplaced optimism becomes a symbol of the ignorance, selfishness, and arrogance that led to catastrophe.

By 1912, tensions were simmering beneath the surface of this confident society. The suffragette movement was fighting for women's rights, trade unions were growing, and socialist ideas were spreading. These pressures would lead to major political and social upheaval. Priestley sets his play on the edge of this transformation to remind audiences that ignoring injustice and clinging to privilege has dangerous consequences.



Priestley's Politics and Purpose

Although *An Inspector Calls* is set in 1912, it was written in 1945 and speaks directly to a post-war audience. After the Second World War, there was strong public support for building a fairer Britain. The 1945 Labour landslide led to high taxation of the wealthy to fund the welfare state, including the NHS, education, and housing. These policies followed the Beveridge Report, which called for the state to tackle poverty, disease, ignorance, squalor, and unemployment by redistributing wealth and expanding state control.

Priestley, a democratic socialist, strongly supported this vision. Through the Inspector, he argues that society must embrace collective responsibility – that the powerful have a duty to support the vulnerable, even through dramatic social and economic reform. His warning of “fire and blood and anguish” is deliberately apocalyptic, drawing on both religious and historical imagery to suggest that ignoring injustice leads to war, revolution, and moral collapse.

The Birlings represent everything Priestley opposes: capitalist self-interest, snobbery, and moral complacency. Mr Birling is greedy, status-obsessed, and dismissive of community, clinging to the illusion that wealth means moral superiority. His obsession with a knighthood and his insecure background show him as a man desperate to protect his privilege. Mrs Birling, meanwhile, relies on old aristocratic values to justify her coldness.

The play is not subtle in its politics. Priestley argues that real change requires the expropriation of wealth through taxation, greater state power, and a complete rejection of individualism. The Inspector's final speech demands a new moral and political order – one rooted in justice, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Class, Gender, and Social Change

The play is deeply concerned with class and gender inequality, both in 1912 and in 1945. Eva Smith represents the exploited working class – anonymous, vulnerable, and easily discarded by the rich. Each Birling contributes to her suffering, either through economic exploitation, snobbery, sexual abuse, or refusal of charity.

Women in 1912 had limited rights and few options. Eva is fired, used, and abandoned – with no legal or social support. Sheila begins as a shallow character



but becomes more self-aware, reflecting the possibility of change. Priestley believed the younger generation – especially after the war – could break the cycle of cruelty and build a better society.

In 1945, women's roles had shifted. They had worked in factories, run households, and supported the war effort. Many were demanding greater equality. Priestley's portrayal of Eva and Sheila taps into these developments and suggests that change is not only possible – it is necessary.



Vocabulary list

Alderman – senior member of local government, often with high social status.

Apocalyptic – suggesting disaster, judgement, or the end of the world.

Capitalism – economic system based on private ownership of property.

Class – divisions in society based on wealth and status.

Cliffhanger – suspenseful moment at the end of a scene or act.

Collective responsibility – shared duty to care for others in society.

Cranks – Mr Birling's dismissive term for intellectuals who promote socialism.

Dramatic irony – when the audience knows more than the characters.

Euphemism – a mild word used to cover harsh truths.

Exploitation – unfair use of others for personal gain.

Expropriation – the state taking private property, usually for public use.

Generational divide – conflict between older and younger views.

Inequality – differences in wealth, power, or rights.

Morality play – drama that teaches a moral lesson.

Naturalism – realistic dialogue and behaviour on stage.

Privilege – social advantage, wealth or status.

Prophetic – warning or predicting future events.

Punitive – intended as punishment, often harsh or severe.

Responsibility – duty to answer for one's actions.

Retribution – punishment seen as morally deserved.

Socialism – economic system based on punitive taxation and state ownership of property.

Social responsibility – moral duty to help others in society.

Squiffy – slang for slightly drunk.

Stage directions – instructions for performance in the script.

Varsity – informal term for university, especially elite ones.

Well-made play – tightly structured drama with rising tension.



Quote list

1. "The lighting should be pink and intimate until the Inspector arrives, and then it should be brighter and harder." (Stage directions, Act One)

Symbolises the shift from comfort and self-deception to scrutiny and truth.

2. "Arthur Birling is a heavy-looking, rather portentous man... rather provincial in his speech." (Stage directions, Act One)

Hints at Birling's social insecurity and outsider status in upper-middle-class society.

3. "Unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable." (Mr Birling, Act One)

Highlights his naive faith in progress and technology – ironic and symbolic of arrogance. The RMS Titanic infamously sank a few days later.

4. "You'll hear some people say that war's inevitable. And to that I say – fiddlesticks!" (Mr Birling, Act One)

His casual dismissal of war mirrors the short-sightedness of pre-war elites.

5. "I speak as a hard-headed business man." (Mr Birling, Act One)

Reflects his pride in business and status – a repeated phrase that Priestley ridicules.

6. "But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense." (Mr Birling, Act One)

Shows Birling's contempt for socialism; his scornful "hive" simile ironically evokes the cooperation Priestley promotes.

7. "A man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own." (Mr Birling, Act One)

Summarises Birling's capitalist worldview – immediately undermined by the Inspector's entrance.

8. "Burnt her inside out, of course." (Inspector Goole, Act One)

The Inspector's blunt, graphic description forces the audience to confront the brutal reality of Eva's suffering.

9. "I refused, of course." (Mr Birling, Act One)

Birling's certainty highlights his moral blindness; Eva's wage was shockingly low by modern standards. (Adjusted for inflation, the wage is c20% of the current legal minimum wage.)



10. "If she'd been some miserable plain little creature, I don't suppose I'd have done it." (Sheila, Act One)

Sheila admits her jealousy – showing how beauty and class prejudice shaped Eva's treatment.

11. "But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people." (Sheila, Act One)

Marks Sheila's moral awakening and challenges her father's capitalist values.

12. "We often do on the young ones. They're more impressionable." (Inspector Goole, Act One)

Suggests the younger generation is more open to change.

13. "Why – you fool – he knows. Of course he knows." (Sheila, Act One)

Shows Sheila's growing awareness and the Inspector's authority in uncovering truth.

14. "I think Miss Birling ought to be excused any more of this questioning."

(Gerald, Act Two)

Gerald attempts to protect Sheila in a patronising way, showing he still sees her as fragile and in need of male control.

15. "We have to share something. If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt." (Inspector Goole, Act Two)

The Inspector insists on collective moral responsibility, even if the Birlings refuse to accept social responsibility.

16. "You seem to have made a great impression on this child, Inspector." (Mrs Birling, Act Two)

Mrs Birling patronises Sheila and dismisses her views, showing her refusal to accept that younger people can be morally serious.

17. "Girls of that class—" (Mrs Birling, Act Two)

Reveals Mrs Birling's deep class prejudice and her assumption that working-class women are morally inferior.

18. "Old Joe Meggarty, half-drunk and goggle-eyed, had wedged her into a corner with that obscene fat carcass of his—" (Gerald, Act Two)

Reveals the hidden predatory behaviour of the privileged and the hypocrisy of those seen as respectable public figures.

19. "I didn't feel about her as she felt about me." (Gerald, Act Two)

Gerald's emotional detachment underscores the imbalance of power in his relationship with Eva.



20. "You were the wonderful fairy prince." (Sheila, Act Two)

Sheila uses sarcasm to expose Gerald's self-image and his fantasy of rescuing Eva, revealing the imbalance in their relationship.

21. "I rather respect you more than I've ever done before." (Sheila, Act Two)

Sheila surprises Gerald with this line – her respect is for his honesty, not his actions, showing her growing emotional maturity.

22. "Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges." (Inspector Goole, Act Two)

The Inspector challenges Birling's belief that status exempts him from moral accountability.

23. "Yes, I think it was simply a piece of gross impertinence – quite deliberate – and naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case."

(Mrs Birling, Act Two)

Shows Mrs Birling's coldness and how easily her class prejudice overrides any sense of charity or justice.

24. "She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position." (Mrs Birling, Act Two)

Mrs Birling mocks Eva's sense of dignity, revealing how the upper-middle class dehumanise the poor.

25. "And he ought to be dealt with very severely—" (Mrs Birling, Act Two)

Mrs Birling condemns the unknown father, unaware that it is her own son – highlighting her hypocrisy and lack of compassion.

26. "I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty." (Eric, Act Three)

Eric uses evasive, upper-class slang to distance himself from his own abusive behaviour.

27. "She was pretty and a good sport." (Eric, Act Three)

Eric's language objectifies Eva and minimises his own responsibility for exploiting her vulnerability.

28. "You're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble." (Eric, Act Three)

Reveals the emotional distance and lack of support in the Birling family, highlighting generational conflict.



29. "Each of you helped to kill her." (Inspector Goole, Act Three)

The Inspector's blunt summary reinforces the idea of shared, cumulative responsibility.

30. "We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other."

(Inspector Goole, Act Three)

The clearest statement of Priestley's socialist message and the play's central moral lesson.

31. "They will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish." (Inspector Goole, Act Three)

An apocalyptic warning referencing war, revolution, and judgement for those who ignore social responsibility.

32. "Probably a socialist or some sort of crank." (Mr Birling, Act Three)

Birling dismisses the Inspector's message by attacking his politics, showing he has learned nothing.

33. "We've been had." (Mr Birling, Act Three – repeated)

Birling uses this informal phrase – meaning they've been tricked or deceived – to dismiss the Inspector's message. His repetition of it shows his desperation to deny moral responsibility and protect his reputation.

34. "To behave sensibly." (Mrs Birling, Act Three)

Mrs Birling urges the family to cover up the scandal and restore order. Her idea of "sensible" behaviour means sweeping everything under the rug to avoid embarrassment, not learning from what has happened.

35. "The fact remains that I did what I did." (Eric, Act Three)

Eric accepts responsibility, showing moral growth in contrast to his parents.

36. "It frightens me the way you talk." (Sheila, Act Three)

Sheila is disturbed by her parents' refusal to learn from the Inspector's visit, showing the generational divide.

37. "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..." (Mr Birling, Act Three)

The final twist restores the moral weight of the Inspector's message and reintroduces uncertainty and urgency.



Past questions

Below are all of the past questions since the first examination of the renewed AQA GCSE English Literature syllabus (8702/2) in 2017. You will also find three sample questions published by the exam board for training purposes but never used as real exams.

In the interests of brevity, mark schemes, examiner reports and grade boundaries are not included in this revision guide. They are readily available to download from AQA.



2017

EITHER

How far does Priestley present Mrs Birling as an unlikeable character?

Write about:

- what Mrs Birling says and does in the play
- how Priestley presents her by the ways he writes.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How does Priestley use the character of the Inspector to suggest ways that society could be improved?

Write about:

- what society is shown to be like in the play and how it might be improved
- how Priestley presents society through what the Inspector says and does.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2018

EITHER

How far does Priestley present Eric as a character who changes his attitudes towards himself and others during the play?

Write about:

- what Eric says and does throughout the play
- how far Priestley presents Eric as a character who changes his attitudes.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How does Priestley explore the importance of social class in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- some ideas about social class in the play
- how Priestley presents the importance of social class.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2019

EITHER

How does Priestley present selfishness and its effects in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- examples of selfish behaviour in the play
- how Priestley presents selfishness and its effects.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How does Priestley present Sheila as a character who learns important lessons about herself and society?

Write about:

- some of the things Sheila learns in the play
- how Priestley presents Sheila as a character who learns important lessons about herself and society.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2020

EITHER

Mr Birling says, "...a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own."

How far does Priestley present Mr Birling as a man who cares only for himself and his family?

Write about:

- what Mr Birling says and does
- how far Priestley presents Mr Birling as a man who cares only for himself and his family.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How far does Priestley present male characters as irresponsible in the play?

Write about:

- one or more of the male character(s)
- how far Priestley presents one or more of the male character(s) as irresponsible.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2021

EITHER

How does Priestley use Gerald to explore ideas about responsibility?

Write about:

- what Gerald says and does
- how Priestley uses Gerald to explore ideas about responsibility.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How far does Priestley present society as unfair in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- what can be seen as unfair in the play
- how far Priestley presents society as unfair.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2022

EITHER

How far does Priestley present Eric as a character who learns important lessons about society in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- what Eric says and does in the play
- how Priestley presents Eric.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

'Priestley shows how inequality in society leads to tragedy.'

How far do you agree with this view of *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- what happens in the play
- how Priestley presents what happens in the play.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2023

EITHER

How does Priestley present what life is like for women in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- what life is shown to be like for women in the play
- how Priestley presents what life is like for women.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How does Priestley present the different ways older and younger characters respond to the Inspector?

Write about:

- the different ways older and younger characters respond to the Inspector
- how Priestley presents the different ways older and younger characters respond to the Inspector.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



2024

EITHER

How does Priestley use the character of Mrs Birling to explore ideas about social class?

Write about:

- what Mrs Birling says and does
- how Priestley presents Mrs Birling.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How does Priestley use the Inspector to suggest the need for social change in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- what the Inspector says and does
- how Priestley presents the Inspector.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Sample 1

EITHER

How and why does Sheila change in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- how Sheila responds to her family and to the Inspector
- how Priestley presents Sheila by the ways he writes.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How does Priestley explore responsibility in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- the ideas about responsibility in *An Inspector Calls*
- how Priestley presents these ideas by the ways he writes.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Sample 2

EITHER

How does Priestley present some of the differences between the older and younger generations in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- how the different generations respond to events and to each other
- how Priestley presents the different generations in the play.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

What do you think is the importance of the ending of *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- how the ending of the play presents some important ideas
- how Priestley presents these ideas by the ways he writes.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Sample 3

EITHER

How does Priestley present Gerald's relationships with women in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- the way Gerald treats women in the play
- how Priestley presents Gerald's relationships with women.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

OR

How does Priestley use Eva Smith to represent poverty in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about:

- what Eva's life is like in the play
- how Priestley uses Eva to represent the lives of poor people.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



Appendix 1: recommended further resources

Model Answers



Flashcards



CGP Resources



AQA Resources





Appendix 2: privacy notice

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