

# An Inspector Calls by J.B. Priestley

## Plot Summary

### a) Act One:

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

### b) Act Two:

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

### c) Act Three:

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

### d) Context

- The play is set in 1912 but was written in 1945 (just after the Second World War).
- J. B. Priestley is therefore looking back over the bloody history of both World Wars and the Russian Revolution. He seems to be warning the characters of the consequences of caring just for yourself.
- The setting, in 1912, also allows for Priestley to look back on a social class system he did not agree with. The character of the Inspector is outside this class system and so able to attack its values.
- J.B. Priestley's socialist politics and beliefs strongly mirrored those he wrote for his character, Inspector Goole.



Character	Summary	Key Quotations
e) <b>Mr Birling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arthur Birling is the father figure in the patriarchal (controlled by men) society of 'An Inspector Calls'.</li> <li>He is a well known owner of a factory and prides himself in being a self made middle class man.</li> <li>He is pleased with the arrangement of Sheila marrying Gerald Croft since this also means a rise in social status for himself.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"A man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own."</li> <li>"I'm speaking as a hard headed practical man of business."</li> </ul>
f) <b>Mrs Birling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sybil Birling is an astoundingly unsympathetic character.</li> <li>Mrs Birling is the chairwoman of a charitable organisation that gives money to the more unfortunate.</li> <li>She sees herself as doing her duty and caring for the poor but, she judges them harshly.</li> <li>She accuses Eva/Daisy of being dishonest, greedy and immoral.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"A rather cold woman and her husband's social superior."</li> <li>"I blame the young man who was the father of the child... He should be made an example of."</li> </ul>
g) <b>Sheila</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At the beginning of the play, she has become engaged to Gerald Croft and she is very materialistic (obsessed with money and expensive things).</li> <li>Throughout the play, we see Sheila change as she learns about her part in the death of Eva/Daisy.</li> <li>She is one of only two characters who takes responsibility for their actions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"But these girls aren't cheap labour, they're people."</li> <li>"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."</li> </ul>
h) <b>Eric</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At the start, Eric appears to be a casual young man without cares.</li> <li>He feels like an outsider and so bottles up all his problems, taking refuge in drinking.</li> <li>We then see Eric begin to grow. He changes his ideas, begins to take responsibility for his actions</li> <li>Eric and his sister are set up as comparison characters to their parents, who are rigid and set in their ways.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I wasn't in love with her or anything. She was pretty and a good sport."</li> <li>"You're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble."</li> </ul>
i) <b>Gerald</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gerald Croft is the son of Birling's business rival. He comes from a good, upper-middle-class family and Arthur Birling is very pleased that Gerald has at last made the engagement to Sheila Birling official.</li> <li>He lied to Sheila took Eva Smith/Daisy Renton as his mistress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"I did keep a girl last summer. I've admitted it."</li> <li>"I didn't install her there so that I could make love to her."</li> </ul>
j) <b>Inspector Goole</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inspector Goole can be seen as the central character of the play (protagonist).</li> <li>The Inspector is a strange character, a bit of a mystery.</li> <li>We are left at the end of the play wondering if the Inspector is real or not. Was he a real policeman? Does he represent another, more omniscient being – a God?</li> <li>The entire play could be described as a morality play in which the Inspector forces the other characters to come to terms with their actions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other."</li> <li>"Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges."</li> </ul>

