

IGCSE Edexcel (9-1) English Literature

An Inspector Calls: Themes

Social Class

Social Class

Social class influences a lot of what happens in the play. In 1912, **class divided Britain**. The land and factory owners were wealthy and powerful, while their workers lived in poverty. The two classes **rarely interacted**. The Birlings' treatment of Eva is a result of their being an upper class family and her being a working class woman.

However, the World Wars **dismantled** the British class system. **The war effort brought people together**, and **rationing** meant the different classes had to live **similar lifestyles regardless of wealth**. Despite this, **class inequality** still existed and this is what Priestley wanted to emphasise to his audience. The attitudes and prejudices that class hierarchy created were still **ingrained** in society, particularly in the minds of the upper class. The upper classes **scorned** (viewed with hatred) and **mocked** their working class peers.

By revealing the **destructive** impact class hierarchy had in 1912, Priestley encourages 1940s society to **move forwards towards social equality** instead of returning to the old ways.

The Setting

The **upper class Birlings** initially live in blissful ignorance of others' suffering. When the play begins, the **stage directions** describe the lighting as "**pink and intimate**" (**Act 1, pg 1**), symbolising the Birlings' optimistic, **rose-tinted perspective**. The audience are **forced to see life through the same lens**. The "**intimate**" atmosphere shows how they are **undisturbed** by the troubles of others.



The family are described as being "**pleased with themselves**" (**Act 1, pg 2**), revealing their **complacency**. They are free to feel **confident** and **satisfied** with themselves. Priestley implies the upper classes lack a **conscience**. They are not **confronted** with what their happiness costs others.

The Class Divide: the Birlings

Priestley uses the play to emphasise the **divide** between the rich and poor. The **differences between classes** make huge **impacts** on the characters and their experiences. Priestley shows how social class **alienates** the two groups so that neither interact, and this is emphasised by how we only ever see one working class character on stage.

Why is there a class system?

Priestley argues that the upper classes **maintain** the class system because it **benefits** them, allowing them to live in **ignorance** of how the working classes struggle. We also see how the capitalist system **increases the gap between the rich and the poor**.

Mr Birling's claims that the country is **"in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity" (Act 1, pg 6)** and **"there'll be peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere" (Act 1, pg 7)** which overlooks the poverty, disease, and physical labour endured by the lower classes.

- He doesn't consider that such **"prosperity"** and **"progress"** **relies on the hard work of others**.

Priestley suggests that authorities and politicians don't realise that it is possible for one group to succeed and prosper while the other experiences a severe decline. Success for some does not mean success for all.



Ignorance of the plight of the working class

Likewise, by showing how the Birlings fixate on the impact the Inspector's visit has on their own lives, Priestley reveals how lower class struggles are dismissed or ignored as **inconveniences**.

Like Sheila, Mr Birling accuses the Inspector of ruining their evening. The contrast between what each character says emphasises their views to the audience

- Mr Birling says, **"We were having a nice little family celebration tonight. And a nasty mess you've made of it now, haven't you?" (Act 1, pg 21)**.
- However, the Inspector replies, **"That's more or less what I was thinking [...] when I was in the Infirmary looking at what was left of Eva Smith. A nice little promising life there, I thought, and a nasty mess somebody's made of it," (Act 1, pg 21)**.

This direct **juxtaposition** emphasises how **selfish** and **petty** Mr Birling's complaint is. He is aware of Eva's death, but still mourns his own party before he mourns her.

The echoing of the harsh, crude **"nasty mess"** alongside the **adjective "promising"** shows how tragic Eva's death is, and how distressing it is for Mr Birling to put his own minor troubles first.

The Characters

Eva - a symbol of the lower classes

Eva Smith is **symbolic of the lower classes as a whole**. As Eva Smith never appears on stage the audience's perspective of her is **altered** by the Birlings' **classist** remarks and personal **bias**. The audience must decide what is reasonable and what is untrue. Through this, Priestley shows how easy it is for the upper classes to **influence the narrative surrounding the working classes**. The Birlings, and Mrs Birling in particular, can describe Eva in their own terms without being challenged, forming a **new reality**.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling is a member of the nouveau riche, which means he made his own money instead of inheriting it. He is the one in the family who is **most concerned about his social class**. Wanting to climb the **social ladder**, he is insecure about his standing, but despite this he feels **entitled** to respect and power. He is a **symbol of class conflict and the upper classes' reaction to this conflict**.

Mr Birling is **a symbol of upper class privilege**, showing how the upper classes used their positions to **evade conflict and responsibility**. Upon meeting the Inspector for the first time, Mr Birling tells him, ***"I was an alderman for years - and Lord Mayor two years ago - and I'm still on the Bench," (Act 1, pg 11)***. He details his career history to **boast** his power and **respectability**. The positions he lists are **white-collar jobs** that were greatly respected

in society and associated with the upper classes. He expects his class will impress the Inspector.



Furthermore, Mr Birling expects to be treated differently by the Inspector because he is a **"public man"**, but the Inspector informs him, ***"Public men [...] have responsibilities as well as privileges," (Act 2, pg 41)***. This shows how Mr Birling is a member of the council and an attorney so that he can enjoy the

"privilege" of being **favoured** by law enforcement. Because the Inspector has to remind Mr Birling about his **"responsibilities"**, this implies Mr Birling and other **"public men"** have been **neglecting their duties**.

Treatment of the lower classes

When he says, ***"If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be for the earth," (Act 1, pg 15)***, it becomes even clearer that he thinks it is his personal obligation to put the lower classes in their place. The **hyperbolic metaphor** ***"they'd soon***

be asking for the earth” implies the lower classes are **greedy** and **unreasonable**, meaning **someone needs to keep them in check**. Priestley shows how the upper classes viewed any attempt by the lower classes to stand up for themselves as an outrageous, disrespectful act. He demonstrates how they purposefully **perpetuated** (continued) the **cycle of poverty** and **widened the class divide**. They do this as a result of their own vanity, as they are under the illusion they are being righteous.

Gerald Croft & Mr Birling

Priestley includes the interactions between Mr Birling and Gerald to demonstrate how social class makes people act with **ulterior motives** and causes **divisions** where there doesn't need to be any.

Nouveau riche vs old money

Gerald Croft comes from a family that is of a **higher class** than the Birlings (Gerald is from old money whereas Mr Birling is considered nouveau riche).

In the early twentieth century, the increase in factories and business meant people who didn't come from noble families could **become wealthy**. This 'new money' was judged as less pure or respectable than the 'old money' of Britain's upper classes, who had been **rich for generations and owned property**. These are the **“old country famil[ies]”** and **“landed people”** Mr Birling refers to.

These differences are highlighted through the tensions between Mr Birling (nouveau riche) and Gerald's family. While both families are rich and successful, the Crofts are of a higher class because of their **“old country” heritage**. The difference in class between the engaged couple (Gerald and Sheila) causes tension.

- Mr Birling is keen for the two to marry because it will help him **climb the social ladder and grow his business**.
- On the other hand, the Crofts are reluctant because the Birlings' lower social status will **degrade** them.



Mr Birling is not subtle in his attempts to **flatter** and **impress** Gerald. His ulterior motives are revealed when he says, **“Your father and I have been friendly rivals for some time now - though Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company - and now you've brought us together,”** (Act 1, pg 4). This shows that he wants the couple to marry to improve his own **business prospects**.

→ His confession that **“Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company”** shows how he **respects** the Crofts as

a more **elite** family, and wants to please them. He is not happy for Sheila, only for himself.

Priestley implies that social class makes people **selfish**. People are only able to be motivated by opportunities to improve their own **social position**. Even Mr Birling is aware that the Croft family is not particularly happy about the engagement. Mr Birling tells Gerald, **“I have an idea that your mother - Lady Croft - while she doesn’t object to my girl - feels you might have done better for yourself socially -” (Act 1, pg 8)**. The Crofts believe they are better than the Birlings, and don’t want their **family line** to be **tarnished** by the lower, industrial classes. Social class is more important to them than their son’s happiness or love.

It is evident that Gerald’s mother Lady Croft doesn’t approve of Gerald’s engagement to Sheila. Mr Birling justifies her view: **“She comes from an old country family - landed people and so forth - and so it’s only natural” (Act 1, pg 8)**.

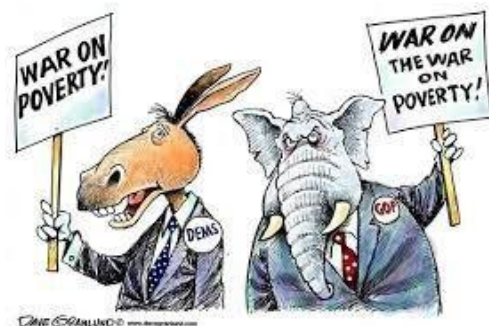
- Here Priestley shows that even Mr Birling is a victim to class prejudices, which makes his treatment of Eva ironic.
- He also suggests these attitudes are **universally accepted** and **“only natural”**, leading to **permanent divisions within communities**. This shows people didn’t question the logic behind social class, meaning **tension and inequality became British traditions**.

Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling is the **epitome** of upper class prejudice. Her **“cold”** demeanor and social superiority make her particularly **judgemental** and **blunt**.

Charity

Mrs Birling makes **assumptions** about Eva because she is a working class girl, and these lead her to deny Eva any help from the charity. Before she hears what the Inspector has to say, Mrs Birling declares, **“I don’t suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class -” (Act 2, pg 30)**, showing how different she thinks the working class are.



- The **verb “understand”** suggests the working class are so **different** that their actions are incomprehensible to the upper class. This means Mrs Birling won’t even be **empathetic** to them, and doesn’t **want** to try to **“understand”** them.
- The **noun “girl”** **infantilises** her and portrays her as **weak** and **foolish**.
- She **generalises** all **“girls of that class”**, and doesn’t believe Eva **deserves any of her time or attention**. Priestley intends to show how **ingrained** prejudice was in

society, and how **deliberately dismissive** the upper class were of their lower class peers.

Lower class stereotypes

Mrs Birling believes all lower class people are **immoral** and **money-hungry**, and she is not afraid to admit it. These beliefs make her overreact, as she sees every small flaw as **confirmation** of her bias.

When she recalls how Eva introduced herself as **“Mrs Birling”**, she adds, **“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,” (Act 2, pg 43)**. She is **outraged** because she thinks it will **sully** or **taint** her name if it is used by a working class girl.

- The phrase **“gross impertinence - quite deliberate”** demonstrates her **insistence** that Eva intentionally stepped out of line and **disrespected** her. The words themselves are **excessive** and **pretentious**, giving her a **superior air**.
- The **adverb “naturally”** implies she is **justified** in her **“prejudice”**, even though she should be **impartial** and compassionate as a member of the charity. Priestley implies the upper classes were determined to find any excuse to disgrace and discredit the working classes.

Opinion about Eva

When Eva shows her **strong moral compass**, Mrs Birling refuses to trust her. She claims Eva **“was giving herself ridiculous airs”** and **“claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position,” (Act 2, pg 46)**, suggesting **she can't believe a working class girl would act in this way**.



She says Eva had **“some fancy reason”** for not taking the money, adding, **“As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!” (Act 2, pg 47)**, showing how she is convinced Eva is a **thief** and **scrounger** (someone who gets money at the expense of others). The **adjectives “ridiculous”, “elaborate”,** and **“fancy”** emphasise how **outlandish** she finds Eva's claims, as she intends to **humiliate** Eva for acting **“above her station”**.

Even when she is confronted with someone who disproves her prejudices, Mrs Birling **holds onto her own stereotypes**. She is fixated on how Eva is a **“girl of that sort”** and in that **“position”**, implying there is a **specific way Eva should act**. These phrases are also **pointed euphemisms** that intend **to mock Eva without compromising Mrs Birling's own respectability**.

Priestley shows how **dedicated** the upper classes were to their **preconceptions** of the lower classes. These prejudices **actively cause more suffering**, as the Inspector retorts, **“Her position now is that she lies with a burnt-out inside on a slab” (Act 2, pg 46)**. He suggests that Mrs Birling's unwillingness to respect or help a **“girl in her position”** has **directly led her to being in a worse one**.

Sheila & The Inspector

British politics in the 1940s took a **leftist** turn after the war, resulting in Britain voting for a Labour government. The impact the war had on the social class system provoked a more **concerted effort** to dismantle it completely, with many left-leaning people highlighting how the class divide was maintained. The Inspector is a voice for this movement.

Sheila

Sheila is the **epitome** of **upper class ignorance**. Unlike her parents and brother, she hasn't had to face conflict or class struggles. When she hears about Eva's death, she says, ***"I can't help thinking about this girl - destroying herself so horribly - and I've been so happy tonight. Oh I wish you hadn't told me,"*** (Act 1, pg 17), exposing her **selfish naivety**.

- The phrase ***"I wish you hadn't told me"*** shows how she views **herself** as the **victim**, not Eva, and she would rather continue to live in ignorance than be troubled by others' misfortunes.
- As Eva and Sheila are both **young women**, Priestley draws a clear **comparison** between them. That one woman can be so **"happy"** while another is **"destroying herself so horribly"** is an obvious **indictment** of **class inequality** (proves it is a bad system).

He suggests that **social class enables hypocrisy and double standards**. He shows that the **expected standard of living for one class is not upheld for the other**.

However, once Sheila is educated by the Inspector she also becomes a socialist mouthpiece. Between them, Sheila and the Inspector **identify** and **expose** the ways in which the Birling family **contribute** to the class divide.



<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WesternAnimation/TheInspector>

Mr Birling

The Inspector **challenges upper class entitlement and superiority**. When Mr Birling claims, ***"If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be asking for the earth,"*** (Act 1, pg 15), the Inspector remarks, ***"But after all it's better to ask for the earth than to take it,"*** (Act 1, pg 15). This is a **veiled insult** to the upper classes, as he implies they **"take"** the earth. This presents the upper classes' **entitlement** as **selfish** and **destructive**.

- The upper classes **owned most of the land in Britain**, so it may refer to the **unquestioned control** they had over others. They had the ability to **deny others land or money while keeping it for themselves**.
- His conclusion that it is **"better to ask"** than **"to take"** suggests that while Mr Birling has been **demonising** the lower classes, accusing them of being **spoilt**, he has been doing something far worse.

Gerald

In the same way, when Gerald objects to the Inspector's treatment of them because **"We're respectable citizens and not criminals,"** (Act 1, pg 22), the Inspector denies his claim. He explains, **"There isn't as much difference as you think [...] I wouldn't know where to draw the line,"** (Act 1, pg 22).

- Gerald's objection shows how the upper classes see a clear division between themselves, the **"respectable"** ones, and the **"criminals"** of the lower classes.
- The **adjective "respectable"** implies it is the **approval** of **society** that matters, not their **true characters**.
- In contrast, Priestley implies **the elite are criminals**. This could be because of explicitly criminal acts they commit in secret and cover up.
- Alternatively, Priestley may intend to show that the **existence** of an elite class is **naturally criminal**, and so all its members are too, because of the **neglect, oppression, and poverty they cause**.

Because of the millions who lived in poverty or died as a result of the **World Wars** or **Great Depression**, Priestley shows that the acts of the upper classes are more **destructive** and **horrific** than any individual criminal's. Therefore, he suggests that the trust society puts in **"respectable citizens"** is **misplaced, influenced by reputation** and not true character. This, Priestley argues, means **the power they have is abused**.

Class barriers

Sheila and the Inspector draw the audience's attention to the **barrier** the upper classes **construct between rich and poor**.

Sheila tells her mother, **"You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl,"** (Act 2, pg 30), showing how **desperate** the upper classes were to **distance** themselves from others.

- The **metaphor** of a **"wall"** demonstrates the extremity of the separation, and implies there was a **physical boundary** that kept the lower classes in poverty.
- Sheila identifies how her mother **"build[s]"** a **"wall"** to desensitise herself, allowing her to remain unsympathetic and untroubled.



The **imagery of a barrier** is also used when the Inspector tells Mrs Birling, **"You slammed the door in her face,"** (Act 2, pg 45), implying the upper classes were deliberate and violent in their rejection of the lower classes.

- **"The door"** is a **symbol** for the systems and establishments that allow the upper classes to exclude or deny the lower classes. For example, Mrs Birling is able to influence her charity to reject Eva's case. Priestley conveys the hostility of the upper classes.

Maintaining their social respectability

As well as **pushing the lower classes down the social ladder**, the upper classes use **appearances** and **masks** to improve their own positions.

Priestley uses Sheila to **break the upper class facade of respectability**. She tells her family, **“We’ve no excuse now for putting on airs,” (Act 2, pg 41)** and **“We really must stop these silly pretences,” (Act 2, pg 32)**, showing how the Birlings present themselves as more **innocent** and **flawless** than they actually are.

→ The words **“excuse”** and **“silly”** suggest their lies are **unrealistic**, requiring **willful ignorance** from the Birlings for them to truly believe them.

Sheila understands that the most harmful aspect of the facade of respectability is that her family are **fooled by their own lies**, so they are shocked to discover each other’s flaws. Priestley presents the facade of respectability as an **invention by the upper classes for the upper classes**. He suggests the upper classes become convinced they are perfect, and this leads to a **delusion of grandeur** that contributes to the class divide.

Development of the Theme

As mentioned before, we only ever see **one working class character on stage**: Edna, the maid. She has few lines, and her only role is to serve the Birlings. This intensifies the impression that **all working class people have no purpose beyond their subservience** (being willing to obey without question) **to the upper classes**. Priestley uses this to show his audience how **difficult** life was for the lower classes. They had **no voice**, and **no one cared for them**, apart from the Inspector, who is a symbol of a more **hopeful future**.

As the plot unravels and the Birlings’ actions are revealed, the **oppression** of the lower classes becomes more and more apparent. The plot has a **cumulative** effect, with each family member’s offence seeming worse than the last. This makes the **absence** of Eva, or any other working class character, more **conspicuous**. The family experiences a **fall from grace**, with Priestley showing how **elitism** and **classism** are **disguises for immorality**.

When it is revealed that Eva Smith was most likely different women, Priestley draws his audience’s attention to the matter of social class. Eva is a **symbol of all lower class people**: it doesn’t matter who she is, just that she was treated immorally. The real tragedy is that **every single member** of this upper class ‘respectable’ family has acted cruelly towards the working classes. Thus, every member of the elite is culpable



<https://shameshameshameshame.com/2018/02/17/an-open-letter-to-working-class-women/>

and implicated in the oppression of the lower classes.

At the beginning of the play, Priestley outlines the **values** of the upper classes. We learn how they protect their own, believe themselves to be superior, and view the lower classes as criminals. By the time the Inspector leaves, these values have all been **challenged**. The Birlings are not a perfect, **“well-behaved”** family. They turn against each other.

In the end, Eva Smith - the working class girl - is **more moral** than any of the Birlings. She refuses to take money from others, especially stolen money, and chooses to protect Eric rather than save herself. Priestley suggests that **not only are the upper classes wrong in their prejudices, but really they are worse than the ones they distance themselves from**. He implies the Birlings should follow Eva's example. Their fall from grace at the hands of the Inspector presents a possible future where **the wrongs of the upper classes will be exposed**.