

IGCSE Edexcel (9-1) English Literature

An Inspector Calls: Themes *Social Responsibility*

Social Responsibility

Social responsibility is the most obvious theme in 'An Inspector Calls'. The Inspector goes to the Birlings' to encourage them to be **accountable** for their actions, and to **take responsibility for others**. Many people in society are **vulnerable** or mistreated **through no fault of their own**, just like Eva Smith.

Priestley shows his audience that **all actions have consequences**, and it is **impossible to live in isolation**. This means by being **mindful** of your own **actions**, you help take responsibility for others. By looking after others, Priestley suggests society as a whole will **benefit**.



The play **condemns** those in **power** for not protecting the people they were supposed to, and for **leading the country into war without considering whom it would affect**. These teachings are in keeping with the **Socialist** direction society was taking in the 1940s after the war, when the standard of living was so low. Priestley uses the theme of social responsibility to advocate for a **Welfare State**.

Because social responsibility is such an important theme in the play, it links to all the other main themes Priestley explores.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling represents the **antithesis** of Priestley's message on social responsibility. He **only cares about himself** and always puts himself first, even when this means **harming others**. He is also completely **oblivious** about what other people go through, or how his actions impact others. No matter what, he **never accepts responsibility**. As he is an upper class, Capitalist businessman, Priestley suggests his lack of **compassion** and responsibility are **tied** to his **class** and **Capitalist ideologies**.

Capitalism vs Socialism

The first time Priestley raises the idea of shared responsibility, it is through Mr Birling. He tells Eric and Gerald, ***"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."*** (Act 1, pg 10). His **intolerance** of Socialism reflects the **political climate** of the 1910s, and suggests he is **narrow-minded**.



- His **harsh and insensitive language** - “*cranks*” and “*all that nonsense*” - would have made Priestley’s audience recognise him as **heartless**. It seems like he is **disgusted** by the idea of looking out for others.
- The **simile** “*like bees in a hive*” implies social responsibility is **primitive** and **demeaning**. The phrases “*you’d think*” and “*as if*” show Mr Birling finds the idea **preposterous**. His comments on the Titanic and war have already **discredited** him, so the audience knows his statements on “*community*” will also be challenged.

Priestley conveys Capitalism’s inherent **negligence** through Mr Birling’s interest in money. When he says, “*We employers at last are coming together to see that our interests - and the interests of Capital - are properly protected,*” (Act 1, pg 6), Priestley implies Capitalists feel they have a responsibility to make profit but **not a responsibility to their workers**.

- The protection of the “*interests*” of businessmen and Capital would be particularly **shocking** to Priestley’s audience, who knew of the horrors society endured because of Capitalist greed and neglect.
- It becomes more shocking still when the audience learns of Eva Smith’s death: she was not “*protected*” by the Birlings or her society.



He tells the Inspector, “*It’s my duty to keep labour costs down,*” (Act 1, pg 15), implying his business pursuits require him to **exploit** his workers. He feels a “*duty*” to his business but not his society. Priestley shows **neglect and inhumanity are a part of business**.

Importance of family honour

Priestley shows how Mr Birling **prioritises** himself over his **duty** to others. His **motto** about **family loyalty** is repeated several times, as he tells Eric and Gerald, “*A man has to make his own way - has to look after himself - and his family too,*” (Act 1, pg 9).

- The repetition of “*a man has to*” reveals Mr Birling believes men are **born with an obligation to themselves alone**.
- The delay before “*and his family too*” even suggests his family comes as an **afterthought**.

Rejection of responsibility

When faced with the **consequences** of his actions, Mr Birling **refuses** to accept any blame. He declares, “*Obviously it has nothing whatever to do with the wretched girl’s suicide,*” (Act 1, pg 13), believing his actions must be **irrelevant** because he fired her “*two years ago*” (Act 1, pg 17). He thinks the two events can’t **link** because they happened so far apart. Priestley implies this interpretation of responsibility is **simplistic** and **self-serving**, allowing people to **excuse** themselves of blame.

- “*Wretched girl*” reveals his lack of **compassion** and **patience**, suggesting he won’t take responsibility because he doesn’t **sympathise** with Eva.

Mr Birling's continued rejection of responsibility seems to be a result of **arrogance** and **disrespect for others**. Accepting blame would be seen as a sign of **weakness** and **imperfection**.

As Eva's story is revealed, Mr Birling insists he's innocent, saying, "**I can't accept any responsibility**," (Act 1, pg 14). He doesn't want to be **accused** of making a mistake in his judgement, and doesn't want to be **burdened**.

→ The **modal verb "can't"** suggests accepting blame goes against his **nature**.

Even after the family have been taught about the consequences of their actions, Mr Birling claims, "**There's every excuse for what both your mother and I did - it turned out unfortunately, that's all**," (Act 3, pg 57).

→ The **noun "excuse"** connotes a pathetic, worthless reason, suggesting Mr Birling is **desperate to excuse himself of blame**.

→ The words "**unfortunately**" and "**that's all**" convey his heartlessness, suggesting the upper classes **trivialised and dismissed the lower classes' hardships**.

→ Eva's death is merely an unforeseen tragedy, an **inconvenience**, and **not worthy** enough to make Mr Birling accept responsibility.

Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling **personifies** the upper classes' **contempt** towards the poor and authorities' **neglect** of those in need. Like Mr Birling, she is **committed** to the idea of her own innocence, refusing to accept the smallest bit of the blame. Priestley uses her to suggest the hatred of social responsibility comes from **classism and prejudice**, as the upper classes didn't want to associate themselves with the lower classes.



Responsibility

Priestley shows how the **conventional** ideas of duty and responsibility in the upper classes are **corrupt**. Mrs Birling is willing to condemn the anonymous father of Eva's unborn child, saying, "**He should be made an example of [...] Make sure he's compelled to confess in public to his responsibility [...] I consider it your duty**," (Act 2, pg 48). She claims to have a firm **moral code**, valuing responsibility and just consequences for wrongdoings.

However, she regrets this instantly when she finds out Eric is responsible, **retracting** her previous demands: "**But I didn't know it was you - I never dreamt**," (Act 3, pg 50). Because she readily **sacrifices** her beliefs about duty to protect her son, it seems she never fully meant them. Priestley suggests the upper classes' idea of duty is **superficial** and **hypocritical**.

Class prejudice

Priestley blames **class prejudice** for people's refusal to accept responsibility for others. She vouches for her innocence before she has heard who Eva is: **"Naturally I don't know anything about this girl," (Act 2, pg 32).**

- The **adverb "naturally"** implies she is **automatically above suspicion** because of her **social standing**. She believes Eva's life is completely **separate** from her own, so she can't be involved.
- This is **situational irony**, as her involvement is soon revealed. Priestley thus **challenges** the way the upper classes **assume their own innocence** to avoid responsibility.

Mrs Birling is happy to admit her **prejudices** against Eva, saying, **"I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class -" (Act 2, pg 30),** and **"Naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case," (Act 2, pg 43).** She thinks Eva's **lower social status** is a **justifiable** reason to abandon her.



- **"Understand"** and **"naturally"** show she believes there is an **intrinsic barrier** between social classes, and that she is **entitled** to act unfairly towards the lower classes.
- Priestley suggests the upper classes, particularly the older generation, are **governed by bigotry** and unrepentant in their **actions**.

Neglects social responsibility

As a **"prominent member"** (Act 2, pg 42) of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation, Mrs Birling has a **duty of care** to those who come to her. She blatantly **neglects** this responsibility, as Priestley shows **all institutions that are supposed to help others are intrinsically corrupt**. **"With dignity"**, Mrs Birling **boasts** to the Inspector, **"We've done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases," (Act 2, pg 42).**

- This **semantic field of virtue** suggests her charity work brings her a **false sense of moral accomplishment**.
 - She enjoys the **recognition** she gets, but doesn't actually **care** for those who come to her, calling them **"girl[s] of that sort" (Act 2, pg 47).**
 - The **adjective "deserving"** foreshadows her prejudice and **harsh judgement**.



Priestley argues that institutions of care are run by the upper classes, who despise the poor and care only about their own status, meaning **the lower classes will never get the help they need**. Mrs Birling's refusal to take responsibility suggests she is **insincere** and **callous**. The purpose of her charity is to be an organisation **"to which women in**

distress can appeal for help,” (Act 2, pg 42), but Mrs Birling refuses to help Eva, and this leads in part to her death.

Moral duty

Despite hearing of Eva’s suicide she says **“I consider I did my duty [...] I’ve done nothing wrong,” (Act 2, pg 44)**. This shows her **ignorance** as it was her **“duty”** to give Eva help, not judge her. Here, Priestley suggests Mrs Birling thinks her duty is to **judge the monetary worth** of women’s cases and stop the working class telling **“pack[s] of lies” (Act 2, pg 46)** to **cheat** the charity of money. It is evident that she thinks her role in Eva’s life ended when she left the room. She is **unmoved** by Eva’s suffering, signifying the **heartlessness** of the upper classes.



Contrast with Sheila

Mrs Birling’s **uncaring attitude** is **juxtaposed** with Sheila’s empathy, with Priestley welcoming **direct comparisons** between the two women.

- When Mrs Birling says she blames **“the girl herself”** for her death, Sheila **“bitterly”** retorts, **“For letting father and me have her chucked out of her jobs!”**, (Act 2, pg 47).
- Priestley demonstrates how the older generation are **content** to **blame** the poor for their own problems, while the younger generation understand that the lower classes are **subjected** to events **beyond their control**.

Equally, when Sheila sarcastically says, **“So nothing really happened. So there’s nothing to be sorry for, nothing to learn. We can all go on behaving just as we did,”** Mrs Birling responds, **“Well, why shouldn’t we?” (Act 3, pg 71)**. Priestley presents the older generation as **remorseless**. Mrs Birling knows they won’t face any **consequences**, so sees **no reason to change her ways**. Priestley conveys this attitude to his audience to highlight **the importance of holding the authorities accountable**. Without challenging those in power, **there will be no change**.

The Inspector

Priestley uses the Inspector to show that the **values of Socialism** - such as **sharing, equality, community/the greater social good, and cooperation** - can be applied outside of economic theory. He proposes that people should aim to **fulfill** these values in all their actions, ensuring they are looking out for their community. He uses the Inspector as his **mouthpiece**, to show the **importance of universal responsibility** in protecting the vulnerable and benefiting everyone.

Teacher

The Inspector **teaches the family to split responsibility between them**. He understands that this makes guilt **easier to bear**. When he tells Sheila, **“You’re partly to blame. Just as your father is,” (Act 1, pg 23)**, he holds her responsible **without pardoning Mr Birling of his role in Eva’s death**. This introduces the idea of **shared blame**.



He tells them, **“We have to share something. If there’s nothing else, we’ll have to share our guilt” (Act 2, pg 29)**, demonstrating how sharing responsibility **brings communities together and comforts people**. The longing to **“share”** and reference to **“guilt”** may be an **allusion** to the two **World Wars**, suggesting social responsibility will help the country **recover**. Through this, Priestley presents the Inspector as **compassionate and understanding, encouraging his audience to side with him**.

Taking responsibility

The Inspector’s teachings of shared responsibility criticise the **laissez-faire** government that was in power in 1912. Mrs Birling believes it wasn’t her responsibility to help Eva because she wasn’t the father of the child, but the Inspector tells her, **“That doesn’t make it any the less yours. She came to you for help,” (Act 2, pg 45)**. People should take responsibility for others **regardless of their own involvement**. Priestley suggests **failing to offer support** is itself an act of **cruelty**. Those who are capable of giving help have a **responsibility** to do so. This includes the **government’s** responsibility to set up a **Welfare State**.

Throughout the play we see the Birlings, particularly the parents, **blame Eva Smith** for getting herself into trouble and killing herself. Their **prejudices** lead them to believe she was **foolish** and **self-destructive**. Her suicide is a **symbol** for the way the lower classes were **blamed for their own suffering**.

- The Inspector’s declaration that, **“This girl killed herself - and died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her,” (Act 3, pg 55)** contradicts this **culture of scapegoating**.
- Just because they didn’t personally make Eva drink disinfectant, **it doesn’t mean they are innocent in her death**. Priestley wants the authorities to confront their own **culpability** in the poverty and suffering of the lower classes.

Sense of duty

Priestley **contrasts** the parents’ view of duty with the Inspector’s. Because Mr Birling feels a duty to himself and his business, and Mrs Birling is hypocritical, Priestley implies their sense of duty is **empty of meaning**. Conversely, the Inspector takes his role in society seriously and **successfully fulfils his duty of care** to others.

When his first action is to decline Mr Birling's offer of alcohol because he is **"on duty"** (*Act 1, pg 11*), Priestley establishes a **distinction** between the Birlings and the Inspector. The Birlings are **unconcerned by rules**, whereas the Inspector is **strict and mindful**.

When the Birlings protest to his **"manner"**, he asks, **"Apologise for what - doing my duty?"**, (*Act 2, pg 41*), and he overstays his welcome so that he can wait for Eric's return and **"do [his] duty"** (*Act 2, pg 49*). He is **dedicated** to his job, even when it is **controversial**. This is the **ideal** of duty that Priestley supports. He shows that people should be **loyal** to others and do what is **right** even if it means **going against authority**.

The Inspector's Final Speech

The Inspector's closing speech is the **direct opposite** of Mr Birling's opening lecture. While Mr Birling supported the Capitalist ideal of **self-preservation**, the Inspector says, **"We are responsible for each other,"** (*Act 3, pg 56*).

- **"We are members of one body"** shows everyone is **connected** on a deep level, where **society is the result of everyone's combined actions**.
- By stating, **"We don't live alone,"** (*Act 3, pg 56*), Priestley presents a **moral duty** to look after others. He suggests ignoring this is not only selfish, but **delusional**.

This is also shown when the Inspector says, **"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,"** (*Act 3, pg 56*). This **semantic field of connection** dismisses all the **societal divisions**, including **class and wealth**, that people such as the Birlings used to avoid responsibility. Priestley shows that, ultimately, **we are all the same**. Shared responsibility is the inevitable outcome of living side by side.



Before he leaves, the Inspector's final words create a **lasting image of grief and pain**. **"If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish"** (*Act 3, pg 56*), is an **allusion** to the **World Wars** that Priestley had just **fought in and lived through**. He suggests that war is a **consequence** of the **neglect** of others.

- This prediction is **prophetic**, almost **Biblical** in its imagery, lending the statement more weight.
- The **"fire and blood and anguish"** of warfare is a large scale **parallel** to the **"fire and blood and anguish"** experienced by Eva as her insides were **"burnt"**, and of the **"fire and blood and anguish"** experienced by everyone who suffers at the hands of selfishness.

Sheila

Sheila is the first member of the Birling family to truly **grasp** the concept of **shared responsibility**. She is the first to **repent**, and takes it upon herself to **continue the Inspector's message**. She represents the way society can **improve**, and is a symbol of the compassionate, Socialist **younger generation**.

It's important to remember that Sheila does not start as a compassionate and responsible person. Instead she is **shaped** by the Inspector, probably in a similar way Priestley hoped the play would shape the audience. It is Sheila's **character development** which is central to the play.

At the beginning

Sheila is one example of how people **fail to consider the consequences** of their actions. She asks, **"How could I know what would happen afterwards? [...] It didn't seem to be anything very terrible at the time," (Act 1, pg 24)**, showing people are **unable to predict the significance of their actions**. This means they need to act **responsibly**, being mindful of everything they do.

Only after Sheila learns of Eva's death can she realise the **extent** of what she caused. Priestley illustrates how the upper classes have the **luxury** of behaving **however they wish** and living in **ignorance** of the consequences, while the lower classes are **left to cope with the aftermath in silence**. This could also be a criticism of the government for **enabling tragedy** by not foreseeing it, such as by not setting up a Welfare State.

Transformation

Sheila's readiness to learn from the Inspector, and her transformation because of it, shows that though accepting blame is difficult, **it can and must be done**. She is initially **"miserable"** because she is **"really responsible"** for Eva's death **(Act 1, pg 23)**, acknowledging that **guilt goes against our instincts**. She **still** owns up to her wrongs: **"It was my own fault," (Act 1, pg 23)**, and unlike her parents, she **pledges** to change her ways of her own accord, promising, **"I'll never, never do it again to anybody," (Act 1, pg 24)**.

Because she recognises her whole family's involvement in Eva's death, Sheila shows how guilt and blame are **important tools** in society. She predicts, **"Probably between us we killed her," (Act 2, pg 35)**, which is a direct **confession** of guilt. She sees that blame can be **split** between them. This statement's **honesty** and **bluntness** is a refreshing change from her parents' deceit and ambiguity.



The **metaphor**, **"He's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves," (Act 2, pg 33)**, is very **macabre** (disturbing because it concerns death), revealing her shaken state of mind and the **severity** of the situation. The allusion to **execution** acknowledges both the

Inspector's role in bringing justice and the Birlings' part in causing their own **fall from grace**. Priestley suggests those in power **incriminate** themselves, and the younger generation have the **responsibility** to hold them **accountable**.

Eva's Death

The **ambiguity** surrounding Eva's death at the end of the play **challenges** Priestley's audience to consider **when they should take responsibility**, and **what they should take responsibility for**. He argues that **actual consequence** should be **irrelevant** in whether people take responsibility for their actions, **preventing** the suffering of others rather than **regretting** it. Does the fact no one died make the Birlings less guilty? Does it make their actions seem better? Does it matter at all what happened to Eva?

What does Eva's death symbolise?

Initially, Eva's death is used to demonstrate how **impactful one person's actions can be**, and how **destructive the thoughtless upper class are**.

Eric and Sheila know that, even if the family won't face **prosecution** for their crimes, they should still **learn** from Eva's death. They ask, **"This girl's still dead, isn't she? Nobody's brought her to life, have they?" (Act 3, pg 64)** and **"That won't bring Eva Smith back to life, will it?" (Act 3, pg 65)**.

- This **refrain of resurrection** shows that actions and their consequences can't be **reversed**, meaning it is important to be **thoughtful** and **responsible before** doing anything.
- The Inspector's true nature doesn't change the **reality** of the situation. Eva's death is a **manifestation** of the **family's wrongdoings**, and a **symptom** of the **widespread mistreatment** in Priestley's society.
- **"We all helped to kill her," (Act 3, pg 65)**, suggests society **as a whole is responsible** for her death.

Gerald

Gerald's theories about the Inspector and Eva allow him and the parents to **excuse** themselves from the situation. They won't face legal action, and her death is the **only thing tying them to their actions**. Gerald's statement, **"Either there's a dead girl or there isn't," (Act 3, pg 69)**, shows how his guilt and the urgency of the situation **depends** on her death.

- It **oversimplifies** the **nuances** of social responsibility.
- The **straightforward parallel phrase "or there isn't"** suggests, if she isn't dead, then everything is fine.

Does the fact no one died make the Birlings less guilty?

When he reveals no girl died at the Infirmary, Priestley **challenges** his audience to consider **whether it makes any difference** to the Birlings' guilt. The older generation are **relieved** and want to celebrate, **learning nothing**. On the other hand, the children are **haunted** by

the visit. Sheila explains, **“Everything we said had happened really had happened. If it didn’t end tragically, then that’s lucky for us. But it might have done,”** (Act 3, pg 70). Her death doesn’t **change** what they did.

Priestley wants his audience to come to the same conclusion. The older generation’s belief that **“everything’s all right now,”** (Act 3, pg 71) shows that **tragedy** is required for the authorities to **pay attention**. By removing the existence of a **“dead girl”**, Priestley **asks his audience whether the Birlings’ selfish, negligent acts are any better morally because no one died**. He suggests responsibility goes beyond the law or fatal consequences. Responsibility is **permanent**.

Development of the Theme

Before introducing his audience to the Inspector, and the ideal of responsibility he represents, Priestley **exposes them to Mr Birling’s attitude**. Mr Birling **rejects Socialist ideology** and mocks the idea of **“community”**. He is Priestley’s **antithesis**.

- His character **associates** Capitalism with **selfish** and **irresponsible behaviour**, proving **change needs to happen**.
- By showing his audience how society used to be, they can understand why that mindset was wrong and what work needs to be done to change it.

Although Mr Birling doesn’t represent Priestley’s ideals, Priestley does **present the theme of social responsibility at the very start of the play**. This indicates to the audience that it will be a **key point of conflict**, and that it is one of the playwright’s main focuses.

The Inspector’s influence

Once the Inspector arrives, the play’s dialogue **revolves** around the argument of social responsibility. Mr and Mrs Birling **dismiss** social responsibility but the Inspector **confronts** them with the reality of it. They are stubborn, but the Inspector has the **last word**.



Priestley makes it clear **who is in the right** and **who wins the argument**. The conflict continues after the Inspector leaves, with the children **taking his place**. The final twist that a girl has died in the Infirmary after all signals the Inspector’s **triumph**. The focus on this conflict is an **allegory for the hostility in 1940s Britain**. He suggests the question of social responsibility should be at the **forefront of politics**. The Inspector’s **perseverance** and **symbolic triumph** show Priestley believes **change can happen**.

At the start of the play, only the Inspector acts as Priestley’s **mouthpiece**, the only one with a clear view on social responsibility. However, Sheila and Eric eventually side with him. They

have a much clearer idea about their own political beliefs once he leaves, showing how the younger generation needs to be **educated**. Change is possible through them.

As the play continues for a significant length of time after the Inspector leaves, we know Priestley's intention is not only to communicate the Inspector's message. He examines the family's reaction to it. The children uphold his values, as Priestley argues **the lessons learned from the World Wars need to be remembered**. Part of social responsibility is **educating the young and thinking of tomorrow**.