

AQA English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Character Profile

The Inspector

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First Impressions

Character in context

The Inspector is dressed in a **minimal** “*plain darkish suit*” and seems to be an ordinary police Inspector. However, the **supernatural** nature of the Inspector becomes apparent as the play progresses, as the **homophone** of Goole (“*ghoul*”) suggests.



Priestley leaves the Inspector’s physical appearance as vague and, to some extent, unimportant due to his message of **social responsibility** being more important than his appearance. He dictates in the **stage directions** that the Inspector “*need not be a big man, but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness*”.

- The Inspector takes on the role of an **omniscient** (all-knowing), moral force for good.
- Priestley presents his character as a spiritual **avenging angel**.
- **Socialist** values and ideology are channelled through the Inspector.
- Priestley utilises the Inspector as a **vehicle to catalyse** change in perceptions of responsibility. He encourages the younger generation to break away from the older, more traditional and **individualistic generation**.

Moral force - resistant to corruption

The Inspector is opposed to, and exempt from, the **immorality** and corruption of society. Despite the Inspector’s physical appearance as a police Inspector, he is more akin to that of a **moral policeman**.

Priestley immediately portrays the Inspector’s as a moral force as he refuses a drink of port: “*no, thank you [...] I’m on duty*”. Alcohol bears connotations of **immoral behaviour** and therefore the Inspector’s refusal is **symbolic** of his refusing to act immorally. The offering of an **alcoholic drink** to an on duty policeman by Mr Birling is a soft attempt at corrupting the Inspector, who is conversely responsible and takes the role seriously.

Priestley utilises a **cyclical structure**, as the play also ends with the Inspector rejecting Mr Birling’s attempt of **bribery**. Mr Birling makes it clear he would “*give thousands*”, which the Inspector responds with “*you’re offering the money at the wrong time*”. This cyclical structure is used to demonstrate the consistency of the Inspector’s morals, while simultaneously presenting Mr Birling as immoral throughout. The audience realises this and draws upon their **political differences** as the cause - **capitalism** causes **immorality** and **socialism** causes morality.



Socialist views

Priestley demonstrates the Inspector's conviction that everyone is equally important within society. The Inspector's views are noticeably **too progressive** for the **pre-suffrage** 1912 society and are more aligned with those of the **contemporary** audience.

- Priestley encourages the audience to realise that a person's class is irrelevant to their **degree of responsibility** as "**public men ... have responsibility as well as privilege**".

The Inspector sees Eva as an individual and refuses to refer to her as a "**girl**" in the same **superficial** fashion as the Birlings do. Instead, he persists in referring to her by her name, Eva Smith.

- ◆ The Birlings perceive Eva as insignificant – just a "**girl**", due to her **lower social status** as a working-class citizen.
- ◆ To the Inspector, Eva is an individual, who has significance. This is evidenced by the Inspector's acknowledgement of Eva's "**promising little life**".

The Inspector's morality is due to his awareness of **social responsibility** and the impact of an individuals' actions upon all of society. Fundamentally, because he rejects **capitalism**, he rejects immorality as Priestley presents the two as **synonymous**.

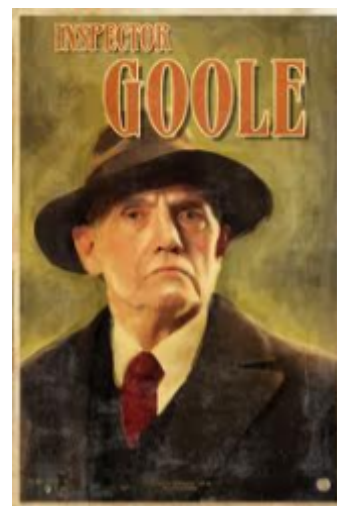
Omniscience

The **supernatural** element to the character of the Inspector is evident through his apparent **omniscience**. The Inspector's purpose is not to convict the Birlings of any crime. His purpose is much deeper and more significant; he attempts to force the Birlings to recognise the **immorality** of their actions and change their attitudes towards **social responsibility**. Through Priestley portraying the Inspector as completely **moral**, the audience is provided with an **example** of how to act themselves for the improvement of society.

Physical appearance

Priestley describes the Inspector in the **stage directions** in order to convey the message that a person's inner morality and integrity supplants their outward appearance. The Inspector "**need not be a large man**" but he "**gives the impression of massiveness**". His physical appearance does not convey the impact of his message and **proWess of his character**; it is the strength of his values and morals which are important.

The Inspector is presented as dressing **modestly** in a "**plain darkish suit**". Perhaps, Priestley is suggesting that the Inspector has no interest in attracting interest to himself; his purpose is to promote **socialist** values and denounce the **commercialism** and **superficiality** of **capitalism**. This modest appearance is in direct contrast with Mr Birling, who is "**heavy looking**" and "**portentous**" with a "**substantial**" house. Through the **juxtaposition** of these two characters, Priestley demonstrates the strength of the Inspector's values of **socialism** are stronger than Birlings' views of capitalism. This is why the Inspector doesn't need to reinforce his views with an impressive appearance.



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Consequences of lacking responsibility

Priestley utilises the Inspector's final speech to warn the audience of the consequences in continuing in the same **capitalist** and **individualistic** fashion. He incorporates **Biblical** references within the Inspector's final speech which establish an atmosphere similar to that of Catholic mass. Through summarising each characters' sins, the Inspector symbolises the role of a **Pastor** and warns the characters of not following his moral message: "**if men will not learn that lesson**". This message extends to the rest of the audience through the sweeping use of the **plural noun** "**men**", who are instructed by the Inspector to "**learn that lesson**" of **capitalism** and the detrimental effects of commercialism.

War

The structure of the play mirrors that of the two world wars. The initial arrival of the Inspector is portrayed as being due to society's capitalist flaws and therefore represents WWI. Then, the intermittent duration between WWI and WWII is highlighted as the characters' opportunity to change and accept greater social responsibility. However, the characters fail this and the phone call to the Birling residence, at the end of the play, is symbolic of WWII as this is the "**fire and blood and anguish**", which the Inspector warned the characters about.

Priestley suggests that WWII occurred due to humanity not heeding the need for greater **social responsibility** for their actions, and that the world wars were a direct result of "**if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.**" Therefore, Priestley's underlying message is revealed; to stop society failing again, the audience needs to take action and reconstruct society to be more responsible than it was in 1912. The world wars were, as suggested by Priestley, caused by the greed and capitalist attitudes of society. However, the Birlings chose to dismiss the Inspector as "**socialist or some sort of crank**". Therefore, Eva's 'second' death is caused by Birlings' refusal to admit responsibility after the Inspectors exit. This repeating of events (Eva's death) is a reflection of the repeated World Wars.

Vehicle for Priestley's agenda

The **character** of the Inspector is used as a **mouthpiece** to present Priestley's own views regarding the need for **socialist** change. The Inspector is portrayed as a role model and is used to show how people should treat each other.

The **cyclical structure** of the play is contextually significant; the characters of the play failed to **assimilate** (understand) the Inspector's message.

Thus, unless the **contemporary** audience embraces the Inspector's lesson and takes on greater **social responsibility**, they too will face the consequences, which plagued the characters of 1912.

- The Inspector's departure is necessary to test the characters to see if they have learnt their lesson: this departure mirrors the interwar years between WWI and WWII; the ruling class also had the chance to change their **capitalist** and individualistic attitudes.



Symbolism

Omniscient, yet not omnipotent [all-knowing yet not all-powerful]

Priestley's message would be less effective on the audience if the Inspector forced the characters to change. Moreover, this would undermine the message of the play, as the audience needs to **accept greater responsibility** without an external force.

Priestley uses **shocking imagery** in an attempt to persuade the characters to change as he frequently refers to Eva's death as "**burnt her inside out**". Persuasion is the Inspector's greatest form of power, as he relies on **rhetorical devices**, such as **triplets**, to evoke empathy: Eva was "**friendless, penniless, desperate**" and needed "**advice, sympathy, friendliness**". The Inspector also attempts to appeal to the **maternal** side of Mrs Birling in an effort to persuade her: "**you've had children**". This tactic is flawed as Mrs Birling is, in fact, not a caring mother. This reveals the truth behind Priestley's opening **stage directions**, which describe Mrs Birling as "**rather cold**".

Agent of God

Priestley incorporates many similarities between the Inspector and the perception of the **Judeo-Christian God**. Both the Inspector and God are **Omniscient**, this is revealed in a **plethora** (lots) of ways. The Inspector arrives immediately after Mr Birling dismisses socialism, saying a man should "**mind his own business and look after himself and his own**".

The nature of the enquiry being moral, rather than criminal, elevates the Inspector to that of **an agent of God**. The Inspector sets about forcing confessions of **vices** (sins) from the characters, similar to the role of a priest, who accepts confessions of sins in the Catholic Church. This link is strengthened through the allusion to the **Book of Genesis** as "**we are members of one body**", which is also used in **Holy Communion**. Therefore, through echoing the words of God, Priestley implies that the Inspector is speaking on **God's behalf**.



Relationships with other characters

Antithesis to Mr Birling

Priestley presents Mr Birling as intolerable. This perception of Mr Birling extends to the ideology which he represents: **capitalism**. This allows Priestley to portray the Inspector as a favourable alternative, which also extends to **socialism** being a favourable alternative to **capitalism**. It is important to consider why Priestley contrasts the Inspector to Mr Birling as his **foil** (opposite).

Exam tip -

You will develop your AO2 for characterisation, if you are able to include a direct comparison between the characters of Mr Birling and the Inspector.

- The purpose of Mr Birling is to allow the Inspector to be presented in a favourable light.
- Mr Birling's reliability is destroyed by Priestley's use of **dramatic irony**. Therefore, his opinions and values bear no value or weight.
 - This is demonstrated through Mr Birling's confident claim that "**there's no chance of war**", which is perceived as contemptible by an audience, which has been affected by both WWI and WWII.
- Mr Birling is only concerned with his appearance and other character's perception of himself, as Priestley describes him in the **stage directions** as "**portentous**".
- Priestley portrays Mr Birling as only concerned with his own appearance, rather than morality.
 - This contrasts with the Inspector, who "**speaks weightily**" and "**need not be a big man**" as the strength of his position and ideology outweigh the need for an imposing physical appearance.
- Priestley places the Inspector and Mr Birling up against each other in order to establish the ideological debate between **capitalism and socialism**.
 - Priestley portrays Mr Birling as **dominating** speech throughout the opening scenes, until the arrival of the Inspector. Then upon the Inspector's arrival, the counterargument against capitalism is provided.
 - The Inspector interrupts the **capitalist narrative** of Mr Birling. This is, perhaps, an **extended metaphor** for **socialism** ending the precedence of **capitalism** in the global/historical narrative. Foreshadowing, a greater sense of **social responsibility** felt by all.

Conversion of Sheila

The Inspector has the greatest impression on Sheila, out of all the characters, as she becomes **symbolic** of Priestley's intended audience response. She therefore becomes **symbolic** of the Inspector's ability to change the mindset of people.

- This conversion is symbolised by whether Sheila accepts or rejects Gerald. This is due to Gerald being **emblematic of capitalism** and the upper-class.
 - Sheila's attitude to Gerald becomes **symbolic** of whether the younger generation will accept the ways of the past. Therefore, it is significant that the inspector interrupts their engagement.



Exposure of Gerald

The Inspector causes the **hypocrisy** of the upper-classes to be revealed; he exposes the upper-class for **shunning** responsibility.

- Gerald, despite knowing that Eva Smith is indeed the same girl that was wronged by all the characters, suggests that they were in fact different girls. Gerald validates Sheila's story as Eva "**said something about the shop too**" and also had to leave Mr Birling's employment "**after a strike**". Therefore, Gerald knows, beyond reasonable doubt, that Eva is indeed the same girl. However, he **fabricates** the claim that Eva is not the same girl to partially **excuse his responsibility** for her ultimate suicide. Priestley uses the character of the Inspector to condemn the upper-classes' lack of responsibility and determination to avoid it.

Mrs Birling's vain attempts to halt inquiry

The Inspector's **accusing tone** causes Mrs Birling to condemn Sheila for expressing empathy towards Eva and the guilt that she feels for her role in her suicide.

- Mrs Birling silences Sheila as "**your behaving like a hysterical child**", right after she expresses how responsible she feels for Eva's death.
- Mrs Birling refers to the disorder *hysteria*, which was essentially constructed by the **patriarchy** to oppress women and prevent them from gaining positions of power.
 - She uses this against her own daughter in an attempt to **dismiss her** views, which are becoming aligned with the Inspector's **progressive view of socialism**.

Supporting Eric

Priestley ensures that Eric is portrayed as redeemable and that the Inspector reveals his **capacity to change**.

Priestley does not directly condemn Eric for his actions, through the Inspector. Rather, Eric's excuse for his actions seems valid; he had been exposed to "**respectable**" men using prostitutes and thus it became normal for him. This coupled with Mr Birling being "**not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble**", allows Eric's actions to seem to be due to the **influence of the society** the Inspector is so heavily critical of.



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Eva as a symbol

The Inspector uses Eva as a means to inflict guilt upon the characters and catalyse change within them. The Inspector's inquiry is centred around the suicide of Eva Smith; however, the Inspector's message is not limited to just Eva. The Inspector acknowledges the **widespread suffering** of the lower-classes at the hands of those **socially superior** to them. This is demonstrated by the Inspector's message that "**there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths**". Inspector reveals in his final speech that Eva's significance extends beyond her as an individual. The characters can no longer help Eva, yet, they can aid the millions of other people whose suffering they are complicit in. Else, they shall "**learn that lesson**" in "**fire blood and anguish**".



Structure

Inspector's arrival

Priestley deliberately times the Inspector's arrival to coincide with, and interrupt, Mr Birling and his negative view of socialism. This allows Priestley to structurally represent the Inspector's opposition to Mr Birling's capitalist views. His arrival concludes a series of claims that the audience – through blunt and explicit use of **dramatic irony** – know to be incorrect due to hindsight:

- **"You'll hear some people say that war is inevitable. And to that I say – fiddlesticks!"** - The use of the **noun** "fiddlesticks", alongside Priestley's use of **dramatic irony** causes Mr Birling to seem overwhelmingly confident in his arrogance. This is due to Britain entering WWI soon after 1912.
- **"(the Titanic is) unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable"** - The certainty shown by Mr Birling's **repetition** of "unsinkable" demonstrates his poor judgement. This is due to the Titanic sinking.
- **"time of steadily increasing prosperity"** - The Great Depression followed 1912 and engulfed post-war Britain. Therefore, the audience in 1945 would identify Mr Birling as unreliable and thus dislike him.

Mr Birling's final statement before the Inspector's arrival: **"a man has to mind his own business and look after himself"** is proved to be as **equally unsubstantiated** and incorrect as his prior erroneous statements. The Inspector's interruption of the **monotonous**, slow paced and single character dominated scene also causes the audience to experience **subconscious relief** at the Inspector's arrival. Priestley may intend for this relief to become **associated with the Inspector's** presence. Therefore, the audience are manipulated into finding catharsis from the change in ideology from a **capitalist** to a **socialist** narrative. This enables Priestley's **manipulation** of the audience's response to the beliefs he supports.

Switch in authority

The Inspector's arrival marks a shift in authority from Mr Birling to the Inspector, which can be interpreted as the shift from **capitalism** to **socialism**. Mr Birling has, hitherto (until now), dominated the dialogue of the play. His **dramatic monologue** form of speech excludes the views of others, which is demonstrated by his dismissal of Eric's protest **"What about war?"**, with **"the Germans don't want war"**. This reflects how capitalism has dominated society throughout the 19th Century and early 20th Century.



The British Museum

Upon arrival, the Inspector challenges the unquestioned authority and dominance not only of Mr Birling, but of the **capitalist** narrative that has so far controlled the narrative and society. Therefore, his interruption marks a change in attitude as past views have to contend with attempts of reform. Priestley constructs this conflict to mirror the way in which war has acted as a **catalyst** for post-war society. Therefore, this forces the audience to reconsider how society should be formed if previous systems led to suffering.



It is significant that it is not Eva's death that has called the Inspector to visit the Birlings, but the **capitalist** and individualistic views that instigate the Inspector's inquiry. He is not there to investigate the crime against Eva Smith. He is there to investigate the cause of **immorality in society**, which Eva is merely a single example of, caused by **capitalism**.

Final impressions

Need for change

Priestley, through the character of the Inspector, expresses the need for change, yet, he also describes how to change. The role of Inspector allows Priestley to portray *An Inspector Calls*, as a **didactic** (educational message) morality play, which is **disguised as a murder mystery**. This is a **reversal** of a murder mystery as the number of suspected characters actually expands, rather than being narrowed down by the Inspector.

The suspects are responsible for contributing to, both, Eva's suicide and the suffering of society.

- Priestley, through the Inspector, portrays Eva as **symbolic** of the reason behind the need for society to adopt **socialism**. In doing this, Priestley creates a compelling argument for the need for reform through the guilt of the characters in their role of Eva's suicide.
- Therefore, Priestley, through the Inspector, conveys the message that it is the whole of the upper class that is responsible for the suffering of the working-class. In doing this, it is clear to the audience that the disparity in the **class system** is responsible for this suffering of the lower classes. The Inspector refuses to allow Sheila to comprehensively accept blame for Eva's death and continues his policy of **"one line of enquiry at a time"**.
 - The Inspector must compromise his beliefs and partially excuse her behaviour to gain her as an ally and display the culpability of all members of the upper-classes.
 - He lays blame on the **"power you had"** rather than Sheila as an individual. Sheila is not fundamentally a bad person; the **influence of her class and environment** has caused her to behave in that immoral manner.

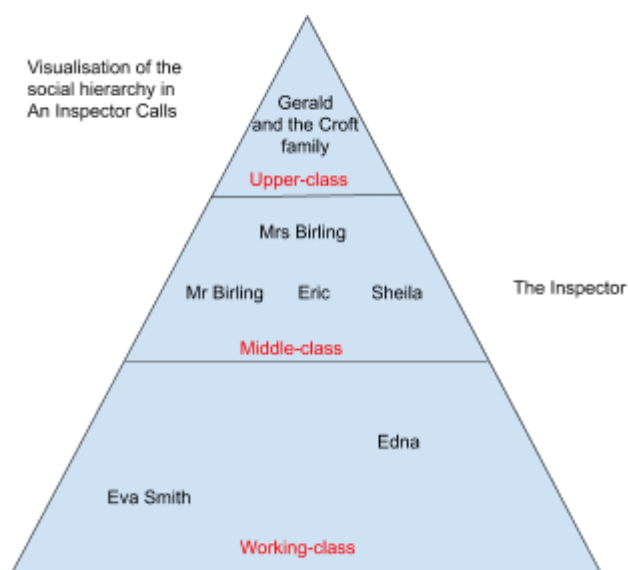


Figure 1



Ambiguous portrayal

Priestley presents the Inspector in such a way that attitudes towards his genuine presence are **ambivalent** (doubtful). He potentially does this to raise questions about his authenticity.

- Academics often engage in a continuous debate regarding the Inspector's purpose and his true nature; was the Inspector real, or perhaps a form of collective conscience? There is also the view that the Inspector was, true to his **omniscient** nature and role of judgement, a representation of God.
- Whilst there is an argument, with evidence, for each interpretation given Priestley leaves **no definitive answer**. Perhaps, this reveals that it is not **who** the Inspector is, which matters. Rather, it is **what** the Inspector's message was, which is of utmost significance.
- This message is a desperate plea to ensure that post-war society is vastly different to pre-war society; men must "**learn that lesson**" of **social responsibility**. The lesson is realising the **capitalist flaws of society**; the response is **socialism**.

Possible 'Topic Sentences'

- Priestley promotes his socialist agenda through the Inspector's speech and appearance, and portrays this ideology as favourable to the status quo of capitalism.
- Priestley explores the contrasting responses to social responsibility through contrasting the reactions between the older and younger-generations within the play.
- Furthermore, Priestley presents socialism favourably through the antithesis of the Inspector - Mr Birling - whose contemptible portrayal extends to the capitalist ideology that he represents.
- Priestley explores the ideal response of the audience to the Inspector's message of responsibility through his profound effect on Sheila.

Exam tip -

A 'Topic Sentence' is the first sentence of your argument. This should convey the overall point you are making. It should reference Priestley explicitly and his ideas.

Exam tip -

Topic sentences should always link back to the question at hand. Also, try to link these sentences together (e.g. discuss the initial, transitional and final portrayals of a character).



Inspector Goole quote bank by theme

| Theme | Quote | Analysis |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Morality / responsibility | <i>“Speaks carefully, weightily”</i> | The use of the adjective “weightily” evidences the impact of the Inspector’s moral message. Also, speaking “carefully” directly contrasts Mr Birling, whose speech is diluted with dashes and hesitations. |
| | <i>“If you’re easy with me, I’m easy with you”</i> | Priestley’s use of parallelism (same grammatical features of a sentence repeated) in this phrase is, perhaps, symbolic for the Inspector’s message. This sense of equality and treating others how you wish to be treated is inherently socialist . |
| | <i>“Yes, but you can’t. It’s too late. She’s dead.”</i> | Here, Priestley uses short sentences and a terse triplet of expressions to convey an impactful message and express the need for radical change. |
| | <i>“Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges”</i> | The Inspector reminds Mr Birling that he cannot do as he pleases without considering the potential consequences his actions may have. |
| | <i>“Their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness all intertwined with our lives”</i> | Priestley continues to spread the message of socialism and the need for greater social responsibility as everybody’s lives are “intertwined” . |
| | <i>“We are members of one body”</i> | Priestley alludes to the Book of Genesis as “we are members of one body” is used in Holy Communion . Therefore, through echoing the words of God, Priestley implies that the Inspector is speaking on God’s behalf . |
| | <i>“Each of you helped to kill her, remember that. Never forget it.”</i> | Despite none of the characters directly ending Eva’s life, they have all had a part to play in her death and are therefore responsible for driving her to suicide. |



| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| | <i>“You used the power you had... to punish the girl.”</i> | The Inspector plainly states how Sheila abused her power, out of “jealousy” in order to punish Eva Smith for being more beautiful than her. |
| Omniscience | <i>“He knows”</i> | Sheila understands the Inspector’s omniscience and thus reveals all to the Inspector, while encouraging Gerald to do the same, as “he knows” anyway. |
| | <i>“I don’t need to know any more. Neither do you.”</i> | At this point, the Inspector has revealed the culpability of the characters in Eva’s death. As this is not a <i>real</i> Inspector, there is no need to know any more details, other than a sense of guilt and responsibility . |
| Physical appearance | <i>“Need not be a big man”</i> | The Inspector “need not be a big man” as the strength of his position and ideology outweigh the need for an imposing physical appearance. |
| | <i>“Impression of massiveness (solidity and purposefulness)”</i> | Priestley leaves the Inspector’s physical appearance as vague and, to some extent, unimportant due to his message of social responsibility being more important than his physical appearance. |
| | <i>“A plain darkish suit”</i> | Priestley presents the Inspector as wearing simple and minimal clothes in “a plain darkish suit” , as appearance is irrelevant to him. It is moral and social responsibility which is of greater importance. |
| Warning of not learning lesson | <i>“Burnt her inside out, of course”</i> | Priestley uses shocking imagery in an attempt to persuade the characters to change as he frequently refers to Eva’s death as “burnt her inside out” . |
| | <i>“If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish”</i> | Therefore, the threat of “fire blood and anguish” could be the Inspector warning both the characters and the audience of the religious consequences for neglecting their duty of social responsibility . The religious connotation of “fire” is hell and therefore the punishment for not following the message of both Christianity and socialism to ‘love thy neighbour’. |

