

Year 10 English Knowledge Booklet

An Inspector Calls

Name:

Class:

JP PRIESTLEY'S

**AN
INSPECTOR
CALLS**



Big Questions:

As you learn more about the play, answer the following questions to consolidate your learning with links to the exam

BQ 1: What compelled Priestley to write this play?

AO3—Context. What was happening at the time that influenced Priestley and audience reception?

AO2—Writer’s intentions. What was Priestley trying to achieve?

BQ 2: How is the Birling household reflective of society at the time?

AO3—Context— What was happening in society? How might this influence the audience and the presentation of the characters?

AO2—How does society at the time influence the way the characters speak, act , the language they use and their overall presentation?

BQ 3: What does Arthur Birling represent?

AO1—References—What quotations or references to the play can you make that convey what Arthur Birling is like?

AO2—What themes or symbols is the writer using that portrays Arthur Birling in a certain way? How is this reflected in what the writer does?

AO3—How does the presentation of Arthur Birling link to society and what the writer is trying to convey to the audience?

Big Questions:

BQ 4: How is the Inspector omniscient?

AO1—Where do we see the Inspector as omniscient in the play? What quotes and references can you make?

AO2—How does the writer portray the Inspector? What techniques does the writer use?

BQ 5: What drives Sheila's behaviour?

AO1—What examples of Sheila's behaviour are there? Is her behaviour the same way throughout the play? What quotes can be referred to?

AO2—How is the writer presenting Sheila? How does her behaviour reflect the structure of the play?

AO3—How does society or family impact Sheila's behaviour?

BQ 6: How has power been abused by Gerald?

AO1—What references to power are made throughout the play and how many link to Gerald?

AO2—How is the theme of power important throughout the play? Who holds the power and how is this presented?

AO3—How is power seen in society? Does Gerald reflect society at the time? Do elements of society (e.g. class) give Gerald power?

Big Questions:

BQ 7: Why is Sybil disdainful of the vulnerable?

AO2— What language does Priestley use that shows Sybil's attitudes? What is his intention with the character of Sybil?

AO3—What was society's attitudes towards the vulnerable at the time the play is set and when it was performed?

BQ 8: Is Eric immoral or a product of his upbringing?

AO1— What references can be made to Eric's behaviour throughout the play? What are his relationships like with others?

AO2—How is the play structured to reveal details about Eric? How does Priestley portray his relationships with his parents and others?

BQ 9: Why are warnings and morals important?

AO1—What references to warnings and morals are throughout the play?

AO2—How is the play structured to reveal the warnings and morals used by Priestley?

AO3—What was happening in society that could have also been seen as a warning or moral? How would the audience have reacted to these warnings and morals?

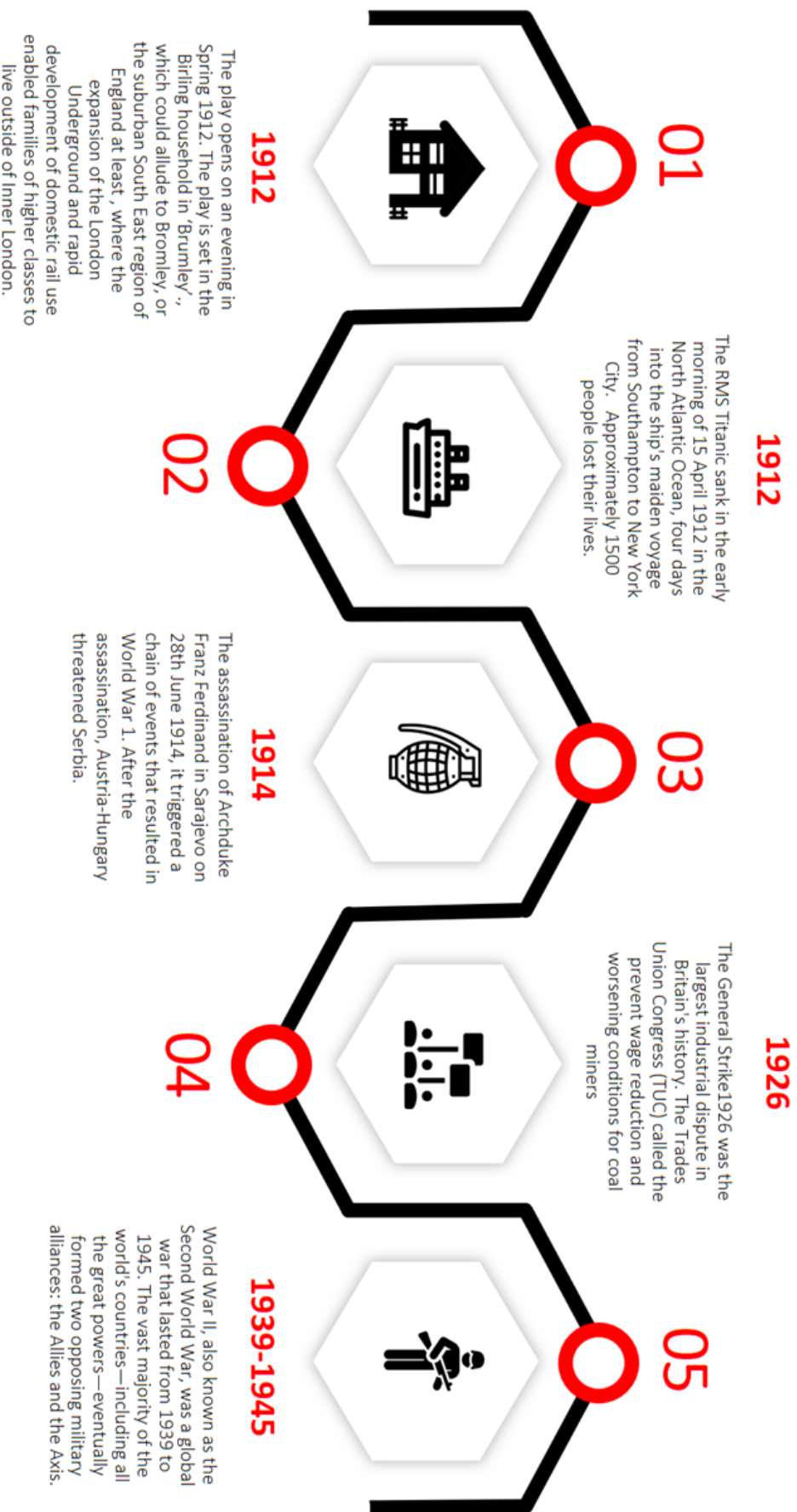
BQ 10: What do we learn from this play?

Key Vocabulary and devices	
Capitalism	A political or social viewpoint that believes key values of Capitalism which are individual responsibility, private ownership of a country's trade and industry and rewards for those that are most financially successful.
Disdain	The feeling that someone is not worth your respect.
Hypocrisy	Claiming an idea or belief and then not following it yourself.
Intuitive	A feeling or instinct that something is true.
Microcosm	A community or situation that represents the features of something much larger, like a complete society.
Nepotism	Those with power or influence favouring relatives or friends, especially by giving them jobs.
Omniscient	Knowing everything.
Patriarchy	A system, society or government that is led by men.
Prejudiced	Having a dislike or distrust of a person or people based upon little evidence.
Privilege	A special right, advantage only available to a particular person or group of people.
Remorseful	Sorry or full of regret for actions or behaviour.
Reputation	The beliefs or opinions held by others about someone or something.
Responsibility	Having a sense of duty to deal with or look after someone.
Retribution	Punishment inflicted on someone as vengeance for a wrong or criminal act.
Socialism	A political or social viewpoint that believes key values of which include: social ownership of a country's trade and industry,
Vulnerable	Someone who is in a position to be in danger of physical or emotional harm.
Dramatic irony	Where the audience know something that the characters do not.
Foreshadowing	A warning, hint or indication of a future event.
Fourth wall	Where an imaginary wall separates the actors from the audience- it stops the characters communicating directly with the audience. Sheila breaks this rule during her confession. The Inspector does the same in his final speech.
Monologue	A long speech delivered by one actor.
Stage direction	Text of the script that instructs the movement, position or tone of the actor. Can also instruct the use of sound effects or lighting.
Time lapse	Within the play, it is implied that time is manipulated for the Inspector's visit; he is able to question each character and warn them of future events in the time that it takes for a girl's body to be discovered.

Key Vocabulary	
----------------	--

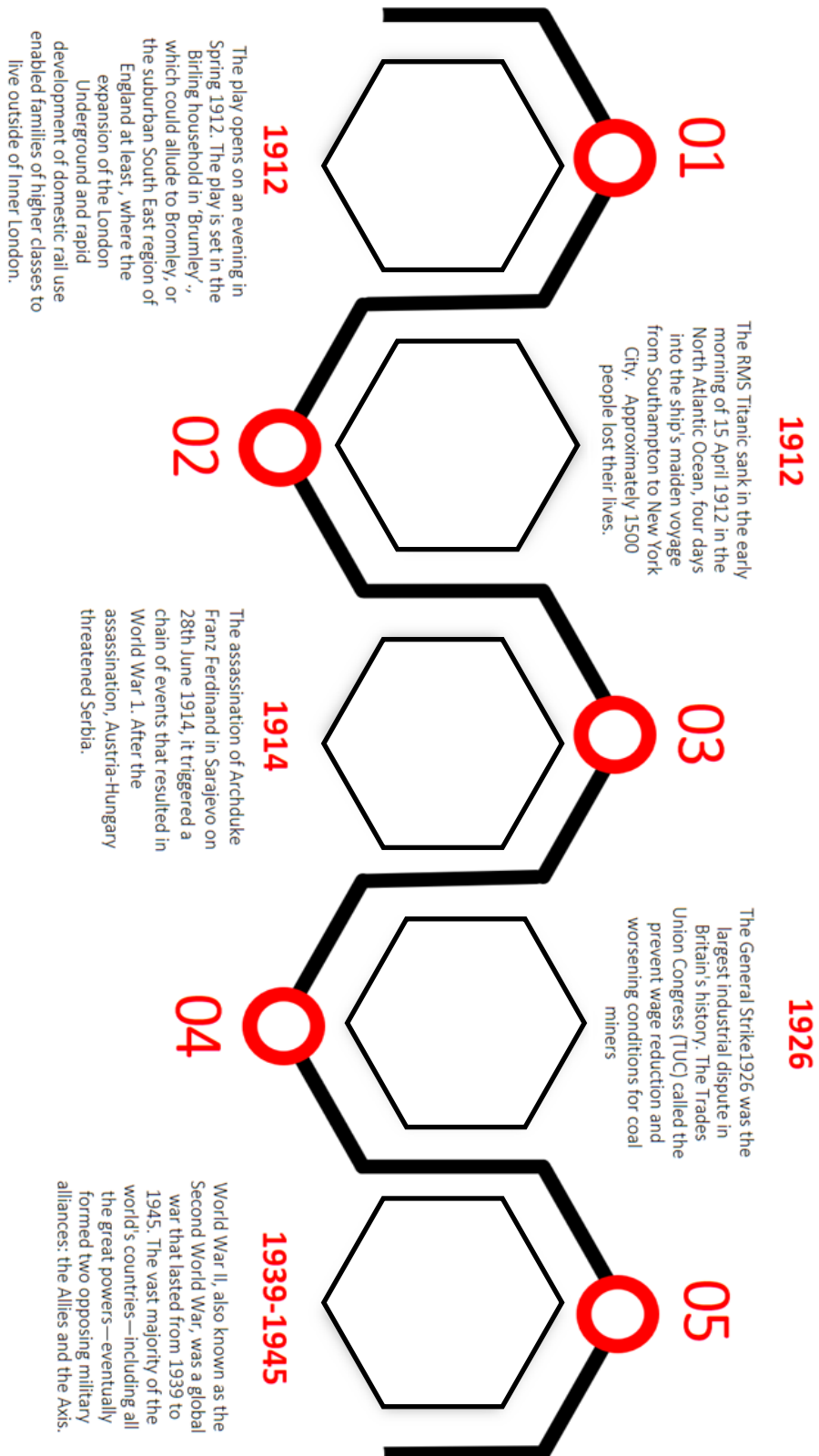
[illegible]

An Inspector Calls: a timeline



How did these events influence An Inspector Calls?

Place a key quote in the middle of each hexagon and then explain how the key event influenced the plot, themes or the writer.



Key Information

Plot

Act 1	Set in April 1912 in Brumley (a fictional place), in the midlands . The Birling family and Gerald Croft are celebrating Sheila Birling's engagement to Gerald with a dinner. Mr Birling lectures his son, Eric, and Gerald about the importance of every man looking out for himself if he wants to get on in life. Edna (the maid) announces that an inspector has arrived. Inspector Goole says that he is investigating the death of a young woman who committed suicide, Eva Smith. Mr Birling is shown a photograph of Eva, after initially denying recognising the woman in the photo , he remembers firing her in 1910 for organising a strike over workers' pay. Sheila is also questioned by the Inspector and recalls having Eva Smith fired by the upmarket department store, Milwards, after becoming jealous of Eva. The Inspector reveals that Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald shows surprise and then reveals to Sheila that he had an affair with Daisy/ Eva.
Act 2	Gerald explains to The Inspector that he had an affair with Daisy/ Eva but that he hasn't seen her since he ended their relationship in August 1911. Sheila gives her engagement ring back to Gerald after his revelations. The Inspector turns his attention to Sybil Birling who confesses that she also had contact with Eva but Eva gave a different name in her interaction with Sybil, that of Mrs Birling. Eva approached the charity Sybil chaired to ask for help as she was desperate and pregnant. Sybil refused to help her because she was offended by Eva calling herself Mrs Birling. Sybil tells Eva that the baby's father should be made responsible. She also tells Inspector Goole the father should be made an example of. Eric then walks back in...
Act 3	Eric is revealed as the father of Eva Smith's baby. He stole money from Mr Birling's office to provide money to Eva. The Inspector delivers his final speech warning the Birlings. After he leaves the family begin to suspect that he was not a genuine police inspector. Which is confirmed by a call to the Chief Constable. They then phone the infirmary who informs them that no suicide case has been brought in. Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald Croft congratulate themselves thinking it has all been a hoax and that they can continue behaving as before. This upsets Eric and Sheila who argue they still causes pain to Eva through their actions. The phone then rings. Mr Birling announces to the family that a girl has just died due to suicide

Characters

Inspector Goole	Priestley's mouthpiece who advocates for social justice and serves as the Birlings' conscience. Socialist, righteous, powerful, unconventional, mysterious, imposing, sardonic, omnipotent
Arthur Birling	Businessman, capitalist, against social equality, a self made man (created his own business and wealth. Wasn't born into it like Gerald). Arrogant, foolish, ignorant, prejudice, stubborn
Sybil Birling	Socially superior to her husband, Arthur. She is from a higher class. Believes in personal responsibility and subscribes to the typical gender roles of 1912. Arrogant, insincere, prejudice, remorseless, bitter, controlling
Sheila Birling	Young, daughter of Arthur and Sybil. Comes to change her views and pities Eva. She feels regret. Transformative, remorseful, socialist, sensitive, strong-minded
Eric Birling	Young, son of Arthur and Sybil. Drinks too much, forces himself onto Eva and steals from his father. Poor relationship with his parents. Eric comes to regret his actions. Rebellious, reckless, immature, compulsive, irresponsible.
Gerald Croft	Businessman, born into his wealth. Engaged to Sheila and has the same political views as Birling. Aristocratic, evasive, secretive, dishonest, unchivalrous
Eva Smith	Unseen in the play but becomes a symbol for victims of social justice. She changed her name to Daisy Renton just before she meets Gerald. Suffragist, victim, vulnerable, socialist, principled

Key Information

Key concepts and context

1912	Set just before WW1 and the sinking of the Titanic. This was a year of rising tensions and industrial expansions. The Victorian Era has ended and so had the rigid class system as the Labour Party (founded in 1900) was gaining momentum. The international tensions resulted in the Russian Revolution beginning in 1917.
1945	People were recovering from six years of warfare, danger and uncertainty. Distinctions between class were greatly reduced as a result of the two world wars (although they were still there to some extent!) Women had a more valued place in society and due to a desire for social change after WW2, the Labour Party won the general election in a landslide victory over Winston Churchill and the conservatives.
Wealth, Power and Influence	The Birlings and Crofts are representative of the wealthy upper-class. They misuse their social influence to benefit themselves and their actions adversely affect the vulnerable people in society.
Blame and Responsibility	The play questions who is to blame for Eva's death as each of the Birlings contribute to a chain of events leading to the destruction of Eva. Priestley is posing the question of what responsibilities do the characters have to each other and to society as a whole.
Public vs Private	The public life that the Birlings present juxtaposes with their private life where there are secrets and fractured relationships. The Birlings present a respectable public life to try and get ahead in business and socially but there are repercussions of this, not just for Eva Smith but for the Birlings as they are exposed at the end of the play.
Morality and Legality	There are many moral and legal laws depicted in the play that are flouted at one point or another by the Birling family. As an audience, there have been developments in law that affect how we perceive the characters compared to the legal obligations in 1945. The moral and legal laws in AIC interweave and expose the characters lack of morality.
Class Politics	The ideologies of capitalism and socialism clash frequently throughout the play, mainly in the form of Arthur versus the Inspector. The older characters of Arthur, Sybil and Gerald represent capitalism and 'every man for themselves' while Sheila and Eric change their views to align with The Inspector as supporters of socialism as 'members of one body'. Is there a correlation between the political beliefs and their behaviour?
Prejudice	The Birlings hold prejudice towards other members of society; Sybil especially looks down on the lower class and still subscribes to the Victorian idea of poverty being caused by the poor being lazy. Arthur, as a self made man, and Sybil are very much about appearances to show their social status and superiority towards others. They also use their age to be prejudiced against their own children who they treat as immature due to being part of the younger generation. What are their prejudices and what are the consequences of this throughout the play?
Young vs Old	There are differences throughout the play between the younger and older generation. The two generations react differently to The Inspector's warning and these differences create an argument between them as to who has the right stance. What does each character learn and how do they change based on their generational views?

Social, Historical and Literary Allusions

The Titanic	The Titanic sailed from Southampton and sank in the early hours of 15th April 1912. Priestley wants his audience to see his drama play out against a background of real historical events and demonstrate the type of character Arthur Birling is which make his comments appear ironic.
Nobody wants war	In reality, economic rivalry between the British Empire and the new German Empire was one of the many causes of WW1.
Russia	This is an ironic comment from Arthur as it suggests Russia will have progressed further than other European countries.
Bernard Shaws and H.G. Wells	Both the noted Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856 –1950) and the father of science-fiction H.G. Wells were socialists.

Key Information

Order of the Inspector's Questioning

Act 1	Sheila and Gerald's engagement is celebrated
Act 1	Birling says there will be no war and references the Titanic
Act 1	The Inspector arrives as a young girl has committed suicide
Act 1	The Inspector questions Arthur Birling. Arthur reveals he threw her out for starting strike action and Sheila is
Act 2	Gerald is questioned about his affair with Daisy Renton (Eva Smith who changed her name)
Act 2	Mrs Birling is questioned. She tells the Inspector that she refused to give charity to the pregnant Eva and blames the father of the baby.
Act 3	Eric is found to be the father of Eva's baby after he forced himself on her. He then tells Arthur Birling that he had been stealing money from the business to give to Eva.
Act 3	The Inspector leaves after giving a warning. Gerald returns and says he questioned a police officer and they don't have an Inspector Goole working with them.
Act 3	The telephone rings. A young girl has been brought in dead from suicide. An inspector is on their way to question them.

Priestley's intentions

- Priestley asks his audience to examine their individual and collective responsibility to society.
- The hypocrisy of the middle class Edwardian society is uncovered; appearance and reputation matter more than reality and morality
- Priestley criticises the selfishness of capitalism and wants a fairer, socialist future after the horrors of two world wars.
- Priestley shows the older generation to be set in their ways while the younger generation are open to change
- Eva Smith is the embodiment of young, working class women who were oppressed by the middle/ upper classes.
- The play demonstrates that when workers did not have full employment rights they cannot fight back.

Your thoughts:

Use this space to write more about key context and Priestley's intentions as a revision tool

Key Quotes

Character Quotes

Birling's Confidence	We are in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity
Birling on society	The way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everyone else.
Sheila's recognition	But these girls aren't cheap labour—they're <i>people</i>
Sheila's regret	It's the only time I've ever done anything like that, and I'll never do it again to anybody.
Sheila on the Inspector	We all started like that—so confident, so pleased with ourselves until he began asking us questions
Sheila on Eric	He's been steadily drinking too much for the last two years
Inspector on guilt	I think you did something terribly wrong—and that you're going to spend the rest of your life regretting it
Mrs Birling defends herself	She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position
Eric explains	I'm not very clear about it, but afterwards she told me she didn't want me to go in but that—well, I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty—and I threatened to make a row.
The Inspector says	But each of you helped to kill her. Remember that
Inspector's message	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, with what we think and say and do. We don't live alone.

Thematic Quotes

Social responsibility	'We are responsible for each other' <i>Inspector</i> 'Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities' <i>Inspector</i> 'It's what happened to the girl and what we all did to her that mattered' <i>Eric</i>
Capitalism	'These silly capital vs labour agitations' <i>Birling</i> A man has to make his own way' <i>Birling</i>
Class	'A girl of that class' <i>Mrs Birling</i> 'Well, we've several hundred young women there, y'know, and they keep changing' <i>Birling</i>
Age	'the famous younger generation' <i>Birling</i> 'What's the matter with that child?' <i>Birling</i> 'Just keep quiet, Eric' <i>Birling</i>
Gender and attitudes to women	'I hate those hard-eyed dough-faced women' <i>Gerald</i> 'And you think young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things?' <i>Inspector</i> 'She had far too much to say, far too much' <i>Birling</i>

Homework

The tasks below represent only part of what you can do to enhance and develop your understanding of the text. You are preparing for an exam on a challenging text.

Knowledge is power, so the more you know, the more secure you will be in your learning.

Deadline	Task
Week 2	Learn the vocabulary on Page 5 and the definitions ready for a test in class
Week 4	Write your own definitions and examples for the vocabulary on Page 5 ready for a test in class.
Week 6	Complete the 'complete the quote' activity below to test yourself on quotes from An Inspector Calls
Week 8	Read through the wider reading on Page 15 and complete the questions to check your understanding

Complete the quote:

- Birling: 'you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up like _____ in a _____ – community and all that _____'
- Mrs Birling: 'I'm very _____ But I think she only had _____ to _____
- Sheila: "You mustn't try to build up a kind of _____ between _____ and that _____. If you do the _____ will just _____ it down. And it'll be all the worse when he does"
- Eric: "I wasn't in _____ with her or anything- but I liked her- she was _____ and a _____ sport-"
- Gerald: 'After all, y'know, we're _____ and not _____'
- The Inspector: 'We are members of _____ body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if _____ will not _____ that lesson, then they will be taught it in _____ and _____ and _____. Good night.'

An Inspector Calls and J B Priestley's political journey

Alison Cullingford explores how J B Priestley's childhood in Bradford and experiences during two world wars shaped his socialist beliefs and fueled the anger of his play *An Inspector Calls*, a work that revolves around ideas of social responsibility and guilt.

An Inspector Calls poses troubling questions: how can people live together? To what extent are individuals responsible for others? Gareth Lloyd Evans described the play as 'perhaps the clearest expression made by Priestley of his belief that "no man is an island" – the theme is guilt and social responsibility'. This article explores how and why J B Priestley came to this belief.

'Substantial and heavily comfortable': Bradford before the War

Priestley was born in 1894 in Bradford, in Yorkshire's West Riding. Bradford was an industrial town soon to become a city (in 1897), which had grown very quickly around the wool and dyeing industries. Young 'Jack' Priestley himself found work in the wool trade, as a junior clerk with Helm and Company, whose offices were in the (now demolished) Swan Arcade.

Jack found this work dull, but otherwise, for a youngster who enjoyed sport, landscape, literature, music, art and socialising, Bradford had much to offer. In his novel *Bright Day*, he looked back from the austerity of 1946 to a golden age of freedom, plenty, hospitality, conviviality, generosity, solid comfort and strong community, where, at Christmas, brass bands played and choirs sang in the streets; you went not to one friend's house but to a dozen; acres of rich pound cake and mince-pies were washed down by cataracts of old beer and port, whisky and rum; the air was fragrant and thick with cigar smoke, as if the very mill chimneys had taken to puffing them.

The bright young lad realised even then, though, that Bradford was not perfect. Working and living conditions had improved from the hellish days of the 1840s, when cholera and starvation were serious threats, but many still lived in poverty. Priestley's political views were heavily influenced by the West Riding's strong Nonconformist socialist traditions, embodied by the Bradford Pioneer newspaper and epitomised by his schoolteacher father, Jonathan.

Jack also noticed that the city's respectable folk could be smug, even hypocritical: 'badly-divided men' were pompously religious on Sundays, but on Saturday nights 'coarsely raffish', ill-using young women. In *When We Are Married* (1937), Priestley made great comedy of turning the world of three respectable couples upside down when it emerged that they had not been legally married. *An Inspector Calls* also shattered the world of such a family, this time, however, revealing the true social and political consequences of the selfishness of the Birlings and others like them.

The First World War: men thrown away for nothing

This world was itself shattered by the Great War, which broke out in August 1914. Twenty-year-old Jack, drawn to prove himself, went alone to Halifax to volunteer for the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment. He served in the British Army for five years, as a private and [lance-corporal](#), and, much later, as an officer with the Devonshires.

Wider Reading 1

Despite being buried alive by a trench mortar explosion and gassed, Priestley survived relatively unscathed physically; but the experience of war changed him forever. He bore witness to the horrors of the front and his realisation of the implications of social inequalities that went far beyond what he had seen in his home city. As he wrote in his memoir, *Margin Released* (1962):

The British command specialised in throwing men away for nothing. The tradition of an officer class, defying both imagination and common sense, killed most of my friends as surely as if those cavalry generals had come out of the chateaux with polo mallets and beaten their brains out. Call this class prejudice if you like, so long as you remember ... that I went into that war without any such prejudice, free of any class feeling. No doubt I came out of it with a chip on my shoulder; a big, heavy chip, probably some friend's thigh-bone.

Bradford could never be the same for Priestley after the war: so many of his friends had been killed, many of them in the 'Bradford Pals' battalions destroyed at the Battle of the Somme. After a venture into academia, taking his degree at the University of Cambridge, he decided to focus on writing and moved to London. The 1920s were years of hard work to make a living. We have the sense that he had a kind of survivor's guilt: he had to make something of his life when so many better men had been killed.

His 1929 bestseller, *The Good Companions*, gave him the financial security to experiment with new literary forms. Priestley turned to drama with great success: he was to re-use the thriller form of his first effort, *Dangerous Corner*, in *An Inspector Calls*.

Celebrity also gave him a platform to share his increasing social concerns. In *English Journey* (1934), he described what he saw when travelling around England by motor coach: the remnants of old rural England, the shocking deprivation of the declining industrial cities and the glamour of the modern Americanised world of arterial roads and cinemas. Of the 'grimy desolation' of 'Rusty Lane' in West Bromwich, he said:

There ought to be no more of those lunches and dinners, at which political and financial and industrial gentlemen congratulate one another, until something is done about Rusty Lane and West Bromwich. While they exist in their present foul shape, it is idle to congratulate ourselves about anything.

Priestley confronted his own wartime past at a regimental reunion in Bradford. He was outraged to learn that some of his fellow veterans were too poor to afford evening clothes to attend the event. They had given their health, their futures, everything they had, for a society that did not care. This righteous anger would be seen again in *An Inspector Calls*.

The staggering power of broadcasting

During the Second World War, Priestley's fame rose to new heights, largely thanks to his BBC radio broadcasts, the 'Postscripts'. In his first Postscript, of 5 June 1940, he helped create the narrative of the Dunkirk evacuation as mythic victory, paying tribute to the frivolous little steamers which saved so many lives. Throughout that momentous summer and early autumn, Priestley continued these weekly broadcasts, boosting morale through homely, often funny, reflections, musing, for example, on a pie which survived the bombing of Bradford and some happy ducks in a pond

Wider Reading 1

Priestley took an active part in a debate that went on in Britain throughout the war: was it appropriate to discuss what should happen afterwards, and if so, what should that be? He used the Postscripts to influence opinion on this issue, calling for a better, fairer society after this war was over. Carefully gauging what might be acceptable to broadcast, Priestley used everyday examples likely to be familiar to his listeners to make his points. His most outspoken Postscript, of 6 October 1940, uses the problem of the 'idle rich' occupying scarce hotel rooms from which bombed-out families could benefit to make the point that:

We are floundering between two stools. One of them is our old acquaintance labelled 'Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost', which can't really represent us, or why should young men, for whom you and I have done little or nothing, tear up and down the sky in their Spitfires to protect us, or why should our whole community pledge itself to fight until Europe is freed? The other stool ... has some lettering round it that hints that free men could combine, without losing what's essential to their free development, to see that each gives according to his ability, and receives according to his need.^[7]

The wording of that second stool, which as Priestley reminded his listeners was the stuff of Christian sermons, is almost exactly Karl Marx's famous 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' which appeared in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

It is often stated that the then Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had Priestley 'taken off the air' as a result of this sort of discussion, and for using the Postscripts as a platform for sharing his views on building a better world post-war. Certainly, Priestley's radio talks worried many politicians and journalists; the end of the Postscripts was, however, at least in part his own decision and the hand of the Prime Minister cannot be definitely traced in it.^[8]

A new and vital democracy?

Away from the airwaves, Priestley could be much more candid about his views. *Out of the People* (1941) came out of his role as chairman of the 1941 Committee, a group of writers and politicians whose statement 'We Must Win' called for a declaration of national 'ideas and objectives after the war'. In *Out of the People*, Priestley outlined the need for a 'new and vital democracy', an end to the waste and unfairness of social inequalities, a world in which everyone was responsible for others. The upheaval of war was shattering old systems and bringing people together to work for a common goal. Why not build on this, rather than going back to old failed systems as had happened after the previous war?

Priestley's Postscripts and other broadcasting and writing certainly played their part in encouraging people to think about the shape post-war society should take, and thus helped pave the way for Clement Attlee's Labour Party to sweep to power in the general election of July 1945. The Labour mandate was to create a 'welfare state' and a national health service, eliminating the shocking poverty observed by Priestley and so many other reporters.

However, the new government was not quite what Priestley had in mind. He disliked the centralised planning and bureaucracy that became synonymous with state socialism in the 20th century. Indeed, he stood unsuccessfully as an independent candidate in the 1945 election!

A Russian journey

An Inspector Calls was born out of this tumultuous wartime debate about society, though Priestley had first thought of using a mysterious inspector years before. He had then mentioned the idea to a theatrical director, Michael MacOwen, who reminded him about it during the autumn of 1944. Priestley was enthused by the idea, found it in his 'little black notebook', and quickly wrote a playscript based around it.

Wider Reading 1

Priestley and his wife Jane later travelled to the USSR, as guests of the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries; he wrote about his experiences for the *Sunday Express*, his articles being reprinted in the pamphlet 'Russian Journey'. Priestley found the Russian people highly congenial and wrote sympathetically about a country that had recently been Britain's wartime ally. Later he was to realise more about the nature of the regime.

The play embodies Priestley's reasons for calling for the 'new and vital democracy' by showing the personal consequences of a selfish society, and the future that would result if lessons were not learned about being 'responsible for each other': 'If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in blood and fire and anguish'. This future might be the Great War which Priestley's 1945 audiences knew was just two years ahead for his 1912 protagonists, or it might be a terrible revolution yet to come: his Russian audiences had seen just that when the frustrations of an unequal society had led to violent revolution and terrible suffering.

Such ambiguities Priestley leaves in the play, along with its origins in his own past and his deepest beliefs, allowing it to work for audiences worldwide ever since, despite its historical origins in a complacent 1912 and his bleak yet hopeful 1945.

Homework Task: Week 8

1. What was a serious threat during Priestley's childhood and why?

2. Priestley observed the 'respectable' folk as...? Which characters does this link to in *An Inspector Calls*?

Homework Task: Week 8

3. What was Priestley's experience of war and how did this affect his political views?

[illegible]

4. During a veteran event, what was Priestley outraged by and why?

5. How does *An Inspector Calls* reflect Priestley's political viewpoint? Use information from the article to inform your answer.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Wider Reading 2

An Introduction to An Inspector Calls

Chris Power introduces *An Inspector Calls* as a morality play that denounces the hypocrisy and callousness of capitalism and argues that a just society can only be achieved if all individuals feel a sense of social responsibility.

J B Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls*, first performed in 1945, is a morality play disguised as a detective thriller. The morality play is a very old theatrical form, going back to the medieval period, which sought to instruct audiences about virtue and evil. Priestley's play revolves around a central mystery, the death of a young woman, but whereas a traditional detective story involves the narrowing down of suspects from several to one, *An Inspector Calls* inverts this process as, one by one, nearly all the characters in the play are found to be guilty. In this way, Priestley makes his larger point that society is guilty of neglecting and abusing its most vulnerable members. A just society, he states through his mysterious Inspector, is one that respects and exercises social responsibility.

What is social responsibility?

Social responsibility is the idea that a society's poorer members should be helped by those who have more than them. Priestley was a socialist, and his political beliefs are woven through his work. There are many different types and degrees of socialism, but a general definition is as follows: an ideal socialist society is one that is egalitarian – in other words, its citizens have equal rights and the same opportunities are available to everybody; resources are shared out fairly, and the means of production (the facilities and resources for producing goods) are communally owned.

Therefore, socialism stands in opposition to a capitalist society, such as ours, where trade and industry is mostly controlled by private owners, and these individuals or companies keep the profits made by their businesses, rather than distributing them evenly between the workers whose labour produced them.

It is precisely this difference between a socialist and a capitalist society that Arthur Birling is discussing in Act 1 when Inspector Goole arrives:

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 – a man has to mind his own business and look after himself...

The Inspector's arrival cuts Arthur Birling off mid-sentence, enacting in miniature the clash between two ideological positions that unfolds throughout the rest of the play.

The play's structure and setting

An Inspector Calls is a three-act play with one setting: the dining room of 'a fairly large suburban house belonging to a fairly prosperous manufacturer'. The year is 1912, and we are in the home of the Birling family in the fictional industrial city of Brumley in the North Midlands. In the dining room five people are finishing their dinner: four members of the Birling family and one guest. Arthur Birling is a factory owner; his wife Sibyl is on the committee of a charity, and is usually scolding someone for a social mistake. Their adult children are Sheila and Eric, and their guest is Gerald Croft, Sheila's fiancé, who is from a wealthier manufacturing family than the Birlings. One other person is present: Edna the maid, who is going back and forth to the sideboard with dirty plates and glasses.

Priestley's description of the set at the beginning of the play script stresses the solidity of the Birlings' dining room: 'It is a solidly built room, with good solid furniture of the period'. But a later section of this scene-setting – on the walls are 'imposing but tasteless pictures and engravings', and the 'general effect is substantial and comfortable and old-fashioned but not cosy and homelike' – suggests that although the Birlings have wealth and social standing, they are not loving to one another or compassionate to others. The setting of the play in a single room also suggests their self-absorption, and disconnectedness from the wider world.

Priestley establishes each of the characters in this opening scene. Arthur Birling is a capitalist businessman through and through, entirely focussed on profit even when discussing the marriage of his daughter:

Wider Reading 2

I'm sure you'll make her happy. You're just the kind of son-in-law I've always wanted. Your father and I have been friendly rivals in business for some time now – though Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company – and now you've brought us together, and perhaps we may look forward to the time when Crofts and Birlings are no longer competing but are working together – for lower costs and higher prices.

His wife Sibyl scolds him, telling him it isn't the occasion for that kind of talk, establishing her as someone primarily interested in doing things properly and conforming to established social rules. Sheila, at this stage in the play, seems to be pre-occupied by the thought of her marriage to Gerald, a privileged and deeply conservative man of 30, while the youngest Birling, Eric, appears more interested in the port going around the table than anything anyone is saying.

Priestley has some fun using this opening section to show how wrong Arthur Birling's opinions are, thus positioning the play as anti-capitalist. He does this through the use of dramatic irony, having Arthur state opinions that the audience, with the advantage of hindsight, knows to be incorrect. When Eric mentions the likelihood of war – remember that the play is set two years before the outbreak of World War One – but was written and first performed 30 years later – Arthur cuts him off:

... you'll hear some people say that war's inevitable. And to that I say – fiddlesticks! The Germans don't want war. Nobody wants war, except some half-civilised folks in the Balkans. And why? There's too much at stake these days. Everything to lose and nothing to gain by war.

He goes on to describe an ocean liner that is clearly meant to be the Titanic (which sank in April 1912) as 'unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable', and suggests that in time, 'let's say, in the forties', 'all these Capital versus Labour agitations and all these silly little war scares' will be long forgotten. In fact, as audiences in 1945 would have been keenly aware, the period between 1912 and 1945 saw a huge number of strikes, including the monumental General Strike of 1926, and not one but two global conflicts, the second of which had only recently ended.

Dramatic irony is rarely a subtle technique, but Priestley's use of it is exceptionally blunt. This could be considered clumsy, but it underlines the fact that *An Inspector Calls* is a play with a point to make, and a character whose sole job is to make it.

The Inspector

When Inspector Goole arrives everything changes. He tells the Birlings and Gerald that a young woman, Eva Smith, has committed suicide by drinking disinfectant, and he has questions about the case. Over the course of the next two acts he will lay responsibility for Eva Smith's death at the feet of each of the Birlings and Gerald Croft, showing how their indifference to social responsibility has contributed to the death of this young woman. Or is it young women? He shows each person an identifying photograph of the dead woman one by one, leading Gerald to later suspect they were all shown photographs of different women.

But who is the Inspector? In the play's penultimate twist, he is revealed not to be a police inspector at all, yet, as Eric states, 'He was our Police Inspector, all right'. Details about him are scant. He says he is newly posted to Brumley, and he is impervious to Arthur Birling's threats about his close relationship with the chief constable 'I don't play golf', he tells Birling. 'I didn't suppose you did', the industrialist replies: a brief exchange that makes a clear point about class, and the battle between egalitarianism and privilege. Beyond these sparse biographical details, the Inspector seems less like a person and more like a moral force, one which mercilessly pursues the wrongs committed by the Birlings and Gerald, demanding that they face up to the consequences of their actions. His investigation culminates in a speech that is a direct expression of Priestley's own view of how a just society should operate, and is the exact antithesis of the speech Arthur Birling made in Act 1:

We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. We don't live alone. Good night.

Wider Reading 2

Hypocrisy

Throughout the course of the Inspector's investigation, and the testimony of Gerald and each of the Birlings, the supposedly respectable city of Brumley is revealed to be a place of deep class divisions and hypocrisy. As Arthur Birling's behaviour towards Eva makes clear, it is a place where factory owners exploit their workers as a matter of course – part of his 'a man has to look after himself' philosophy. Eric accuses his father of hypocrisy for sacking the dead girl after she asked for higher wages, because the Birling firm always seeks to sell their products at the highest possible prices.

This exploitation is not limited to the factories. In the testimony of Gerald, and later Eric, the Palace Theatre emerges as a place where prostitutes gather, and where the supposedly great and good of the town go to meet them. When Gerald first met Eva, as he describes it, she was trapped in a corner by 'Old Joe Meggarty, half-drunk and goggle-eyed'. Sibyl Birling, scandalised, asks 'surely you don't mean Alderman Meggarty?' An unsurprised Sheila tells her mother 'horrible old Meggarty' has a reputation for groping young women: the younger characters are either more knowledgeable or frank about the dark secrets of the city, whereas the older Birlings live in a dream world of respectability, or hypocritically turn a blind eye to any disreputable behaviour by supposedly respectable people.

The play begins with the characters' corrupt, unpleasant natures safely hidden away (a respectable group in a respectable home, enjoying that most respectable event, an engagement party); it ends with naked displays of hypocrisy. When it is confirmed that Goole is not really a policeman, Arthur, Sibyl and Gerald immediately regain an unjustified sense of outrage. 'Then look at the way he talked to me', Arthur Birling complains. 'He must have known I was an ex-Lord Mayor and a magistrate and so forth'. Once it is confirmed, in the play's penultimate twist, that there is no suicide lying on a mortuary slab, they forget the immoral, uncharitable behaviour they were recently accused of – things, remember, that they undoubtedly did – and begin talking about getting away with things.

Only Sheila and Eric recognise and resist this hypocritical behaviour. 'I suppose we're all nice people now!' Sheila remarks sarcastically. Earlier she broke off her engagement to Gerald, telling him 'You and I aren't the same people who sat down to dinner here'. Likewise, Eric angrily accuses his father of 'beginning to pretend now that nothing's really happened at all'. Priestley's vision is cautiously optimistic insofar as the youngest characters are changed by the Inspector's visit, while the older Birlings and Gerald appear to be too set in their beliefs to change them.

Eva Smith: Everywoman

The play leaves open the question of whether Eva Smith is a real woman (who sometimes uses different names, including Daisy Renton), or multiple people the Inspector pretends are one. There is no right answer here, and in terms of Priestley's message it is beside the point: because his socialist principles demand that everyone should be treated the same, in his opinion abusing one working-class woman is equivalent to abusing all working-class women. Eva Smith is, therefore, not an individual victim, but a universal one.

This helps explain the effectiveness of the play's final twist. Having discovered that Inspector Goole is not a real policeman, and that there is no dead woman called Eva Smith at the Brumley morgue, a phone call announces that a woman has killed herself, and an inspector is on his way to question the Birlings. The invented story Inspector Goole related has now come true. This seems a bizarre coincidence with which to end the play, but if we consider *An Inspector Calls* as a moral fable, and not as naturalistic theatre, it begins to seem much more like a logical, even inevitable, conclusion. The characters have been confronted with the error of their ways; some have repented, some have not. Now is the time for judgement, and for the watching audience to ask themselves, according to Priestley's design, are any of these people like me?

Wider Reading Review



Wider Reading List

Atkins, John Alfred. *J. B. Priestley: The Last of the Sages*. New York: Riverrun Press, 1981.

Cooper, Susan. *J. B. Priestley: Portrait of an Author*. London: Heinemann, 1970.

De Vitis, A. A. *J. B. Priestley*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.

Fagge, Roger. *The Vision of J. B. Priestley*. London: Continuum, 2012.

Hughes, David. *J. B. Priestley: An Informal Study of his Work*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970.

Priestley: An English Journey.

Lloyd Evans, Gareth. *J. B. Priestley, the Dramatist*. London: Heinemann, 1964.

Pogson, Rex. *J. B. Priestley and the Theatre*. Clevedon, England: Triangle, 1947.

Film adaptations

(be careful of plot changes!)

An Inspector Calls (Dir. Aisling Walsh) 2005