

*The
Connell Short Guide
to
J.B. Priestley's*

An Inspector Calls

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Introduction

A girl's face haunts the play, a girl alone and dying. She wants to die. Pregnant and penniless, she has swallowed disinfectant. This is Eva Smith, the central figure, a heroine who doesn't even appear in her own play. Forgotten by the wealthy elite who have abused her, she was once "a lively good-looking girl". Her story has been lost. It is the task of the Inspector to reclaim it.

An Inspector Calls is set in 1912, when a mysterious police inspector visits the wealthy Birling family, and exposes how each of them has contributed to the death of this impoverished young woman, Eva Smith. Priestley wrote the play in 1944, at a time when Britain was about decide its direction after World War II; he wrote it to make the case for socialism and to evoke the inequalities and, as Priestley saw it, injustice of society in 1912, while also seeking to remind his audience that not nearly enough had changed since the days before World War One.

On one level, *An Inspector Calls* is a detective story, a whodunit where suspects are questioned in turn, and where each is found guilty. It is, perhaps, a ghost story, too. It is a family drama, where secrets and tensions emerge to disrupt the seeming harmony of an engagement party. But much more importantly it is a social commentary, where the arrogance and indifference of the ruling class are brought to book by a mysterious figure

who argues “we are responsible for each other”, and a morality play, where characters embody vices, and are brought to judgement.

So how successful is it, as a play, and how relevant is it to the world we live in today?

Let us first look at the way the story unfolds.

What happens in *An Inspector Calls?*

Act One

It is 1912, and our play is set in Brumley, a fictional north Midlands town. The curtain rises. We see a dining room, and a family around the table. These are the Birlings, relaxing after dinner with a guest, as Edna, the parlour maid, clears away their “champagne glasses” and “dessert plates”. The “good solid furniture” tells of prosperity, and the “evening dress” worn by the characters assures us these are respectable people.

Mr Birling, a self-made man in his “middle fifties”, sits at the head of the table, while his wife sits at the far end. In between them, upstage and facing the audience, sits their daughter Sheila, “a pretty girl in her early twenties”, and her fiancé Gerald Croft, an “attractive chap about thirty”. Facing these two, downstage, and with his back to the audience, is Eric, the Birlings’ son, also in his “early twenties”.

The dinner is to celebrate the engagement of Sheila to Gerald, the son of a wealthy industrialist. The atmosphere is cheerful and complacent. Birling uses the occasion to express his confidence that neither worker unrest nor talk of war with Germany will pose a threat to their way of life. Birling identifies himself with “progress”, mentioning the new “unsinkable” *Titanic* as evidence that history is on the side of capitalists like himself, those who believe society is based on the idea that “a man has to mind his own business and look after himself”.

All seems well. And yet there are questions. Why did Gerald keep away from Sheila last summer? Why is Eric drinking? Why is he provoking his father, or checking himself when he was about to speak of some woman he remembers? There is more to all this than meets the eye, and a “sharp ring of a front door bell” interrupts Mr Birling in full flow, just as he is dismissing socialist ideas of “community and all that nonsense”. Edna announces the arrival of an “Inspector Goole”.

The Inspector is an impressive figure, with a direct manner. He brings news of a young woman, Eva Smith, who has committed suicide by drinking disinfectant. Birling is confident this has nothing to do with him, but the Inspector produces a photograph of the girl. Birling remembers her. This was autumn 1910. She was a worker in his factory, and her troubles began when he dismissed

her for demanding higher wages. Birling denies any responsibility for her death – this happened eighteen months ago – but the Inspector believes this is part of a “chain of events” which led from Eva losing her job, to her suicide.

Quickly, others begin to be involved. Gerald is shocked when he hears Eva also went by the name of Daisy Renton. Sheila is distressed when she learns Eva was dismissed from her next job at Milwards, a local department store. It was December 1910. A customer had complained. Sheila realises it was her. She had been trying on a new dress, against the advice of her mother and an assistant. Eva held the dress against herself to make a point. It suited her better than Sheila. As Sheila tried it on in the mirror, she caught Eva “smiling” at her fellow assistant as if to say “Doesn’t she look awful?” Sheila had Eva sacked. Unlike her father, Sheila understands now she was wrong. She feels it is “a rotten shame”. She feels responsible. She also sees Gerald is hiding something. The Inspector “knows”. Act One ends dramatically. Gerald and Sheila are confronted by the Inspector, who “looks steadily and searchingly at them. The curtain falls.

Act Two

Sheila and Gerald argue. Sheila sees Gerald is being “evasive”. She insists on hearing what Gerald has to say to the Inspector. Gerald says she is staying out of spite, “to see somebody else put

through it”. Sheila is angry. He doesn’t know her. He is mistaking her for “a selfish, vindictive creature”. Sheila is growing in independence and understanding. She sees Mrs Birling and Eric will also be involved. She sees it is no good Mrs Birling adopting a gracious, patronising manner towards the Inspector. She warns her mother she “mustn’t try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl”. Now Gerald tells his story.

By January 1911, Eva had changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald “happened” to meet her at the bar in The Palace music hall in Brumley. This is a “favourite haunt of women of the town” (prostitutes). He noticed Daisy, who was “very pretty”, and “young and fresh and charming”. Daisy was being harassed by a “notorious womaniser”, Alderman Meggarty, and gave Gerald “a glance that was nothing less than a cry for help”. Gerald began to help Daisy. He offered her a meal and arranged for her to live in “a nice little set of rooms” at “Morgan Terrace”, which he was looking after for a friend. Gerald emphasises that he “didn’t install her there so I could make love to her”, but he admits that she became his “mistress”, and says “I suppose it was inevitable”.

By the first week of September 1911, however, the relationship was “coming to an end”. Gerald “broke it off” before going on a business trip. Daisy expected this, and “hadn’t expected it to last”. He insisted on giving her money, which she reluctantly accepted. Daisy then left for two

months at a” seaside town”. Here she wrote a diary which showed her disappointment at the end of the relationship, that “there’d never be anything as good again for her.”

As she listens to Gerald’s story, Sheila responds. She now understands where he was last summer. Her anger is vented in sarcastic comments about him being a “hero” and a “Fairy Prince”. She wants to know if he was in love with Daisy, as she tries to gauge the depth of his betrayal. As Gerald leaves, upset by memories of Daisy, Sheila hands back the engagement ring. She is relieved at least that he has been “honest”. She respects him more than she did. On his part, Gerald asks her permission to return later. Here, mid-way through the play, the impact of the Inspector is felt in the separation of Sheila and Gerald. Now attention turns to Mrs Birling.

Mrs Birling is reluctant to tell her story. It appears she had met Eva at the Brumley Women’s Charity Organisation, where she decided who should receive gifts of charity. This was only two weeks ago, in the spring of 1912. Eva needed help. She was unmarried, pregnant, and tried to pass herself off as a “Mrs Birling”. This provokes the real Mrs Birling. She refuses to help. Eva was guilty of “impertinence”, “disgusting” sexual impropriety, and “telling us a pack of lies”. Eva didn’t want to say who the father was. Mrs Birling feels “a girl of that sort” was also not entitled to moral scruples. Morality was her business. Eva

was not “a deserving case”. The father should be made to pay. As usual, Sheila is the first to see what is happening. The more Mrs Birling blames the father, the more she is condemning her own son. Eric is the father. Eric enters dramatically as Act Two ends. He is next.

Act Three

In November 1911, Eva Smith was again at the Palace music hall. Eric had a vague idea “some woman... wanted her to go there”. Eva was now in peril of prostitution. Eric was “squiffy”, “in that state when a chap easily turns nasty”. He forced himself into her rooms in a threatening way, and “that’s when it happened”. He had sex with her. He effectively raped her (though the text isn’t explicit here). They met again by chance, made love, and eventually she became pregnant. Eric was “in a hell of a state about it”, and offered Eva money. He even offered to marry her, but she wouldn’t, dismissing him as if he were a “kid”. All that was left for Eva was the Brumley Women’s Charity Organisation.

Eric’s story causes more family upset. Mrs Birling is shocked to hear Eric drinks. She even has to leave the room when she learns of his sexual encounter with Eva. Mr Birling is apoplectic when he discovers that Eric stole money from the works to keep a pregnant Eva going. Eric’s buried anger against his parents is emerging. His father has been domineering, a bully. Eric now turns on him.

He says “you’re not the kind of father a chap could go to when he’s in trouble”. He accuses his mother of killing Eva and the baby who would have been her first grandchild, saying “you killed them both”.

The Inspector interrupts the family arguments. He is about to leave. He ends with the lesson of the play, its most important statement. This is that we live in a society, that “We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for one another”. He leaves with the warning that “if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.”

After the Inspector leaves, there is a family scene. This balances the one before he came, though it is very different in mood. Sheila asks if he were a real inspector, and Gerald returns with news from a local constable that there is no Inspector Goole. Gerald develops the idea that the investigation was an elaborate “hoax”. He points out how the Inspector could have been talking about different girls, since he only showed the photograph(s) to one person at a time. Birling telephones Colonel Roberts who confirms there is no inspector. Gerald drives things further forward by phoning the infirmary to see if a girl has died that evening. No – no one has committed suicide for months.

Without the Inspector, the characters are free to react how they like. Mr and Mrs Birling are eager to discredit the Inspector, and present him as “a fake”, a “socialist or some kind of crank”, and



An Inspector Calls starring Eileen Moore, Olga Lindo, Brian Worth, and Alastair Sim

Gerald contributes to this process with his questions. Mr Birling is delighted at the prospect of avoiding public shame, and attaining his knighthood. Sheila and Eric, however, form an alliance, and feels “it’s what happened to the girl and what we all did to her that matters”. The older generation and Gerald seek to erase the past, and deny any “responsibility” for what they did. Sheila and Eric face up to it. Sheila has grown. Eric has expressed his buried resentments, and accepted he was wrong.

When it appears no girl has died, Gerald renews his proposal to Sheila, saying “What about this ring?” The play ends, however, with another kind of “ring”. The “telephone rings sharply”. It is

dramatic news. A girl has died swallowing disinfectant, and a police inspector is on his way. In a final coup de theatre, Priestley shows the Birlings are unable to escape their “responsibility” for Eva’s death. They will pay for their actions. Justice will be done, and the ending is also effective by pointing to the Inspector’s lesson that we must learn from our errors, or suffer as we repeat them, “in blood and fire and anguish”.

Why is social class so important in *An Inspector Calls*?

Look again at the opening scene, the sheer materialism, the consumption: the splendid “evening dress”, the cigars, the fine port, the “first-class” dinner. Gerald is giving Sheila a ring. Sheila has been buying clothes for Gerald’s benefit. The dining room has “good solid furniture of the period”. Edna the servant is catering to their every need.

The Birlings are successful, socially ambitious. Wealth appears in their clothes, furniture, food, and drink, the valuable objects they offer one another. They are confirming their social status. Birling tells Gerald this engagement to Sheila “means a tremendous lot to me”, as it will pave the

way to Gerald’s family company working with Birling and Company “for lower costs and higher prices”. Birling hints to Gerald that he is expecting a knighthood. Mrs Birling is in control of conduct at the table, reminding Birling it is not good manners to compliment the cook when dining in company, and correcting the behaviour of the children. She understands that good manners make wealth seem natural, proper, and well deserved. Manners are an index of the rank to which they aspire.

The Birlings have acquired wealth. They want to preserve it. This process is supported by the ideas they have, what Marx calls “ideology”, a set of social beliefs which present their wealth as justifiable, while also concealing its real sources. Ideology is a kind of “cover story”, and Birling’s after dinner speech expresses his beliefs. Birling speaks as “a hard-headed business man”. He defends “the interests of Capital”. He justifies the interests of the ruling class who own the factories and means of production, and set the wages. For him and his class, it is a time of “peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere”, and those who agitate for the rights of the working class or “Labour” are fighting the tide of history. To think otherwise is “nonsense”.

The Birlings and Gerald all present their treatment of Eva as justifiable. Each of them sees her through the prism of this ideology, the social values and attitudes of their class. Unconsciously,

they believe this: they are in the right; Eva is working class; she is to be disposed of like an object. For Birling, she is a number in a business equation. She is twenty two shillings and sixpence a week, not twenty five shillings. It is morally necessary to protect his capital, to dispense with her. It was his “duty to keep labour costs down... she had to go”. As the customer at Milwards, Sheila is always right, and “that girl” had been “impertinent” to one of her betters. She had transgressed against the rules of polite behaviour which ensures those lower down defer to those higher up. For Sheila, deference to the elite matters more than someone’s livelihood. Mrs Birling can also provide an ideological story or two. The poor can be divided into the “deserving” poor, and undeserving cases like Eva. This means Eva’s poverty is her own fault, the result of her “disgusting” sexual offences, what she deserves. The Birlings are in the right. Eva is to be disposed of, however extreme her plight has become.

As for the young men, there are double standards of sexual morality readily available to justify their behaviour. In visiting the Palace music hall, the “favourite haunt of women of the town” Gerald is simply being an “easy, well-bred young man about town”, behaving as rich young men do. Eva may hope for love, but she comes to see their relationship is doomed by beliefs about class. It cannot be. It is “inevitable” that an “affair” between a poor girl and the son of Lord Croft will

come to nothing. Gerald may be “distressed” when he realises Eva is dead, but it doesn’t last. He is soon back offering Sheila her engagement ring. No matter he has betrayed her, and Eva. A dynastic marriage between Birlings and Crofts makes perfect social sense. Even Gerald fails to see Eva as an autonomous and independent young woman.

Eric is even worse. He is so drunk he doesn’t even try to justify what he does. He says “I couldn’t remember her name or where she lived. It was very vague.” Eric, like all of them, does what he wants with her. She doesn’t have a “name”, an identity. He just takes her. When he finds out she was pregnant, he responds “I was in a hell of a state about it”, and he gives her money he has stolen from the works, money which was part of the profit made from the labour of workers like Eva.

Viewed together, these attitudes have a single purpose and a single effect. They allow the wealthy characters to justify what they are doing. It was perfectly understandable how they behaved. It was “duty”, “deference”, “morality”, or “marital suitability” which guided them. Their behaviour was reasonable. It was justified to treat Eva so.

Only Eric lacks a cover story for what he does.

In a way, though, Eric is the most honest of all of them in his treatment of Eva, and he clearly shows what is really going on. In what is perhaps the most disturbing line in the play, Eric says “I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty –

and I threatened to make a row". Here Priestley takes the Woosterish notion of a "chap", and makes a connection with violence.

It may surprise us that a "chap" can be "nasty", but Eric is right. Each of the Birlings turns "nasty". They construct their moral positions, and find ways of justifying themselves. But in each case Eva is behaving in ways which challenge their sense of what is due someone in their position. And so they *punish* her. Birling talks of "capital", but there is real hostility in the way he decides to "come down sharply" on her. Sheila is "absolutely furious". Mrs Birling sets about Eva in a way Sheila describes correctly as "cruel and vile", and which Eric describes as murderous, "you killed her – and the child she'd have had too". There is a lot of anger directed towards Eva. And in each case it is because Eva has stepped out of line. The Birlings enjoy their position in the hierarchy. They have to protect it.

So the play exposes a social violence beneath the stories they tell. Each of them is finding ways of laundering class cruelty. What an example Mrs Birling is here, doing her good works at the Brumley Women's Charitable organisation. She talks of charity, love of one's neighbour. But she is really enjoying the chance to use her social position to decide the fate of others. She likes the gratifying sense of her own superiority, particularly if it can appear as morality.

It is no surprise, perhaps, that Eva herself

begins to internalise all this abuse, and social violence. She was a feisty class warrior at the strike at Birlings. She was a mischievous attendant at Milwards, a girl of spirit, wishing to rise in the world. But gradually she becomes demoralised, reduced to an object of men's attention because of her "soft brown hair and big dark eyes", a mistress for Gerald, a visitor at the Palace music hall, an unmarried mother and a charity case. And, in the end, of course, she *literally* internalises the violence meted out to her in the play. She takes her life by drinking disinfectant, "destroying herself" at the infirmary.

As we shall see, Eva's suicide is a complex act. She is completing the violence done to her. She is also reclaiming control of the body which had become a kind of commodity. Dying by "disinfectant" is also significant. It is a way of purifying herself of the contaminating effects of the Birlings. To understand more about this, we need to pay attention to her story. There is a lot in it. This is where the play gets really interesting.

What is the significance of Eva Smith?

Each of the dinner guests had power over Eva, and each abused that power. Each saw Eva in a way which was distorted according to particular social