

# GCSE Literature | Modern Text | **An Inspector Calls** | *All You Need to Know*

## Characters

### Eva Smith

We never meet Eva Smith during the course of the play, but she is a very important character. It is her death that is the cause of the Inspector's investigation which in turn drives the drama. The audience learns about Eva through the Inspector, who has read a letter and a diary she kept. They also learn about her through the characters she came into contact with. A lot of the information about her is inferred – from the incident at Mr Birlings' factory we can infer that she was **strong willed**. From her interaction with Sheila the audience can see that Eva had a **sense of humour**. Her relationship with Gerald, when she changed her name to Daisy Renton, reveals her sensitivity. By the time she reaches Eric and Sybil, Eva is **desperate and resourceful** in trying to get herself help. Eva is always referred to in a positive light by the characters that met her but the Inspector never lets the audience or the Birlings and Gerald forget her gruesome death. The Inspector's final speech reveals Priestley's lesson that there are millions of Eva Smiths being exploited and this must not continue.

### Mr Arthur Birling

Mr Birling is the **head of the Birling household**. He has made himself very wealthy by being a **'hard-headed' business man**. He is an active member of the community in Brumley and thinks that he might be in the running for a Knighthood. At the start of the play he comes across as being arrogant, making long speeches about his predictions for the future. He also makes assertions about how a man should look out for number one and not waste time helping others. It is at this exact moment that the Inspector arrives. Sybil, his wife, is his 'social superior' and it is hinted that he is self-conscious about being from a more working-class background. He is **materialistic and possessive** and also has **old fashioned views about women**.

### Mrs Sybil Birling

Mrs Sybil Birling is Arthur Birling's wife and right from the opening of the play she is **cold-hearted and snobbish** despite being a prominent member of local women's charity. Throughout dinner she tells Sheila and Eric off for things that she considers impolite whilst ignorantly turning a blind eye to her son drinking too much. It is clear that despite Eric being old enough to drink and Sheila getting married, she sees them both as children, not as a young man and woman.

### Sheila Birling

Sheila Birling is Arthur and Sybil's daughter and is in her early twenties. At the start of the play she is celebrating her engagement to Gerald Croft and she is a **gladdy, naïve and childish** young lady. The Inspector arrives and she is very shocked by the news of Eva Smith's death, she is also very regretful of her own involvement in the suicide. As the play continues, she matures, admiring Gerald's honesty, even though he cheated on her. **She shows an assertive side** by standing up to her mother and father and she also shows that she is **insightful and intelligent** – she can see where the Inspector's investigation is going and tries to warn the others. By the end of the play she has grown up and has realised that her actions can have grave consequences.

### Eric Birling

**Eric is the Birlings' son** and is in his early twenties, he is described as being 'not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive'. In other words, **he lacks confidence**. At points he tries to stand up to his father but is talked down. It becomes clear that he is drunk at the dinner table and later it is revealed that he has been drinking too much for quite some time. It turns out that Eric had an affair with Eva Smith and that she was pregnant with Eric's baby when she committed suicide. Eric stole money from his father's business to help Eva. In the final act Eric makes an emotional attack on his parents and their values and shows that **he can be assertive**.

### Gerald Croft

Gerald is described as 'an attractive chap about thirty, rather too manly to be a dandy but very much the easy well-bred young man-about-town'. Mr Birling is very pleased that Sheila is getting engaged to Sheila because his family are upper-class business owners, Mr Birling hopes they can join forces in business. At the beginning of the play, Gerald comes across as being **confident and charming**. This changes after his affair with Eva Smith is revealed. Gerald gives himself away when he hears that Eva changed her name to Daisy Renton. **He initially is evasive** and tries not to talk too much about it but redeems himself in the eyes of the audience by being more open and honest about it as he talks to Sheila. He lets himself down in the final act by trying to get the family out of trouble, he doesn't seem to have learned from his mistakes.

### Inspector Goole

The Inspector arrives whilst the Birling family are celebrating the engagement of Sheila and Gerald. The stage directions state that he 'need not be a big man' but that he must create an **'impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness'**. The Inspector investigates each family member one at a time and in doing so, reveals the consequences of their behaviour. He drives forward the drama, with his questions creating shocking moments and gripping cliff-hangers for the audience. By the end of the play it is revealed that he isn't actually an Inspector. It is not entirely clear who he is, Priestley leaves it up to the audience to decide. His name 'Goole' suggests a supernatural or ghost like element, and he seems to know what the characters will say before they do – is he the conscience of the audience? Is he the voice of Priestley? Either way he delivers a frightening message when he leaves, that if people do not take responsibility for each other, the world is doomed.

## Plot

Before the play begins, Priestley gives detailed instructions on how the play should be staged. The action takes place in a single room with few adjustments needed during the performance. The stage directions specify that the house is 'not cosy and homelike' and the lighting needs to become 'brighter and harder' once the Inspector arrives. The first of the three acts opens with the Birling family and Gerald Croft celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling and Gerald. As it is a happy occasion, Mr Birling takes the opportunity to make a speech. During the speech he reveals how happy he is that Sheila is marrying Gerald because Gerald's parents are wealthy business owners. It is clear that Mr Birling feels this marriage will be to his advantage, he boasts that he is to be considered for a knighthood. It is important to realise that the audience of 1945 would pick up on the fact that a lot of what Mr Birling says is incorrect. He states how war will never happen and that the Titanic is unsinkable. This would indicate to the audience that what Mr Birling says is ignorant of the events and world around him. It might also alert them to a few other clues that Priestley gives in this opening scene that things are not as positive as they might appear in the Birling house. Eric Birling is distracted and a little drunk, while Sheila teases Gerald about him neglecting her last summer. During the speech, Mr Birling suggests that 'a man has to make his own way'. At this precise moment, Inspector Goole arrives. The Inspector tells the family that a girl died in the infirmary two hours ago. She took her own life by drinking disinfectant. The family are shocked by this news but don't see how they could be involved. The Inspector has a picture of the girl and a letter and diary she had written. He only ever shows one person the picture at a time – this is an important detail for later. He reveals the girl's name – Eva Smith, and that she used to work in Mr Birling's factory. Mr Birling had Eva sacked as she was the ringleader of a group of workers who had asked for higher pay. Mr Birling still can't see how he has anything to do with Eva's death. The Inspector points out that her being sacked could be the beginning of a chain of events that led to her suicide but Mr Birling is still not convinced. The Inspector explains that Eva Smith had no family to turn to and was out of work for two months after being sacked by Mr Birling. He then turns his attention to Sheila who has been deeply affected by the news of the girl's suicide. He asks if she remembers making a complaint about a worker at the department store, Milward's. She does and then he shows her the photograph to confirm the girl's identity. Sheila is horrified when she finds out that her complaint led to Eva being sacked for a second time. Sheila gives a full and honest account of what happened in the store, admitting that she thought Eva had smiled when she tried on a dress that didn't suit her. Sheila is very ashamed of her behaviour. The Inspector says that after being sacked from Milward's, Eva Smith changed her name to Daisy Renton. On hearing this, Gerald is shaken and privately Sheila presses him for more information. He admits that he was having an affair with Daisy over the summer and that was why he didn't see Sheila. The first act ends. Act II begins with Gerald and Sheila discussing the affair. Gerald is initially hesitant to come clean but eventually tells the truth. Although Sheila respects him for his honesty, she returns his engagement ring. Gerald had picked up Daisy in a bar and had looked after her, giving her money and accommodation. While Gerald was fond of Daisy, she had much stronger feelings for him and was devastated when Gerald ended the relationship. The Inspector tells us that after the affair with Gerald, Daisy went to live by the sea for two months – this was when she kept the diary he had found. Attention then turns to Mrs Birling who is revealed to be a prominent member of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation. She has kept quiet about the fact that just two weeks earlier Daisy had approached the charity seeking help. Daisy had called herself Mrs Birling when she introduced herself to the charity, Mrs Birling did not like this and sent her away. The Inspector continues to question Mrs Birling and it turns out that Daisy was pregnant. Mrs Birling claims that the man who got her pregnant should be made an example of. Sheila knows what has happened by this point and begs her mother to stop talking. Eric enters the scene and Act II ends. Mrs Birling looks very stupid after Eric admits that it was he who got Daisy pregnant. Like Sheila, he is very ashamed of his actions and is honest about his involvement with Daisy. He tells the Inspector that he drinks heavily and how, during a night out, he met Daisy. He admits that the first time they met he walked her home and pressured her into letting him into her lodgings. He slept with her that evening and on a further evening. When he next met Daisy, he found out that she was pregnant. They both knew that they weren't in love and marriage wasn't an option but Eric wanted to help by giving her money. She refused to accept the money when she found out Eric had stolen it from his father's business. The family are distraught by this point and are arguing amongst themselves. The Inspector interrupts and makes a speech about how if we are not responsible for each other, there will be terrible consequences. The Inspector leaves and Gerald returns after a walk outside. He met a police officer and found out that there was no Inspector Goole on the force. They also begin to wonder if the girl mentioned to each of them could have been 'four or five different girls', suggesting that the whole evening could have been a trick. Gerald rings the local infirmary and discovers that no girl who had died by drinking disinfectant had been admitted. Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald are excited by the idea that they may not be to blame. Eric and Sheila are aware that it makes no difference whether or not the Inspector was real, they still behaved badly. Just as Mr Birling is mocking the Inspector and is celebrating that he is off the hook, the phone rings. Mr Birling answers and to his horror it is the police. They inform him that a girl has just died after drinking disinfectant and a police officer is on their way to ask the family some questions. The curtain falls and the play ends.

## Terminology Relevant to An Inspector Calls

<b>Apotoposis</b>	A sentence is deliberately broken off and left unfinished, the ending to be supplied by the imagination, giving an impression of unwillingness or inability to continue.	<b>Hypocrisy</b>	the practice of claiming to have higher standards or more noble beliefs than is the case.
<b>Bourgeoisie</b>	The materialistic middle class and Capitalists who own factories.	<b>Isolationism</b>	Remaining distanced from the affairs or interests of other groups, e.g. the wealthy distance themselves from the problems and needs of the poor.
<b>Capitalism</b>	The political belief that people should keep the money they earn and that services and manufacturing are privately owned rather than by the government.	<b>Left-wing</b>	The end of the political spectrum (communism, socialism) which believes in community, equality and sharing of wealth, power and responsibility.
<b>Cliff-hanger</b>	The play is split into three acts; each act concludes with a cliff-hanger to build a sense of climax and tension.	<b>Monologue</b>	When a character speaks their thoughts and feelings alone – e.g. when each of the characters tell their part of the lead up to Eva's death.
<b>Climax</b>	The peak of tension in the play, e.g. the phone call at the end of the play.	<b>Motifs</b>	recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes, e.g. calls, alcohol, rudeness
<b>Contemporary</b>	The audience / ideas / issues which existed when the play was created.	<b>Omniscient</b>	All-seeing – the Inspector has seen / knows everything the characters have done
<b>Cyclical Plot</b>	The play opens with a phone call which disrupts the family's lives, and ends with a phone call which does the same	<b>Parable</b>	A religious story told to teach a moral or spiritual lesson – e.g. social responsibility
<b>Denouement</b>	The ending / conclusion of the play – that the Birlings' worst escape their actions.	<b>Patriarchy</b>	A society governed by men, which favours the rights of men over women.
<b>Didactic</b>	To teach – Priestley's intention was to teach his audience the importance of social responsibility.	<b>Political</b>	To be interested in politics; to be influenced by political ideas.
<b>Dramatic Irony</b>	When the audience knows something the characters don't, e.g. Eric is the father of Eva's baby and Mrs Birling blames him in her rant about responsibility.	<b>Proletariat</b>	Working class people; blue collar workers – e.g. factories
<b>Emotive</b>	To provoke strong emotions in the audience to achieve a particular purpose, e.g. shock and sadness at the tragic suicide of a pregnant young woman.	<b>Right-wing</b>	The end of the political spectrum (capitalism, traditional) which believes wealth should be kept by individuals, and that people should look after themselves.
<b>Euphemism</b>	The characters speak as the Edwardians did, sometimes using euphemism (polite phrases) rather than blunt language, as in, 'a girl of that sort' for prostitute.	<b>Socialism</b>	The political belief that wealth should be shared out equally in society, and the belief in state-controlled services and manufacturing.
<b>Exposition</b>	The introduction of important background information of the characters – achieved in the opening stage directions and the conversations prior to the inspector's entrance.	<b>Spoken Language</b>	The use of fluency, pauses, slang etc. to mimic real spoken language.
<b>Hierarchy</b>	The order in society from the powerful and wealthy, to the poor and vulnerable.	<b>Symbolism</b>	The use of a character to stand for an idea. The Inspector is the symbol of justice, Eva Smith is the symbol of the oppressed and the Birlings and Crofts the symbols of wealth, power and social irresponsibility.

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## Context and Priestley's Intentions

*An Inspector Calls* was first performed in 1945 at a time of great change - both World Wars were fresh in the minds of the people, women had become more prominent in the workplace and it was possible to be class mobile.

It is set in 1912 - this means that the characters have no knowledge of these world events. Priestley uses this to make important points about society and responsibility.

The first performance took place in the Soviet Union in Russia. The clear socialist message of the play appealed to the communist ideology of the Soviet audience.

### Welfare and Social Responsibility

When the play was written after World War Two in 1945, there was no form of welfare from the government to help the poor. J B Priestley believed in socialism, the political idea based on common ownership and that we should all look after one another. Mr Birling represents greedy businessmen who only care for themselves. Priestley uses him to show the audience that the Eva Smiths of the world will continue to suffer if people like Birling remain in positions of power.

### Class Structure

The hardships of wartime challenged the class structure in Britain. Due to rationing of food and clothes, people of all classes were eating and dressing the same. They were also fighting side by side, and so class barriers came down. Sybil Birling, like her husband Arthur, represents a type of middle-class snobbery that existed prior to the World Wars. Priestley hoped that these sorts of attitudes would die out, and uses Mrs Birling to show how they can lead to cold and thoughtless behaviour.

Priestley uses Gerald to attack the upper-classes of post-war Britain. He shows that despite outward appearances, Gerald is described as an 'attractive chap' and 'well-bred'. This class of people were still capable of questionable behaviour. Gerald has an affair and initially tries to avoid telling the truth. Priestley also suggests that they saw themselves above the problems of the working-classes - Gerald tries to get himself and the Birlings out of trouble.

### Generational Divide

Sheila, like Eric, allows Priestley to show his opinions on youth. He felt that there was hope in the young people of post-war Britain. He saw them as the ones who would help solve the problems the country had with class, gender and social responsibility. This is seen in how Sheila is deeply affected by Eva's death, she accepts responsibility straightaway and promises to never behave in such a way again. This is not the case with the older characters, Mr and Mrs Birling and even Gerald do not accept responsibility and we do not get the impression that they will change. J B Priestley uses Eric as he does Sheila - to suggest that the young people of a post-war Britain would be the answer to a hopeful future. With Eric he also addresses some concerns he had about the dangers of immoral behaviour. Through Eric, Priestley shows that excessive drinking and casual relationships can have consequences.

## Themes

Age	Gender	Class	Responsibility	Capitalism	Socialism
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## Quotes

Act	Character	Themes	Quote
1		■ ■	<i>It has a good solid furniture of the period. The general effect is a substantial and heavily comfortable but not cosy and homelike.</i>
1			<i>The lighting should be pink and intimate until the INSPECTOR arrives and then it should be brighter and harder.</i>
1		■ ■ ■	<i>Arthur Birling is a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in this middle fifties with fairly easy manners but rather provincial in this speech.</i>
1		■ ■ ■	<i>His wife is about fifty, a rather cold woman and her husband's social superior.</i>
1		■	<i>Sheila is a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited.</i>
1			<i>Gerald croft is an attractive chap about thirty, rather too manly to be a dandy but very much the well-bred young man-about-town.</i>
1		■	<i>Eric is in his early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive.</i>
1		■	<i>At the moment they have all had a good dinner, are celebrating a special occasion, and are pleased with themselves.</i>
1	Sybil	■	Now, Sheila, don't tease him. When you're married you'll realize that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business. You'll have to get used to that, just as I had.
1	Arthur	■	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
1	Arthur	■	The Germans don't want war. Nobody wants war...
1	Arthur	■	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 - community and all that nonsense.
1	Arthur	■	a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own...
1	Goole	■ ■	The inspector need not be a big man but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness. He is a man in his fifties, dressed in a plain darkish suit of the period. He speaks carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses
1	Goole	■	They wanted the rates raised so that they could average about twenty-five shillings a week. I refused, of course.
1	Arthur	■ ■	If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be asking for the earth.
1	Goole	■ ■	... it's better to ask for the earth than to take it.
1	Sheila	■	So I'm really responsible?
1	Sheila	■	It's the only time I've ever done anything like that, and I'll never, never do it again to anybody.
2	Gerald	■	I don't come into this suicide business.
2	Goole	■ ■	you think young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things?

Act	Character	Themes	Quote
2	Goole	■	<i>(massively taking charge)</i> allow me, miss Birling. (to Gerald.) I can tell you why miss Birling wants to stay on and why she says it might be better for her if she did. A girl died tonight. A pretty, lively sort of girl, who never did anybody any harm. But she died in misery and agony -
2	Sheila	■ ■	I know I'm to blame - and I'm desperately sorry - but I can't believe - I won't believe - it's simply my fault that in that in the end she - she committed suicide.
2	Sybil	■ ■ ■	Naturally I don't know anything about this girl.
2	Sheila		<i>(Rather wildly, with laugh)</i> No, he's giving us the rope - so that we'll hang ourselves.
2	Gerald		I didn't feel about her as she felt about me.
2	Sybil	■	We've done a great deal of good in helping deserving cases.
2	Goole	■	You admit to being prejudiced against her case?
2	Sybil	■	I think she only had herself to blame
2	Sybil	■ ■	I used my influence to have it refused. And in spite of what's happened to the girl since, I consider I did my duty.
2	Goole	■	She was here alone, friendless, almost penniless, desperate. She needed not only money but advice, sympathy, friendliness.
2	Sybil	■ ■	As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!
2	Sybil	■	And if you'd take some steps to find this young man and then make sure that he's compelled to confess in public his responsibility... then you really would be doing your duty.
3	Eric	■	Yes I insisted - it seems. 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.
	Goole	■ ■	Each of you helped to kill her.
	Goole	■ ■	...there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smith 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...
	Goole	■ ■	We don't live alone. We are members of one body... if men will not learn that lesson then they will be taught it in fire and blood and
	Arthur	■ ■	There'll be a public scandal... I was most certain of a knighthood
	Gerald		There isn't any such inspector. We've been had.
	Sheila	■	You're forgetting one thing I still can't forget. Everything we said had happened really had happened.
			<i>As they stare guiltily and dumbfounded, the curtain falls.</i>