An Inspector Calls By J.B. Priestley: The Role Of Working-class Women And Their Struggles In 1912 Britain

‘An Inspector Calls’ by J.B. Priestley is a play composed in 1945 and first presented to a post-war audience that widely explores the role of working-class women and communicates their struggles in 1912 Britain, which is when the play is set. To achieve this, Priestley created the central character, Eva Smith, who operates as a metaphor for those women and for all the varied sorts of social barriers that incapacitated them to live safe, fulfilled lives. The character was so despondent from her loss of hope that she went for her last way out of a desperate state of life where she was utilized by higher class males and manipulated by higher class females: suicide. The unfortunate chain of events that had occurred during the time of her life ranged from being dismissed from hard labour at a factory for minimal opposition, being pushed into living her life as a prostitute as a consequence of jealousy from a girl of a higher class, and finally, to being rejected by a charity when her case was seen ‘unworthy’, despite pregnancy, only because she was a working-class woman.

‘An Inspector Calls’ is a strong example of a morality play that displays various situations involving different-classes with a purpose of showing how difficult life could be for working-class women. We can see that it is a morality play as it features Eva Smith as an allegorical character who delivers a broad message about the harsh reality of the life of working-class women in the years the play is based, with their main barriers to happiness being privileged high-class Capitalists. Further proof of the play being a morality one is the observation that the secondary characters that have interacted with Eva at some point in her life, the Birling family and Gerald Croft, are representatives of what Priestley wants the audience to consider as ‘evil’. The Inspector, on the other hand, is a side character who differs from the others as he had delivered no harm towards Eva Smith and sympathizes with not just her struggles, but with the whole lower-class female generation that is going through the same ill-treatment as Eva. This can be observed when he suggests how ‘It would do us all a bit of good if sometimes we tried to put ourselves in the place of these young women counting their pennies in their dingy little back bedrooms’. His words form a general idea in the audience’s minds of the harsh reality that faced women as he specifically states that they should place themselves in their shoes to recognize their struggles. Additionally, the pronouns ‘us’ and ‘we’ are all-inclusive and would have transmitted a sense of responsibility to the post-World War Two audience, who were the ones in charge of the change in society, which was Priestley’s main goal. He utilizes the words ‘dingy’ and ‘little’ to convey how the working-class women’s lifestyle was not bright at all, but rather a shallow one - pennies are also the lowest currency, so an image of just how meagre their income was would have formed in the audience’s head, most of which would have been rich, meaning that this would bring out further sympathy in them as they would see the contrast between their and the poor women’s lives.

The morality play’s purpose is not solely to convey Eva’s suffering, but the ubiquitous struggles that the whole of the working class women were going through. ‘One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths left with us’ is a statement in the Inspector’s closing speech that features a variety of techniques including repetition to show how all-inclusive the lifestyles of toil of the working-class were. The name Eva is common, but the surname ‘Smith’ is moreover generic and when he stated that only one

Eva Smith has gone, it indicates how even though Eva is considered to be the main character, she was made to seem insignificant and dull in the background of higher-class characters because she was a working-class woman. The repetition of ‘millions’ would have augmented the number of these generic faces in the audience's minds, but the knowledge that they are all ‘Eva Smiths’ and her male counterparts gave them the idea that they are not leading an easy life, and are in need of help. This would have worked to form the image in their minds of just how large the number was of the many women who were in need of help. The inspector consequently mentions how they are left 'with their lives, their hopes and fears’. The use of juxtaposition of ‘hopes and fears’ in this sentence portrays the different emotions shown throughout the play and their placement shows how even though at first Eva’s dominating emotion was hope, all that was left in the end for her was the fear. These emotions were as well reflected on the ‘millions and millions and millions’ of working class women who were still alive and might have been facing the same horrible fate if there was a lack of change of society to save them. What Priestley wanted to achieve with this is the consideration of a better way of life and society from the audience due to his Socialist beliefs.

Eva Smith, in comparison to the higher-class members, is the most moral character in the ‘An Inspector Calls’ and demonstrates how women like her could get misjudged just because they were working-class. While she was alive, the Birling family saw her as immoral throughout her whole lifetime, as we can see when Mr Birling calls her ‘wretched’ and Mrs Birling refers to her as a ‘girl of that class’. This shows that both are not fond of her and look down at her as an inferior, which is contrasting to their opinions on Eva as in reality, they could be considered the immoral ones for such thoughts. She is a metaphor for the oppression of low-class women when she is shown encountering constant opposition as well as the use and abuse of power from higher class people against her own will whenever it accommodated them. This is shown when Mr Birling fired her from her job at the factory because according to him, ‘she'd had a lot to say – far too much’. This connotes how women who had no choice but to work for low wages could not resist or oppose, even if their complaints had a truly necessary purpose, as they had a limited amount of what they could say. The inspector later clarifies that ‘like a lot of these young women, she'd used more than one name’. The detail that there were numerous women who felt so pressured that they were driven to a name change, like Eva Smith changing to Daisy Renton and later to Mrs Birling, is important as it shows how the numbers of persecuted women were large. The clarification of them being ‘young’ is also utilized to affect the audience, as it makes them think that even though these women have only lived a small part of their life, they were overloaded with pressure and the need to change their identity to be forgotten or as an attempt to gain more respect, which is ironic as it is contrary to the belief that one has to always be oneself.

The structure of the play is organized to chronologically introduce every struggle that Eva Smith faced as a working-class woman to prove that a job was crucial for a female with her status. At the start, she is presented as one of Mr Birling’s many workers, to whom he referred to as ‘cheap labour’. This shows how he saw the women working for him not as humans with feelings, but as plain faces that would do very hard work for minimal wages. This would have brought the audience to obtain a negative opinion on high-status men like him as they would consider the treatment towards the hardworking women unfair, which is what Priestley would have been attempting to achieve. The necessity working-class women had for a job is furtherly proved when the Inspector states that after losing her second job, the girl changed her name to ‘Daisy Renton’ and ‘had to try something else’, insinuating prostitution. This proves that for working-class women such as Eva, having a job and money was crucial, as the only alternative

to that was turning to being sexually exploited by men for money. To the audience, this could have been seen as shocking and very unjust, and would have made them pity women like Eva, therefore proving Priestley's point on how life was full of struggles for working-class women solely due to their lower rank in society. This is also seen when Gerald used 'young and fresh and charming' as the reason why he kept Eva as his mistress. The listing of those adjectives form an image of a very vulnerable girl, and thus give the impression that due to such vulnerability, Gerald considered it in his power that he could sexually exploit her as he was a high-class male and could discard her at any time he wished. Priestley's intention would have been to bring the audience to disrespect Gerald and come to realize that power should not be abused against those who have got less of it.

Eva Smith is portrayed as desperate to the point where ended up taking her own life because of how downtrodden she was by members of the higher class, like many working-class women in her time. This is evident when she is introduced as a 'young' woman who died as she swallowed disinfectant that 'Burnt her inside out, of course', as quoted by the Inspector. There is an emphasis on Eva's young age before her death all throughout the play that brings out an additional sense of pity topped onto the sorrow the audience had already felt from the shocking way that she died. This suggests that she had not fulfilled her potential to its fullest due to the short life she led and raises the empathy of the post-World War One and Two audience as they might have come face-first with relatives or friends that had their young lives taken away during the wars. The inspector's use of the adverb 'of course' proves how like many women who were trying to overcome similar struggles, she had no more options left relating to continuing with life. This would have caused the post-war audience to relate and sympathize with her, as they would realize that absolutely nothing could save her at that point in her life, much like a lot of soldiers during the war who could not escape death.

Furthermore, Eva Smith is shown to have very little control over the reasons for which she was suffering, and like the many working-class women who were in her similar situation, she did not have a lot of options to turn to. This is clear when the inspector describes Eva Smith to have been 'a pretty, lively sort of girl, who never did anybody any harm' who 'died in misery and agony'. Her prettiness is emphasized throughout the play several times, and depicts how she suffered punishments for reasons that were beyond her control, as it was what attracted Sheila's jealousy which got Eva fired and led her to become sexually exploited by both Gerald and Eric, who did it for the sole reason of her attractiveness. The words 'lively' and 'died' have a contrasting effect that make the statement furthermore shocking, and the stressing on how she had done no harm to anyone supports the fact that the bad treatment towards her was unjust and that she was ill-treated while being completely innocent. 'Misery' and 'agony' are strong words that have a possible link to war, so their purpose could have been to make the post-war audience sympathize with Eva and the working-class women overall because their situation would be relatable. Priestley intended to bring an air of innocence and softness that was shattered by the second, harsher part of the statement in order to form an image with the harsh reality in the minds of his audience that would push them to consider whether they were giving the right treatment to the female members of the working-class, as a lot of the audience would have been composed of people belonging to the higher classes.

Moreover, the audience gets a look at Mrs. Birling's negative point of view on Eva Smith which reflects her general view on lower-class, unmarried women as a more successful woman looking down at ones she considers inferior to herself. This can be seen when Eva turned to Mrs. Birling's charity, only to be downtrodden for the very last time and to be described as

‘claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd’ for a girl ‘in her position’. This suggests that simply because Eva was pregnant and unmarried at the same time, she gets looked down on by the only woman that could help her in her desperate situation. The unsympathetic behavior of Mrs Birling is shown through her opinion of Eva not being allowed to have ‘fine feelings’, which insinuates that she doesn’t consider her worthy of experiencing the normal feelings any regular person has. This gives the impression that she considers the girl inhuman, which is ironic, as Mrs Birling’s own inhumane acts finally pushed Eva to suicide. This makes the audience contemplate the harsh opinion and treatment of the higher class women towards the lower class ones, and Mrs Birling’s overflowing sense of superiority brings them to despise characters like her, just as Priestley intends, as he might have wanted to bring some of the posher women in his audience to reflect upon their acts and consider how they have been treating women socially ‘inferior’ to them.

Finally, there is a plot twist as a finale which acts to demonstrate that along with being of a high-class come responsibilities which could involve working-class women and in the case of ‘An Inspector Calls’, Eva Smith. This can be seen during the final dialogue, given by Mr Birling, in which he states that he was told that ‘A girl has just died – on her way to the Infirmary – after swallowing some disinfectant’. This implies that the characters who refused to change their attitude upon thinking that the suicide was not real, Mr and Mrs Birling, have not yet learnt their lesson and have to go through the same process of inerrogation again due to not accepting and admitting their responsibilities. This is also demonstrated in the stage direction ‘as they stare guiltily and dumbfounded’, where it is evident that the higher-class characters come to finally realize that they carry the responsibility of the girl’s death, the adverb ‘dumbfounded’ conveying their shock, which is an emotion that the audience would have experienced, as well. This shocking reveal targeted at the audience conveys the impression that Priestley intended for them to have perceived how hard it was to be a working-class woman at those times, and consequently making them consider whether having social classes was necessary if they meant that they would have to carry such large responsibilities. This would have been effective due to the instability between the social situation, as the play was presented after the Second World War and there was a grand opportunity to convert fully to Socialism, which Priestley wanted to convey as something where women of the working classes, such as Eva Smith, would no longer have to struggle given that they had a low rank in society.

Overall, Priestley’s intention of including Eva Smith in ‘An Inspector Calls’ was clear; It was to teach the audience a lesson on how the working-class women were being exploited by superior social classes and how it was unjust and needed to be stopped, something that the post-war audience could have achieved. He attempted to reach his goal this by introducing various situations which featured antagonistic behavior towards Eva from the higher classes, therefore bringing the audience to feel more sympathy towards characters like Eva and to despise ones who despite all her suffering, kept a negative opinion of her as a result of her being a working-class woman. He utilized her as a mouthpiece for all the unjust treatment and limited rights that such women had, with her suicide serving as an example of what would eventually happen if a working-class woman had been exploited one too many times. In conclusion, Eva Smith was Priestley’s way of attempting to change the audience’s opinions, as he hoped that a change of opinions would change the world to be a better and more united place.