
An Inspector Calls: Social Issues In The Play

Set in 1912, the play *An Inspector Calls* explores aspects of socialism and equality previous to the war. Priestley presents three distinct and powerful female roles who show contrasting views on society. It is interesting to consider the interactions between the female characters; Sheila, Mrs Birling and Eva.

At the beginning of the play the Birling family are at a small dinner party celebrating Sheila and Gerald's engagement. It is at this party that we first begin to see flaws in the engagement. Sheila seems to be a very sarcastic character making modest digs at Gerald, saying; "Except for all last summer when you never came near me" as the stage directions tell us Sheila is saying this in a "half serious, half playful" way we can tell that she is saying it as a deliberate dig at him not as a silly joke. Because of this the audience start to believe that the engagement isn't all it's said to be.

We can also see very stereotypical expectations of Sheila for example Mrs Birling saying; "What an expression ... The thing you girls pick up these days!" She says this in response to Sheila calling Eric "squiffy". This shows the audience that Mrs Birling has some very dignified expectations of the way Sheila should act. In addition, Sheila is also called "hysterical" several times throughout the play; this is used to show the audience that she is still a child in her parents eyes; because of this her parents believe that the only way out for Sheila is for her to marry the wealthy Gerald Croft, and the also improves their own social standing.

Further in to Act 1 Inspector Goole arrives and explains the suicide of Eva Smith to them. "A young woman died in the infirmary ... because she'd swallowed a lot of strong disinfectant. Burnt her inside out, of course." the inspector tells the family this brutal description of her death in the hopes of shocking the family out of their naive ways. This description makes Eva seem very weak to the males in the play however they do not seem to care due other lower class and probably the fact she is a woman. However Eva was a very strong character and lost her job at Birlings because she stood up for her rights and asked for more payment for her work. Mr Birling clearly didn't care if she struggled and fired her; and he feels no remorse for it when he says "I can't except any responsibility" even though it is clear to the audience she wouldn't have been in the situation to kill herself if Mr Birling had payed her extra.

Later on in act one we discover that Eva worked at Milwards clothing shop after being fired from Birlings; during her time at this shop Sheila was trying on a dress and it didn't suit her and Eva held the dress up against herself and it suited her. Because of this Sheila became very jealous and used her class and status to get Eva fired. She tells the inspector "She was very pretty and looked as if she could take care of herself. I couldn't be sorry for her." Sheila suggests that Eva looked strong enough to handle losing a job which is dramatic irony as the audience know that is not the case as Eva ends up killing herself. For women in 1912 everything revolved around looks, during the play the way Eva looks is mentioned several times, particularly by the male characters. But after World War One this all changed as upper class women began working for the first time and Great Britain began to show more areas of socialism and equality with the majority of women working and the NHS starting to form.

In acts 2 and 3 we are informed of Gerald's affair with Eva; he met Eva at the Palace bar, where most men of the town went to meet women. He gave Eva money and somewhere to live for a while and ended it when he had to go away with work. He told the inspector that although she became his mistress "I didn't install her there so that I could make love to her [...] I was sorry for her" by saying this he is making himself sound like the hero but also showing his misconceptions for Eva; he thinks he is weak, maybe because she is a woman, maybe because she is at the Palace bar. But for whatever reason it is he pities Eva and uses her weakness to his advantages which demonstrates inequality between men and women. However, due to this affair Sheila uses her power to end the engagement, but her parents try to stop her which shows the audience how common this type of deception could be.

Towards the end of the play, after the inspector has left, the family discover that Inspector Goole wasn't a real inspector at all and that there was no suicide. We see the most contrasting views between Mrs Birling and Sheila at this point; Mrs Birling believes that because there was no suicide that the family are guilty of no crimes and that nothing the inspector said mattered. However, Sheila has stronger beliefs in socialism and realises that what the family had all done, whether it had led to a suicide or not, was still wrong, Sheila says to her parents "It frightens me the way you talk, and I can't listen to any more of it." she says this because she is scared, she knows the inspector was right in saying that what they had done was wrong. And her mother believes in the upper class society being more important than the lower class. Mrs Birling says to Mr Birling "They're over-tired, in the morning they'll be as amused as we are." Mrs Birling is treating the whole situation as if it is a joke and acts as if the actions of the family count for nothing. However, Sheila is younger and has beliefs in socialism so understands that their actions are wrong and they should be punished.

To conclude, in the play *An Inspector Calls*, the writer J.B Priestly expresses his views on society before the war and warns the audience that their old ways of living got them into the mess of WWI and WWII; and they shouldn't make the same mistakes. The play was written in 1945, after both wars, and Priestly shows the naiveness of the upper class society as a exhortatory to show the public how not to treat each other if they want to avoid fighting.