

An Inspector Calls Knowledge Organiser



Plot Summary:

Act 1:

1. The play is set in 1912, in the fictional city of Brumley, North Midlands. The stage directions reveal that the play takes place in a large suburban house, owned by a wealthy business man. Mr Birling, his family and Gerald all sit around the dining table after dinner. They talk and Sheila mentions how Gerald did not contact her very much last summer. Eric appears to be a little drunk.
2. Mr Birling gives a short speech on Sheila and Gerald getting married. Gerald gives Sheila a ring.
3. Birling gives a long speech on progress. Sheila & Mrs Birling leave.
4. Birling tells Gerald that he might get a knighthood. Birling talks to Gerald and Eric about the idea of 'community'.
5. The Inspector enters and tells the family of the death of a young woman called Eva Smith.
6. The Inspector questions Birling and shows him the photo.
7. Despite Mr Birling's statues, the Inspector is confident, abrupt and mysterious.
8. Mr Birling sacked Eva Smith from his factory 2 years ago, in September 1910. She led a group to strike in order to obtain a pay rise, which was unsuccessful and the ring leaders were sacked.
9. Mr Birling defends his action and Gerald supports him.
10. Sheila enters and hears about Eva Smith, she is upset by the news of the girl's suicide.
11. The Inspector informs the Birlings that after being sacked, she began working in Millwards in December 1910. However, she was sacked one month later after a complaint by a customer.
12. The Inspector shows Sheila the photo and she runs out upset. The Inspector talks to the men.
13. The Inspector questions Sheila / she talks about how she knew Eva Smith and that she believed it was her fault that the girl was sacked.
14. She explains that she was in a bad mood and felt the girl was laughing at her. She also admits she was jealous at how pretty Eva was.
15. The name 'Daisy Renton' comes up after the Inspector explains that this is the name Eva Smith began calling herself and Sheila and Gerald have a heated discussion about this.
16. Sheila realises that Gerald was having an affair with Daisy at some point the previous year.

Act 2:

1. The Inspector begins to talk about joint responsibility.
2. Mrs Birling acts in a superior manner, referring to Eva's lower class and talking down to Sheila.
3. Sheila indicates that Eric drinks too much, which Gerald agrees with. Mrs Birling is shocked and annoyed.
4. Sheila warns her parents that they are making the situation worse.
5. Gerald explains how he met Daisy in a bar. Sheila's parents do not want her to hear the story but she refuses to leave.
6. Gerald is visibly distressed by the reality of Daisy's death.
7. He discusses how he took Daisy for a drink having helped her get away from an old council man, who he describes as a "womanising drunk".
8. Gerald explains how Daisy had no money and was hungry/ He then moved her innocently into a friend's apartment and they later became lovers. Mrs Birling is disgusted by his behaviour.
9. Gerald explains that he did not love Daisy and that he broke up with her in September 1911.
10. Sheila returns her engagement ring – she says she respects Gerald's honesty but that they are now different people.
11. The Inspector shows Mrs Birling the photo. The front door slams and Birling leaves then returns.
12. The Inspector questions Mrs Birling, revealing that Eva was pregnant and that she had asked Mrs Birling's charity, the Brumley Woman's Charity Organisation, for help.
13. Mrs Birling reveals that Eva was using the name Mrs Birling and that it was therefore her duty to have her claim for help refused.
14. The Inspector reveals that Eva was pregnant – but clarifies it wasn't Gerald's child.
15. The Inspector manipulates Mrs Birling into stating that it was entirely the father of Eva's child who was to blame for her death.
16. The audience and characters gradually realise that Eric is the father.
17. Sheila cries and Eric enters.

Act 3:

1. Eric talks to Sheila, Mrs Birling, Mr Birling and the Inspector. Eric has a drink.
2. The Inspector questions Eric. Sheila and Mrs Birling leave.
3. Eric tells the story of how he knew Eva Smith. He discusses how he became drunk and aggressive before Eva allowed him into her flat.
4. Eric says that when the two met up again, they began a short relationship. Eric tried to help Eva by stealing money from his father's company, which she refused to take.
5. Sheila and Mrs Birling return. Eric accuses Mrs Birling of killing his child.
6. The Inspector makes his final speech. Telling them that they all killed Eva Smith, summing up what each family member had done, before reminding Mr. Birling that he had destroyed a girl over a small pay rise.
7. The Inspector then discusses the state of the country and how we are all "responsible for each other."
8. The Inspector leaves.
9. The family argue and question whether he was a real inspector or not. The doorbell rings. Gerald enters.
10. Gerald tells them he wasn't a real police officer. Mr Birling calls the Chief Constable to check.
11. The family argue. Mr Birling and Mrs Birling are happy, while Sheila & Eric are not.
12. Gerald questions if there was in fact one girl that all the separate events happened to and if a girl died at all that evening. Gerald calls the infirmary, who say that no girl has been brought in / they have not had any suicides.
13. Everyone is happy apart from Sheila and Eric.
14. The phone rings and Birling answers. It was the police saying an inspector is coming to ask some questions as a girl has just died on her way to the infirmary.

Context:

J.B Priestley - John Boynton Priestley was born in Yorkshire in 1894. He knew early on that he wanted to become a writer. However, he became a junior clerk with a local wool firm at the age of 16. When the First World War broke out, Priestley joined the infantry and only just escaped death on a number of occasions. After the war, he wrote successful articles and essays. During the Second World War he broadcast a massively popular weekly radio programme which was eventually cancelled by the BBC for being too critical of the Government.

Political views - During the 1930's Priestley became very concerned about the consequences of social inequality in Britain, and in 1942 Priestley and others set up a new political party, the Common Wealth Party. Priestley was influential in developing the idea of the Welfare State which began to be put into place at the end of the war.

1912 –

The time the play was set – World Wars - The First World War would start in two years. Birling's optimistic view that there would not be a war is completely wrong.

Class distinction - There were strong distinctions between the upper and lower classes.

Women - Women were subservient to men. All a well off women could do was get married; a poor woman was seen as cheap labour. Men and woman had specific roles and expectations. Women were seen as the 'weaker' sex.

Political views - The ruling classes saw no need to change the status quo. Trade unions however, were beginning to form in order to gain better working conditions for workers.

1945 –

The year the play was written – World Wars - The Second World War ended in Europe on 8 May 1945. People were recovering from nearly six years of warfare, danger and uncertainty.

Class distinction - Class distinctions had been greatly reduced as a result of two world wars. Men of different classes fought side by side despite previous differences.

Women - As a result of the wars, women had earned a more valued place in society due to their determination to keep the country running during the war. Women were encouraged to take on jobs that prior to the war they were not encouraged to do.

Political Views - There was a great desire for social change. Immediately after The Second World War, Clement Attlee's Labour Party won a landslide victory over Winston Churchill and the Conservatives.

1912 - Priestley deliberately set his play in 1912 because the date represented an era when all was very different from the time he was writing. In 1912, rigid class and gender boundaries seemed to ensure that nothing would change. Yet by 1945, most of those class and gender divisions had been breached. Priestley wanted to make the most of these changes.

Key Characters:

Inspector - Priestley's mouthpiece; advocates social justice.

Mr Birling - Businessman, capitalist, against social equality.

Mrs Birling - Husband's social superior, believes in personal responsibility.

Sheila - Young girl, comes to change views and pities Eva, feels regret.

Eric - Young man, drinks too much, gets Eva pregnant, and regrets actions.

Gerald - Businessman, engaged to Sheila, politically closest to Birling.

Eva - Unseen in play, comes to stand for victims of social injustice.

Key Themes:

Morality
Survival of the Fittest
Social Responsibility
Personal Responsibility
Inequality
Young and Old
Generations
Love
Gender Differences