

An Inspector Calls

by J.B. Priestley · Language: EN

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Overview

An Inspector Calls is a play by J.B. Priestley, first performed in 1945 and published in 1947. Set in 1912 in the fictional industrial city of Brumley, it unfolds in real time in the dining room of the prosperous Birling family. The story begins as the family celebrates the engagement of their daughter, Sheila, to Gerald Croft. Their evening is interrupted by the arrival of Inspector Goole, who announces that a young woman, Eva Smith, has died after drinking disinfectant. The Inspector proceeds to question each family member, revealing that each of them, in some way, contributed to Eva's downfall—from firing her from a job to driving her to the streets and ultimately to suicide. As the interrogation progresses, the family's comfortable, self-satisfied world unravels, exposing their hypocrisy, selfishness, and collective responsibility for the tragedy.

The play is a morality tale and a social critique, arguing that society is interconnected and that individuals have a duty to one another. Priestley uses the Inspector as a mouthpiece to deliver a powerful message about social responsibility, contrasting the older generation's refusal to accept blame with the younger generation's growing conscience. The play's structure is tight and dramatic, with each revelation building tension and forcing characters to confront their actions. Its famous twist ending—where the Inspector's identity is questioned and the phone call reveals that a real inspector is on his way—leaves the audience with a chilling sense of inevitability and the idea that the lesson must be learned again. The play matters because it remains a timeless and urgent call for empathy, accountability, and social justice, and it continues to be a staple of English literature curricula and theater productions worldwide.

Key Takeaways

- We are all responsible for each other; our actions, no matter how small, have consequences for others.
- Social class and privilege can blind people to the humanity of those less fortunate.
- The younger generation is capable of learning and changing, while the older generation often clings to self-justification.
- The play warns against complacency and the belief that we are isolated from society's problems.
- Priestley uses the Inspector as a dramatic device to expose hypocrisy and force characters to confront their guilt.

- The ending suggests that the lesson of social responsibility is not learned once but must be repeated, as history will keep returning.
- The play critiques capitalism and the exploitation of workers, as seen in Mr. Birling's business practices.
- The Inspector's final speech is a powerful call to action: 'We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.'

Chapter Summaries

Act One

The Birling family is celebrating Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft. Mr. Birling gives a pompous speech about progress and self-reliance, dismissing the idea of social responsibility. The mood is festive until Inspector Goole arrives, announcing the death of a young woman named Eva Smith. He shows a photograph to Mr. Birling, who admits he fired her from his factory for asking for a raise. The Inspector then reveals that Sheila had Eva dismissed from a shop job out of jealousy. Sheila is deeply remorseful, while her parents remain defensive. The act ends with Gerald admitting he knew Eva, but he is reluctant to share details.

Act Two

The Inspector continues his interrogation. Gerald confesses that he had an affair with Eva, who had changed her name to Daisy Renton. He claims he was kind to her, but the Inspector points out that he used her and then discarded her. Sheila, now fully aware of the family's guilt, becomes an ally of the Inspector, urging her family to tell the truth. Mrs. Birling is questioned next. She reveals that she refused help to a pregnant woman at her charity committee, and she insists that the father of the child should be held responsible. The Inspector reveals that the father is Eric, the Birlings' son, who is not yet present. The act ends with Eric's entrance, and the family is stunned.

Act Three

Eric confesses that he forced himself on Eva, got her pregnant, and stole money from his father's business to support her. The family is horrified, and Mr. Birling is furious about the theft. The Inspector delivers a powerful final speech, reminding them that they are all responsible for each other and that if they do not learn this lesson, they will be taught in 'fire and blood and anguish.' He leaves. After his departure, the family begins to question whether the Inspector was real. Gerald discovers that the Inspector was not a real police officer, and they begin to doubt the story. They learn that there is no such person as Eva Smith, and they laugh in relief. Then the phone rings: a real inspector is on his way to question them about the suicide of a young woman, and the family realizes the lesson is not over.

Themes

- Social responsibility
- Class and privilege
- Guilt and blame
- Generational conflict
- Capitalism vs. socialism
- The consequences of actions

Notable Quotes

- "We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other." — The Inspector's final speech to the Birling family, emphasizing the central theme of social responsibility.
- "A man has to make his own way—has to look after himself—and his family too, of course, when he has one." — Mr. Birling's speech at the dinner table, expressing his individualistic and capitalist worldview.
- "I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty—and I threatened to make a row." — Eric's confession to the Inspector about how he forced himself on Eva Smith.
- "You see, we have to share something. If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt." — Sheila's remark to her mother, acknowledging the family's collective responsibility.
- "The point is, you don't seem to have learnt anything." — Sheila's accusation to her parents after the Inspector leaves, highlighting their failure to change.
- "I think it was a mistake. I think it was a bad mistake." — Gerald's reflection on his affair with Eva, showing his partial remorse but also his self-justification.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is An Inspector Calls about?

An Inspector Calls is a play about a wealthy British family, the Birlings, who are visited by Inspector Goole. He reveals that each family member contributed to the suicide of a young working-class woman, Eva Smith. Through the interrogation, the play exposes their hypocrisy and argues that everyone is responsible for the welfare of others.

Is An Inspector Calls worth reading?

Yes. It is a short, powerful play that tackles timeless themes of social justice and personal accountability. Its tight structure, dramatic tension, and twist ending make it engaging for both students and general readers. It is also a classic of modern British drama and is frequently studied in schools.

How does An Inspector Calls end?

Spoiler: After the Inspector leaves, the family discovers he was not a real police officer and that no one named Eva Smith exists. They laugh in relief, but then the phone rings. A real inspector is on his way to question them about the suicide of a young woman, suggesting that the lesson is not over and they must face the consequences again.

Who should read *An Inspector Calls*?

Anyone interested in classic drama, social critique, or moral philosophy. It is a staple in high school and college literature courses, but its themes of responsibility and empathy are relevant to all readers. It is also a quick read, making it accessible for those new to plays.

How long does it take to read *An Inspector Calls*?

The play is about 90 pages long, so at an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 1.5 to 2 hours to read. However, because it is a play, many readers prefer to read it aloud or in one sitting, which can take longer.