

BBC BITESIZE

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Jean: In the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with your revision. Full versions of some of the text you might be studying, revision playlists and other Bitesize podcast series to help with different GCSE subjects.

It's important to let you know that in this podcast, there will be discussions of suicide and sexual abuse.

Carl: In this series, we're going all the way back to 1912 and into a fictional town in the Midlands called Brumley to explore JB Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls*.

Jean: I'm Jean Menzies, an author and ancient historian.

Carl: I'm Carl Anka, an author and journalist.

Jean: In this episode, we're going to be looking at dramatisation which is the technical word for how the play would have been performed. It's important to remember that this is a play and plays are written to be performed and watched not necessarily read.

Carl: *An Inspector Calls* is a play. Priestley wrote it knowing that the directors and actors would develop it further and bring it to life.

Jean: He knew that they would enhance the way the story is told with costumes, lighting, scenery, and a bunch of different technical and artistic choices. Those choices would have a real influence on how the audience would react to the play. So today, we're going to focus on casting, performance and staging and maybe you could think a little bit about how you would like to cast, perform or stage this play.

Carl: In the very first page in the stage directions, Priestley outlines who the characters are, and he's pretty specific about the age, appearance and demeanour.

Jean: He writes that Mr Birling is:

Carl: A heavy looking, rather portentous man in his middle 50s with fairly easy manners, but rather provincial in his speech.

Jean: Portentous is a description of him being a serious man, but the provincial speech shows him as not being sophisticated. Priestley says that Mrs Birling is:

Carl: About 50, a rather cold woman and her husband's social superior.

Jean: But the character that has the most detailed description is the inspector:

Carl: The inspector need not be a big man, but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity, and purposefulness. He's a man in his 50s dressed in a plain dark suit of the period. He speaks carefully, weightily, has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking.

Jean: Because the inspector is one of the most important characters in the play, his casting is particularly important.

Carl: While Priestley gives us a description, casting is often up to interpretation. So in some performances of *An Inspector Calls*, Inspector Goole can be very confrontational, taking charge and shouting accusations at the Birlings.

Jean: In other interpretations he's softer and more sympathetic. Casting is key. But every director and performance can interpret it differently. So it's worth having a think about some of the different ways that different actors might have interpreted and performed the role of each character. The essentials can be given different shades of meaning through the actors' choices.

Carl: Okay, that's casting done. Let's move on to the next dramatic choice - staging.

Jean: Like casting, Priestley gives directions for how the performers and directors could stage the play, but it's ultimately up to their interpretation.

Carl: On the first page of the script, Priestley provides pretty clear instructions about how the play should be staged. In some ways, staging is quite simple. The whole story takes place in real time and in one location, which is the Birling dining room.

Extract:

The dining room is of a fairly large suburban house, belonging to a prosperous manufacturer... Edna, the parlourmaid, is just clearing the table, which has no cloth, of the dessert plates and champagne glasses, etc, and then replacing them with decanter of port, cigar box and cigarettes. Port glasses are already on the table... All five are in evening dress of the period, the men in tails and white ties, not dinner-jackets.

Jean: We should say that the presence of cigars and cigarettes is really relevant to this era to paint an accurate picture because this was long before public health messages about smoking. Priestley gives a whole list of props and the stage directions for each act of the play.

Carl: You can have the dining table centred downstairs during act one when it's needed there and then swinging back can reveal the fireplace back for act three. You can show a small table with a telephone.

Jean: And one of the stage directions immediately tells us a lot about the play when Priestley describes the Birling home as heavily comfortable but not cosy and home-like. It's a beautiful house but it's not supposed to feel like a warm and cosy home, which gives the audience their first insight into what the family who lives there is like. Mr And Mrs Birling are very concerned with appearances over pretty much everything else.

Carl: You can use that to describe the whole family as comfortable but not cosy. They are wealthy and from the outside are quite successful. But the reality is they're not a perfect happy family at all.

Jean: No, they are not. And another way the staging reflects the themes that Priestley wanted to explore in his play can be seen in the stage directions. He writes about the lighting of the stage. He says that:

Carl: the lighting should be pink and intimate until the inspector arrives. Then it should be brighter and harder. Because at the start of the play, they're having a private family dinner, which is reflected in the pink intimate light, but then when the inspector comes to interrogate them, and shine a light on who they really are, the lighting becomes brighter and harder.

Jean: Like an interrogation room.

Carl: But like most dramatisation choices, the staging is up to interpretation in Priestley's stage directions. He acknowledges that the set doesn't have to be realistic.

Jean: Different productions of the play have taken different creative choices with their staging. Some directors have set the play in an industrial area, and another performance set the stage to include an outside area to show Eva Smith acting out her life.

Carl: There's even one performance that built a set of the Birling's house onto the stage and then had it burst into smoke and flames.

Jean: Finally, performance. Because plays are meant to be performed, not just written.

Before each performance the director and actors make their own choices about how each character, stage direction and idea should be performed. They read the stage directions to see how Priestley originally imagined each scene, but then they put their own spin on it.

Carl: The actors and the director will discuss each character's motivation, which is why a character behaves in the way they do. And they'll use that to inform how they perform each line.

Jean: The director will consider the different themes in the play and might choose to emphasise some and pay less attention to others. For example, if the director was really interested in class, they might make the Birling's costumes even fancier. Or if they were really focused on gender, they might get the men in the play to speak over the women in the play more.

Carl: Like with all of the dramatisation choices, the performance of the play is all up to each individual director and the actors' interpretations. So when you're reading the play, be sure to think about all the different ways each line and stage direction could be interpreted.

Jean: Watch any interpretations of a play that are available to you in person or online, because seeing them read the lines out loud and act out each scene will help you to understand the characters and themes that little bit better.

Carl: The next episode of this podcast will be going back in time to 1912 and 1945 to tell you more about the context of *An Inspector Calls*.

Jean: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize English literature podcast.

Carl: We've still got a lot more to discuss. So have a listen to the other episodes to find out more about *Inspector Calls* and other books in the English literature podcast series.