

# BBC BITESIZE

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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:** 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 form, structure and language in *An Inspector Calls*. Let's start with form. *An Inspector Calls* is written in the form of a play and it draws on three different genres of play: one - the well-made play, two - the morality play, and three - the crime thriller.

**Jean:** The well-made play was actually a popular sub-genre of play in the 19th century. In a well-made play, the plot is intricate and complex and the drama of the story builds to a big climax.

**Carl:** Like in the end of act two.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** (*grimly*) Don't worry Mrs Birling. I shall do my duty. (*He looks at his watch.*)

**Mrs Birling:** (*triumphantly*) I'm glad to hear it.

**Inspector:** No hushing up, eh? Make an example of the young man, eh? Public confession of responsibility – um?

**Mrs Birling:** Certainly. I consider it your duty. And now no doubt you'd like to say good night.

**Inspector:** not yet. I'm waiting.

**Mrs Birling:** Waiting for what?

**Inspector:** To do my duty.

**Sheila:** (*distressed*) Now, mother – don't you see?

**Mrs Birling:** (*understanding now*) But surely .... I mean ... it's ridiculous . . . (*she stops, and exchanges a frightened glance with her husband.*)

**Birling:** (*terrified now*) Look Inspector, you're not trying to tell us that – that my boy – is mixed up in this - ?

**Inspector:** (*sternly*) If he is, then we know what to do, don't we? Mrs Birling has just told us.

**Birling:** (*thunderstruck*) my God! But – look here –

**Mrs Birling:** (*agitated*) I don't believe it. I won't believe it . . .

**Sheila:** Mother – I begged you and begged you to stop-

**Jean:** So that's a pretty dramatic climax. A well-made play is a genre of play that started becoming popular around the 1800s. In a well-made play, the action is caused by events that happened before the events of the play, with the story pulling everything back into order at the end.

Priestley moves away from the genre of the well-made play by ending the play with a revelation that actually puts the characters back into jeopardy.

**Carl:** The audience thinks everything's going to go back to normal when they realise the inspector isn't who he said he was, but then the phone rings and everything goes straight back into chaos. Because when it comes to form, An Inspector Calls is also a morality play.

Morality plays were really popular in the 15th and 16th centuries. In morality plays, characters committed sins and were punished. If they repented, the play showed how the character could redeem themselves. Priestley wanted to remind the audience that they needed not to slip back into old ways after the war had brought about greater quality.

**Jean:** In An Inspector Calls, Sheila and Eric take responsibility for their actions and say that they're not going to go back to the way things were.

**Carl:** Whereas Mr and Mrs Birling just want to go back to the way things were before. So Priestley uses the form of a morality play, to invite the audience to judge the characters. Sometimes it feels like inspector's speeches are being said to the audience.

**Jean:** Morality plays were also meant to encourage the audience to question their own behaviours. So sometimes when the inspector is talking, he isn't just talking to the characters, he's talking to us, too. It's called breaking the fourth wall, which is when a character acknowledges the fact they're fictional, by addressing the audience directly.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** (*dryly*) I've had that notion myself from time to time. In fact, I've thought that 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.

**Carl:** The final form that the play An Inspector Calls takes is that of a crime thriller. Now, crime thriller is a genre in which a play tells a gripping tale based around a crime.

**Jean:** In this case, though, the play revolves around the moral crime of who was responsible for making Eva Smith's life so miserable.

**Carl:** Exactly. In crime thrillers, the audience receives clues by who's committed the crime. And then they watch the play to try and figure out the twist before the big reveal.

**Jean:** And in *An Inspector Calls* the audience spends a whole play slowly learning that everyone in the family was responsible for Eva's death in different ways, which is what makes it such a gripping mystery to watch unfold.

**Extract:**

**Eric:** And I say the girl's dead and we all helped to kill her. And that's what matters.

**Jean:** Okay, let's move on and talk about structure. The play has three acts, and Priestley structured each act to end on a gripping cliff-hanger, which heightens the sense of tension and suspense in the story.

**Carl:** There's a twist in act three when they realise that maybe Inspector Goole wasn't real. And then another twist at the very end when the phone rings telling them that a woman really did die, and that an inspector is coming over to question them.

**Jean:** Everything about this play is structured really intentionally. To keep the momentum up, Priestley slowly peels back new parts of the mystery and reveals more about the character and themes of the story. And the play, especially the end, also reflects Priestley's interest in theories about time. Including the idea that people re-enter their lives again after death, and live life all over again.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** And I tell you, that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood, and anguish. Good night.

**Carl:** Priestley was interested in idea that people could learn how to live better lives and make changes to their past actions to begin a new cycle where they didn't have to repeat the mistakes of their past.

**Jean:** You can see it in the play, each of these stories the inspector draws out of the characters is kind of like a cycle of its own, which in literature is called a cyclical structure. The play is a cycle of Eva trying to create a better life for herself, being disappointed or punished, then not getting the support she needs, so having to start over again.

**Carl:** Eva's life is a cycle of events, she gets knocked down and tries again, over and over and over again until unfortunately, she dies. The play itself also has a cyclical structure. It starts and ends with an investigation into the young woman who has taken her own life. And the older Birlings go right back to avoiding responsibility as they did at the start of the play.

**Jean:** Sheila and Eric have learned something from their mistakes and act differently to break the cycle.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** Now listen, you two. If you're still feeling on edge, then the least you can do is to keep quiet. Leave this to us. I'll admit that fellow's antics rattled us a bit. But we've found him out – and all we have to do is to keep our heads. Now it's our turn.

**Sheila:** Our turn to do – what?

**Mrs Birling:** (*sharply*) To behave sensibly, Sheila – which is more than you're doing.

**Eric:** (*bursting out*) What's the use of talking about behaving sensibly. You're beginning to pretend now that nothing's really happened at all. And I can't see it like that. This girl's still dead, isn't she? Nobody's brought her to life, have they?

**Sheila:** (*eagerly*) That's just what I feel, Eric. And it's what they don't seem to understand.

**Eric:** whoever that chap was, the fact remains that I did what I did. And mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her. It's still the same rotten story whether it's been told to a police inspector or to somebody else. According to you, I ought to feel a lot better - (*To Gerald.*) I stole some money, Gerald, you might as well know - (*As Birling tries to interrupt.*) I don't care, let him know. The money's not the important thing. It's what happened to the girl and what we all did to her that matters. And I still feel the same about it, and that's why I don't feel like sitting down and having a nice cosy talk.

**Sheila:** And Eric's absolutely right. And it's the best thing any one of us has said tonight and it makes me feel a bit less ashamed of us. You're just beginning to pretend all over again.

**Carl:** The final aspect of this play that we're going to talk about today is language because *An Inspector Calls* is a play. It's made up of dialogue and stage directions. Priestley wrote the dialogue to be realistic. So there isn't a lot of emphasis on imagery here as you would find in a novel. So instead, there's more of a focus on plain emotive expressions.

**Jean:** The characters are given lines to perform but then it's them and the director's choice as to how they want to interpret the language and act it out. But Priestley also fills the play with stage directions about how to say things and what needs to be emphasised, to add to the drama of the play.

**Carl:** There are so many ways to say a line in a play. So Priestley gives some direction. For example, in the first act of the play, Sheila says to Gerald “you be careful” in a response to the idea they will get “too busy for it” when they get married, which can be said in a bunch of different ways. It could be said jokingly or seriously.

**Jean:** So throughout the play, Priestley specifies how the line should be delivered in the stage directions for that line. Here, he writes that it should be said in a half playful, half serious way.

**Carl:** Foreshadowing

**Jean:** Foreshadowing is to suggest what's going to happen in the future. At the start of the play, we don't know that Gerald had an affair, or that Sheila had already suspected it. So the stage directions half playful half serious

gives a very early hint to the audience members who are really paying attention that something's not quite right with Sheila and Gerald.

**Carl:** All the dramatic choices that precede makes it so the form, the structure and the language of An Inspector Calls have a real impact on how the audience experiences the play.

We go deeper into that in the next episode. We're going to talk about dramatisation and all the different ways the play could be performed.

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