

# BBC BITESIZE

**Carl:** Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature Podcast.

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

**Carl:** I'm Carl Anka, I'm a journalist and author.

**Jean:** We're here today to help you dive a little deeper into some of the texts in GCSE English literature.

**Carl:** It's worth noting that there will be spoilers in this as we look into each text as a whole. So if you're not quite finished reading, or you're not quite ready for spoilers, just come back later.

**Jean:** And don't forget that whilst you're 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 subjects. We also think it's really 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:** And in this episode, we're going to take a look at the plot of *An Inspector Calls* to find out the who, what, where and why of the play, and find out about all of the key moments from the story and what *An Inspector Calls* is all about.

**Carl:** Alright, it's time to get on my best shoes and polish the cutlery because tonight we're going for dinner with the Birlings. As the play begins, Mr and Mrs Birling are having a dinner party with their son Eric and their daughter Sheila. Sheila's fiancé Gerald is also there. The family is celebrating Sheila and Gerald's engagement.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** (*raising his glass*) So here's wishing the pair of you – the very best that life can bring. Gerald and Sheila.

**Mrs Birling:** (*raising her glass, smiling*) Yes, Gerald. Yes, Sheila darling. Our congratulations and very best wishes!

**Jean:** Oh, they seem so happy in this scene, don't they?

**Carl:** Oh, yes, they do. A nice, happy family dinner. They toast to Sheila and Gerald and then Mr Birling pulls his son Eric, and soon-to-be-son in law Gerald to the side and gives them some advice.

**Jean:** That's nice of him.

**Carl:** I wouldn't quite call him nice. Here's Mr Birling:

**Extract:**

**Birling:** *(solemnly)* ...But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense.

**Jean:** I take that back. He does not seem like a very nice guy

**Carl:** No. But before Mr Birling finishes his speech about why you should only look out for yourself and your family, an inspector rings the doorbell and walks into the Birling's house in the middle of their dinner party. He tells them that he's here to talk to them, because earlier on a woman took her own life. The inspector says he wants to ask the family some questions, but he wants to question them one by one. The first person on that list is Mr Birling.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** Do you remember her, Mr Birling?

**Birling:** *(slowly)* No – I seem to remember hearing that name – Eva Smith – somewhere. But it doesn't convey anything to me. And I don't see where I come into this.

**Jean:** So the inspector shows Mr Birling a photo and it turns out he does recognise the woman. Eva used to work in Mr Birling's factory but he sacked her for going on strike for better pay.

**Carl:** Mr Birling refuses to take any responsibility for the way that his sacking of Eva sent her life into a downward spiral.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** *(moving)* No, leave this to me. I must also have a word with my wife – tell her what's happening. *(turns at the door, staring at the inspector angrily.)* We were having a nice family celebration tonight. And a nasty mess you've made of it now, haven't you?

**Inspector:** *(steadily)* That's more or less what I was thinking earlier tonight when I was in the infirmary looking at what was left of Eva Smith. A nice little promising life there, I thought, and a nasty mess somebody's made of it.

**Carl:** Well, the inspector doesn't hold back there does he?

**Jean:** Not in the slightest, he just goes straight to the point. So after questioning Mr Birling, the inspector moves on to questioning Sheila. He reveals that after being sacked by Mr Birling, Eva got a job at a nice clothing store called Millwoods. But then Sheila got her fired.

**Carl:** Why?

**Jean:** Well, you know, sometimes you walk into a shop and see an outfit on a mannequin and think, wow, I'd look great in that and then sometimes you might try that outfit on in the harsh light of the changing rooms and realise it looks nothing like you thought it would. Well, that's what happened to Sheila. She went to the clothing shop that Eva worked at and tried on a dress. When she saw herself in the dress she didn't think it looked good on her.

Eva was working at the shop and Sheila caught a glimpse of Eva holding the dress up to her body and it looked good on Eva. This brought Sheila's insecurities out. She thought she saw her smile at the other assistant. So she thought Eva was laughing at her. So she got her fired.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** In fact, in a kind of way, you might be said to have been jealous of her.

**Sheila:** Yes, I suppose so.

**Inspector:** And so you used the power you had, as a daughter of a good customer and also of a man well known in the town, to punish the girl just because she made you feel like that?

**Sheila:** Yes, but it didn't seem to be anything very terrible at the time. Don't you understand? And if I could help her now, I would---

**Inspector:** (*harshly*) Yes, but you can't. It's too late. She's dead.

**Jean:** One thing about the inspector is he's going to tell it exactly as it is.

**Carl:** He does not care about sparing their feelings at all. So once the inspector is done questioning Sheila, he then moves on to Gerald, Sheila's fiancé. The inspector drops a bombshell when his questioning reveals that Gerald had an affair with Eva Smith.

**Carl:** Gerald had an affair with Eva Smith when he knew her as a woman called Daisy Renton. Gerald actually made Eva happy when they were together.

**Jean:** Which the inspector says he found out by reading Eva's diary entries. There will be more on Gerald later. But I think it's worth noting here that there was a big power imbalance in that relationship. And he took advantage.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** She kept a rough sort of diary. And she said there that she had to go away and be quiet and remember 'just to make it last longer'. She felt there'd never be anything as good again for her – so she had to make it last longer.

**Gerald:** (*gravely*) I see. Well, I never saw her again, and that's all I can tell you.

**Jean:** So Gerald made Eva happy for a little while. But as soon as he ended the relationship with her, he left her heartbroken with nowhere to stay. Then he just went back to his life as if nothing had happened.

**Carl:** Yes. And it turns out that Sheila had already suspected that Gerald had been having an affair. Rather than getting really angry when she finds out the truth, she kind of just respects him for being honest about it. However, she does make it very clear that she is not prepared to accept the husband who has affairs.

**Jean:** Nope, no happily ever after here. Sheila gives him the engagement ring back.

**Extract:**

**Sheila:** We'd have to start all over again, getting to know each other—

**Jean:** After questioning Gerald, the inspector talks to Mrs Birling, and it's revealed that a few months after Gerald ended things, Eva Smith was pregnant. And after she was in a tough spot when it came to money, she went to the local women's charity to ask for help. And guess who was an influential member of the Women's charity? Mrs Birling, of course.

**Carl:** Eva went to go and get help for her baby but instead of helping, Mrs Birling used her power and influence to stop Eva from getting any help because Mrs Birling thought Eva wasn't acting in a way that a working class woman is supposed to act - humble and polite.

Eva called herself Mrs Birling which foreshadows what we will find out in Act Three. The original Mrs Birling (*Sheila's mother*) did not like the fact that Eva was going around calling herself Mrs Birling. So she refused to help Eva and instead insisted that it was the baby's father's responsibility.

**Extract:**

**Mrs Birling:** ...I blame the young man who was the father of the child she was going to have. If, as she said, he didn't belong to her class, and was some drunken young idler, then that's all the more reason why he shouldn't escape. He should be made an example of. If the girl's death is due to anybody, then it's due to him.

**Jean:** But then guess who walks in?

**Carl:** Eric! It turns out that it was Eric who was the unborn baby's father. Eric stole money from his father, Mr Birling, to try and help Eva and the baby. However, when Eva found out, she refused to take it from Eric.

**Jean:** And a few months later, Eva Smith took her own life.

**Carl:** Yes, the inspector ends the play with a speech about how each one of them played a part in making Eva's life so much harder than it should have been.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** But just remember this. One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do.

**Carl:** When the inspector leaves, Sheila starts crying. Mrs Birling collapses into a chair. Eric is caught in deep thought and Mr Birling pours himself a drink.

**Jean:** But then Gerald comes back in the same room. It turns out that he went to speak to a police officer he knew. He discovers there's no one in the local police force called Inspector Goole.

**Carl:** Inspector Goole is a play on words. Ghoul - like a ghost.

**Jean:** They call the infirmary and find out that woman hadn't died that night, either.

**Carl:** The Birlings and Gerald then begin to start talking and they realise why they all did the things they did. Nothing the inspector said proves they actually knew the same Eva Smith.

**Jean:** Eric and Sheila are thinking seriously about everything that happened, because they do seem to actually feel some responsibility. Mr and Mrs Birling's response is much more self-centred, and they are relieved, because if Eva Smith didn't die, there's no chance of the story ruining their reputations. But then...

**Extract:**

**Birling:** Yes?. . . Mr Birling speaking. . . What? - here-

**Birling:** That was the police. A girl has just died – on her way to the Infirmary – after swallowing some disinfectant. And a police inspector is on his way here – to ask some – questions –

**Jean:** What an ending!

**Jean:** Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize English literature podcast. We hope this has been helpful for you and your revision. Don't forget you can listen back to this or any of the episodes at any time to help your revision on BBC Sounds.