Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. If you want to hear all the episodes in this podcast, make sure you download the BBC Sounds app.

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 England during the time An Inspector Calls was written.

Carl: The interesting thing to note about An inspector Calls is that while the story is set in 1912, it was written over 30 years later and was first performed in 1945. The setting is a lot different to the world in which Priestley wrote in.

Jean: What happened in 1912?

Carl: The United Kingdom was just coming out of the Victorian era, women in didn't have the right to vote yet. And while there had been some reforms for people living in poverty, Britain was still a pretty individualistic society. So people just looked after themselves and their families and there wasn't really a strong sense of social responsibility. The government wasn't doing much to help people in need.

Jean: You can see the values of that era reflected in the characters.

Carl: The Birlings are somewhere between middle class and upper class. They're a family that has beautiful candlelit dinners, talk about business and politics, but you get the sense that their lives aren't that affected by the world around them. In fact, let's step back into their family dinner to find out more.

Extract:

Sheila: Yes, go on, mummy. You must drink our health.
Mrs Birling: *(smiling)* Very well, then. Just a little, thank you.*(to Edna, who is about to go, with tray.)* all right, Edna. I'll ring from the drawing room when we want coffee. Probably in about half an hour.
Edna: *(going)* Yes, ma'am. *(Edna goes out. They now have all the glasses filled. Birling beams at them and clearly relaxes.)*
Birling: Well, well – this is very nice. Very nice. Good dinner too, Sybil. Tell cook from me.
Gerald: *(politely)* Absolutely first class.

Jean: So they seem pretty content and relaxed.

Carl: Yes, they are. It's 1912 and it's a good time to be in business. There's stuff going on in the background of the Birlings' lives like labour reforms and rumours about the First World War. But the Birlings themselves are not too concerned because they believe that their wealth protects them from the harsh realities of the world. Unlike Eva.

Extract:
Birling: …And we're in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity.
Gerald: I believe you're right, sir.
Birling: …Now you three young people, just listen to this – and remember what I'm telling you now. In twenty or thirty year's time – let's say, in 1940 – you may be giving a little party like this – your son or daughter might be getting engaged – and I tell you, by that time you'll be living in a world that'll have forgotten all these capital versus labour agitations..

Carl: World War One started in 1914, two years after Mr. Birling called the idea of war "fiddle sticks," which is a good example of what is known as dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is when the audience knows something that the characters don't. Another good example of dramatic irony is where Mr. Birling describes an exciting new ship that's just been built as "unsinkable." And that ship would go on to be the Titanic, which of course would go on to sink in the spring of 1912, on a voyage between the United Kingdom and New York.

Jean: Priestley uses dramatic irony to discredit Mr. Birling's views and by extension, the type of man that he represents. Priestley is basically telling us that old businessmen who think they know everything, actually don't.

Carl: This irony is enhanced when Mr. Birling calls his children "the famous younger generation who know it all."

Jean: The play is set in 1912. But it was written and first performed much later in 1945, and a lot had changed by then.

Jean: In 1945, Britain was a whole different country to what it had been in 1912. The country had gone through World War One and World War Two. Two wars that changed so much about British society.

Carl: When men left to fight the wars, women stepped in to do the work needed to keep the country afloat during the wars which led them to win the right to vote.

Jean: Then the government created laws and reforms to look after people living in poverty, which helped them get better access to healthcare, gave them support while trying to find a job and made it so that they had better living conditions. That's when the NHS was invented.

Carl: It completely changed the class structure.

Jean: During the war, everyone, both rich and poor had to ration food and clothes. There was a bit of a black market, that meant some people had access to luxury goods. But generally all the classes were eating and dressing the same.

Carl: They were also fighting side by side. And so the class barriers that had existed in 1912 started to break down, not totally, but just a little bit. Let's fast-forward to when the play was first performed.

Jean: By 1945, there were more British women in the workplace, and there was more movement when it came to people going up and down from working to middle class.

Carl: So when the audience of 1945 went to the theatre, to see Inspector Calls for the first time, it must have felt like going back in time a little bit.

Jean: It was 30 years later. The values and social structures had changed a lot. That's why Priestley set the play in the past.

Carl: The characters in the play had no idea about how much the world would change. So Priestley uses them to make important points about what life used to look like to remind the audience how important it is not to go back to old ways, and how they acted back then, in the 1910s.

Extract:
Inspector: …Well, Eva Smith's gone. You can't do her any more harm. And you can't do her any good now, either. You can't even say "I'm sorry, Eva Smith."
Sheila: *(who is crying quietly)* That's the worst of it.
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. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other…

Jean: So the play is like a reminder to keep looking after each other because life could be so much worse for the Eva Smiths of the world, if people forget what they learned during the wars. It's a story about how caring for one another and having a sense of social responsibility benefits everyone.

Carl: That's right. Priestley uses characters like Mr Birling to show the audience what middle class snobbery and ignorance looked like before the World Wars. And to highlight just how cold and thoughtless that behaviour was, and in fact still is right up to the modern day.

Extract:
Birling: …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: That speech would have sounded ridiculous to a post war audience, because they'd just seen how important it was to look after each other during the war.

Carl: At the end of the play, they're not the same versions of themselves that they were at the start of this dinner. At least Sheila, Eric and Gerald aren't. These characters had an experience that changed them.

Jean: The audience who had been around before the war, and then lived through the war up until 1945, would have felt the same way. They weren't the same people they had been before the war had changed every part of their lives.

Carl: That's one of the key reasons that Priestley set the play in the past. To contrast the values of 1912 when compared to the values 1945. JB Priestley was a social commentator, which means he wrote stories that commented on the politics and society around him.

Jean: He was also a socialist, which means that he believed that things like health care, housing and welfare should be managed by the government in order to do the best for the most people.

Carl: Things like the NHS and state schools are run by the government.

Jean: Although the NHS wasn't founded until a couple of years after the play was written. Priestley believed that it was everybody's responsibility to help the most disadvantaged people in society, and that was something he campaigned for in his own life.

Carl: He's the opposite of Mr Birling. Remember that speech Mr. Birling gave at the start of the play to remind the audience of what life was like in 1912. By the end of it, Eric has learned just how wrong his father is.

Extract:
Eric: Yes, and do you remember what you said to Gerald and me after dinner, when you were feeling so pleased with yourself? You told us that a man has to make his own way, look after himself and mind his own business, and that we weren't to take any notice of these cranks who tell us that everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together. Do you remember? Yes – and then one of those cranks walked in – the Inspector. *(laughs bitterly.)* I didn't notice you told him that it's every man for himself.

Carl: It's like Priestley started the play with that speech so he could spend the rest of the play proving just how wrong Mr. Birling was. This is something known as straw man fallacy or a straw man argument. You take another person's argument or point of view, and then you distort it and exaggerate it in some sort of extreme way to create what is known as a straw man. And then you go on to attack that extreme distortion as if that's really the claim the first person was making.

Jean: The play is Priestley's way of encouraging the audience of 1945 to put the lessons they learned in the war into practice, so they can build a better, more caring society.

Carl: While it cannot be described as a hopeful play, by the end of it, you get a sense that at least some of the characters within it, have begun to learn their lesson. Maybe the audience will too.

Carl: In the next episode, we will be doing a recap quiz to test just how much you learned.

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