

# B B C BITESIZE

**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 the main themes of *An Inspector Calls*.

**Jean:** You can immediately tell that the Birlings belong to the upper-middle class, as soon as the play begins.

**Carl:** Yes, they are all wearing fancy dinner outfits, and the men are wearing white tie suits with tails. White tie is even more formal dress than black tie. Tails refers to the rear of the suit, which is often pointed.

**Jean:** I love to get dressed up as much as the next person but I'm not sure I could imagine putting on all these fancy suits and adornments just to have dinner my own house.

**Carl:** Indeed, it was different time and place and what people wore to dinner symbolised their social classes. When audiences watched the play for the first time, in 1945, they were living in a version of Britain that had just experienced two world wars. Everyone had to ration and look out for each other. So we got to the point where both rich people and poor people were eating the same meals, dressing in the same clothes and spending time in the same places. It was an equaliser.

**Jean:** It was an equaliser to an extent, but there was a black market and rich people still had advantages, of course.

**Jean:** The play is set in 1912, a few years before World War One. Before the wars Britain was strongly divided by class. The middle class was made up of wealthy people like the Birlings who owned land and factories. And then the working class were people like Eva Smith, who worked in those same factories. So Priestley wanted to show what life was like when people in different classes lived really differently and to caution about going back to those ways.

**Carl:** He also wanted to highlight how the upper classes look down on the working classes, and to show the unfairness of it all. You can really see it in the way that Mr And Mrs Birling talk. You can see what Mrs Birling said about Eva here:

**Extract:**

**Mrs Birling:** Whatever it was, I know it made me finally lose all patience with her. She was giving herself ridiculous airs. She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position.

**Inspector:** (*very sternly*) Her position now is that she lies with a burnt-out inside on a slab. ( As Birling tries to protest, turns on him.) Don't stammer and yammer at me again, man. I'm losing all patience with you people. What did she say?

**Mrs Birling:** (*rather cowed*) she said that the father was only a youngster – silly and wild and drinking too much. There couldn't be any question of marrying him – it would be wrong for them both. He had given her money but she didn't want to take any more money from him.

**Inspector:** why didn't she want to take and more money from him?

**Mrs Birling:** all a lot of nonsense – I didn't believe a word of it. **Inspector:** I'm not asking you if you believed it. I want to know what she said. Why didn't she want to take any more money from this boy?

**Mrs Birling:** Oh – she had some fancy reason. As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!

**Carl:** Mrs Birling completely refused to believe Eva's story about not wanting to take the baby's father's money, because she was poor. Why would you ever think about things such as morals when there's money on the line?

**Jean:** Mrs Birling thought that a girl of that sort wouldn't dare to refuse stolen money because she thinks that working class people don't have the same moral values as her, so Mrs Birling refuses to help Eva. The play encourages us to sympathise with Eva and highlights the unfairness of the class system that it puts the vulnerable at even more of a disadvantage.

**Carl:** Mr Birling isn't much better when the workers at his factory go on strike for fair wages. He just sacks the ringleaders and then gets the others that come back for the same poor pay.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** Right, Gerald. They mostly were. And so was the strike, after a week or two. Pitiful affair. Well, we let them all come back – at the old rates – except the four or five ring-leaders, who'd started the trouble. I went down myself and told them to clear out. And this girl. Eva Smith, was one of them, she'd had a lot to say – far too much – so she had to go.

**Gerald:** You couldn't have done anything else.

**Eric:** He could. He could have kept her on instead of throwing her out. I call it tough luck.

**Jean:** This extract takes us right onto our next theme, which is social responsibility.

**Carl:** Yes, that old thing that Mr Birling doesn't really believe in.

**Jean:** Social responsibility is the idea that we all have a role to play when it comes to looking after each other, especially the most vulnerable and at-risk people in society. An Inspector Calls was first performed in the UK just after the end of World War Two. Life after the war was really difficult.

**Carl:** Priestley wanted to highlight the importance of social responsibility by reminding the audience of what the world would be like without it. A lot of people had health conditions and couldn't afford to go to the hospital. Some people had lost their jobs and didn't have enough money to rent out somewhere else to live. And many people couldn't really afford to buy food or look after themselves and their families.

**Jean:** People just like Eva.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** That doesn't make it any the less yours. She came to you for help, at a time when no woman could have needed it more. And you not only refused it yourself but saw to it that the others refused it too. She was here alone, friendless, almost penniless, desperate. She needed not only money but advice, sympathy, friendliness. You've had children. You must have known what she was feeling. And you slammed the door in her face.

**Carl:** For Eva, losing a job sets off a domino effect. That meant she didn't have a safe place to stay, or enough money to look after her baby. All this was caused by a member of the Birling family.

**Jean:** JB Priestley believed that if people were considerate and cared more about the people in their community, it would improve everybody's quality of life.

**Carl:** So he wrote this play to encourage the audience to be more socially responsible. Inspector Goole is the main voice of social responsibility in the play.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** ...We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other...

**Jean:** Some would argue that Inspector Goole is a stand in for the voice of JB Priestley, who says everything that Priestley wants the audience to hear.

**Carl:** On the opposite side, playing the main voices against social responsibility are Mr And Mrs Birling?

**Jean:** Mr Birling started the domino effect and Mrs Birling ended it Mr and Mrs Birling never accepted responsibility for the effect their actions had on Eva.

**Extract:**

**Mrs Birling:** I'm sorry she should have come to such a horrible end. But I accept no blame for it at all.

**Inspector:** who is to blame then?

**Mrs Birling:** first, the girl herself.

**Carl:** Well, what a great quote about social responsibility because Mrs Birling takes absolutely no responsibility.

**Jean:** We talked about it in the last episode, but there's a real divide between the Birling parents and their children when it comes to taking responsibility for their actions. Now this takes us to the next theme of the play: age.

**Carl:** Mr and Mrs Birling are from the older generation. They just believe that everyone had to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, just get on with things, don't fuss, don't dwell, just get on and do the work. They don't have the same kind of empathy for Eva Smith that their kids do.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** (*pointing to Eric and Sheila*) Now look at the pair of them – the famous younger generation who know it all. And they can't even take a joke-

**Carl:** The Birling parents are pretty stubborn in their beliefs, whereas the younger Birlings are much more willing to learn and change their perspective.

**Extract:**

**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...

**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.

**Jean:** Priestley had hopes in the younger generation's ability to learn and change, which you can see in the way that both Sheila and Eric seem to grow up over the course of the play, to take responsibility for their actions.

**Carl:** And then try to get the parents to take responsibility for theirs.

**Jean:** They're younger and more open to the lessons the inspector's teaching them because they accept their mistakes. The younger Birlings offer the chance for a brighter future.

**Carl:** Eric still did some pretty terrible things. But at the end the play, even though she and Eric understand they can't undo the damage they've done, you finish with a sense of hope that both Sheila and Eric will leave the

dinner party and try to become better people. Because the things the inspector has said have changed both of them.

**Jean:** Fingers crossed. Now, the final theme.

**Carl:** Yes, the final theme of the play is gender. So we know that *An Inspector Calls* was written after World War Two. At that time, many British men had left their homes and their towns to go and fight during the war. Women had to step in to fill the jobs that men usually did.

**Jean:** Like working in factories, mechanics, business and manual labour. Women did a good job which changed the perspective of what a woman's role in society is. Some people realised that women could be more than mothers, wives and homemakers. So with that new-found freedom, women were able to make their own money and look after themselves.

**Carl:** But the play is set before both wars. Many people had quite traditional views on gender. We can see that in the way that Mr Birling and Gerald talk.

**Jean:** Gerald says he hates hard faced women showing how superficial he can be when it comes to how he sees women. And Mr Birling talks about women wearing certain clothes as a sign of self-respect, suggesting that women who dress differently don't respect themselves, which is just a little bit sexist.

**Extract:**

**Eric:** *(sitting down)* Yes, please. *(takes decanter and helps himself.)* Mother says we mustn't stay too long. But I don't think it matters. I left 'em talking about clothes again. You'd think a girl had never any clothes before she gets married. Women are potty about 'em.

**Birling:** Yes, but you've got to remember, my boy, that clothes mean something quite different to a woman. Not just something to wear – and not only something to make 'em look prettier – but – well, a sort of sign or token of their self-respect.

**Gerald:** That's true.

**Carl:** Throughout the play, we can see just how much of Eva's fate is in the hands of men like Mr Birling, who fired her, Gerald who had an affair with her. There's Eric who is the father of her unborn child and who failed to take responsibility and look after her and the baby. Priestley uses these characters to symbolise men, and what they do to people they view as less than them.

**Jean:** Even though Eva fit into conventional ideas of beauty, she faced struggles at each point in her story because of the men who used their power to take advantage of her and the women who use their power and influence to sabotage her.

**Carl:** So in the play, the themes of class, social responsibility, and age all come together to shape the way Gerald and the Birlings see the world.

**Jean:** And they come together to shape the negative impact they all have on Eva's life. There are four different themes all intertwined, so be sure to think about how they cross over when you're reading the play and revising it.

**Carl:** Be sure to listen to the next episode of this podcast. We're going to talk about the form, the structure and the language of *An Inspector Calls*. We'll be getting into all the parts of play that you want to highlight and underline.

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

**Carl:** We have a lot more to discuss our listen to the other episodes on BBC Sounds to find out more.