

# B B C BITESIZE

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

**Jean:** We're here today to help you dive a little deeper into some of the texts in GCSE English literature. Don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help your with revision. 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, author and ancient historian.

**Carl:** and I'm Carl Anka, an author and journalist, and in this episode, we are going to take a look at the first set of characters in *An Inspector Calls*. Today we're going to talk about Inspector Goole, Mr Birling, and Mrs Birling.

**Jean:** We're introduced to the inspector just a few pages into the play. When he walks into the living room in the middle of the Birling's family dinner.

**Carl:** We get a really clear description of him through the stage directions:

**Extract:**

The inspector need not be a big man but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness. He speaks carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking.

**Jean:** The inspector investigates the family's role in the death of Eva Smith by questioning them one at a time. And by doing that he reveals the domino effect that sent Eva's life into a downward spiral.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** This girl died a horrible death, but each of you helped to kill her. And don't ever forget that, but then I don't think you ever will.

**Carl:** We also learn a lot about the inspector through Priestley's stage directions, specifically the way the inspector speaks and interacts with the other characters. The inspector is cutting through massively.

There's also a bit where the inspector is talking coolly, looking hard at him. He is also described as talking gravely and also talking dryly. There's also a lot of things happening impressively, harshly, sharply and very sternly.

**Jean:** The inspector interrupts a character when they're speaking and doesn't show any deference or submission to Mr and Mrs Birling, and unlike their parents who treat them like children, the inspector treats Sheila and Eric like adults.

**Carl:** the inspector drives the drama forward getting the characters to reveal a shocking truth with each question. He acts as the moral voice of the play, getting the audience to empathise with each other.

**Jean:** We'll talk about this more in episode four and seven, but the inspector is a mouthpiece for JB Priestley's own views on this too.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** A girl died tonight. A pretty, lively sort of girl, who never did anybody any harm. But she died in misery and agony – hating life.

**Jean:** By the end of the play, it's revealed the inspector isn't actually a local inspector, but it's not revealed who he really is. Priestly leaves it up to the audience to imagine who he could be

**Carl:** His name, Goole (ghoul) suggests something supernatural. It's suspicious that he seems to know what the characters are going to say before they say it.

**Jean:** So the inspector could be a ghost, the conscience of the audience or something else. But it doesn't really matter. What matters is what the characters did to Eva. That's actually a really big point going into exams. It's so easy to get hung up on who the inspector really was. But actually, we want to look at how Priestley uses these characters to present ideas.

**Carl:** The inspector also delivers a pretty ominous message before he leaves just before the end of the play, too.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. 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 bloody and anguish. Good night.

**Carl:** The inspector delivers an ominous message to all before he leaves where he references the hell that awaits men who do not learn a lesson.

**Jean:** Let's move on to the next two characters Mr and Mrs Birling.

**Carl:** One thing you notice reading the play is the clear differences in attitudes and values between the Birling parents and the Birling children.

**Jean:** Mr and Mrs Birling represent the older generation's old fashioned values. Let's start with Mr Birling. We get our first introduction to him in the stage directions

**Extract:**

*Arthur Birling is a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in this middle fifties with fairly easy manners but rather provincial in this speech*

**Carl:** So, he's a serious man. But priestly describes him as provincial in his speech, which is his way of seeing that Mr Birling comes from a lower class background, and we also learn a lot about him through the way he speaks and acts.

**Carl:** He speaks explosively or angrily, lines are delivered sharply or even very sharply. He's very often furious. Mr Birling is the arrogant head of the Birling household who made himself and his family wealthy by owning a factory, and he tells the younger generation that it is a man's job to look out for number one, and not to waste time trying to help other people.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** Take my word for it. And I've learned in the good Harvard School of experience. A man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own.

**Jean:** He didn't grow up wealthy, like his wife or Gerald. And during quite a few moments in the play, he comes across as insecure and self-conscious about this.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** I have an idea your mother feels you might have done better for yourself socially.

**Jean:** So Mr Birling has decided to become an active member of the Brumley community, which is all in order to boost his own social status, rather than from a genuine desire to help his community.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** I thought you must be. I was an alderman for years – and lord mayor two years ago – and I'm still on the bench – so I know the Brumley police offices pretty well – and I thought I'd never seen you before.

**Jean:** He thinks that he might be in the running to receive a knighthood.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** there's a fair chance that I might find my way into the next honours list. Just a knighthood, of course.

**Carl:** When the inspector arrives, he reveals that Mr Birling knew Eva Smith because she once worked at his factory, but then she went on strike.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** They wanted the rates raised so that they could average about twenty-five shillings a week. I refused, of course.

**Inspector:** Why?

**Birling:** (*surprised*) Did you say 'why?'?

**Inspector:** Yes. Why did you refuse?

**Birling:** Well, inspector I don't see that it's any concern of yours how I choose to run my business.

**Jean:** From Mr Birling's point of view, he didn't need to pay Eva and the other workers a better wage, so he sacked them for talking too much. What he actually means there is that she had opinions about worker's wages and wouldn't just be quiet like he wanted her to be.

**Carl:** And he doesn't take any responsibility for ruining her life. In fact, when the questioning is done, Mr Birling is more worried about the damage that the investigation could do to his reputation than he is about the girl who just died.

**Extract:**

**Birling:** Nothing much has happened! Haven't I already said there'll be a public scandal – unless we're lucky – and who here will suffer from that more than I will?

**Carl:** And then when the play ends, Mr Birling is shaken up and shocked by son's behaviour when the inspector leaves. It's clear he didn't really learn anything.

**Jean:** When he finds out that the inspector might have been an imposter, he's overjoyed and mocks everyone else for having been tricked by the investigation.

**Carl:** He's happier that he's reputation isn't going to be ruined than he is that Eva Smith might still be alive, which tells us a lot about his character. He's selfish, he's arrogant, he's unremorseful.

**Carl:** Let's move on to the next character. Mrs Sybil Birling. Mrs Birling is about 50, rather a cold woman and her husband's social superior. We find out more about her through the way she speaks and acts. She speaks grandly, bitterly, with sudden anger and she also is alarmed and speaks severely. Mrs Birling is Mr Birling's wife and Sheila and Eric's mum. She has pretty traditional ideas when it comes to gender and how to be a good wife. Ideas that she tries to pass on to her newly engaged daughter Sheila.

**Extract:**

**Mrs Birling:** When you're married, you will realise that men with important work sometimes need to spend all their time and energy on their business. You will have to get used to that just as I had.

**Jean:** Mrs Birling treats Sheila and Eric like children, even though they're adults. She doesn't see Eric's poor behaviour and unlike the rest of the family refuses to admit or see that he has a dependency on alcohol.

**Extract:**

**Inspector:** (*cutting in*) isn't he used to drinking?

**Mrs Birling:** No, of course not. He's only a boy.

**Inspector:** No, he's a young man. And some young men drink far too much.

**Carl:** Like her husband, Mrs Birling cares more about how things look to other people than how things actually are. Throughout dinner, she tells Sheila and Eric off for things that she considers impolite while turning a blind eye to Eric's drinking.

**Jean:** And despite being a key member of the local women's charity, Mrs Birling is quite prejudiced and cold-hearted.

**Carl:** The inspector reveals that Mrs Birling used her influence to stop Eva from getting the help that she needed. This is all because Eva didn't act in a way that Mrs Birling expected from a lower class woman who needed help.

**Jean:** But despite being the person who refused to help Eva Smith when she needed the charity's help more than ever, like her husband, Mrs Birling doesn't accept any responsibility for her part in Eva Smith's death.

**Carl:** She doesn't appear to have learned anything or changed her mind when the play ends.

**Extract:**

**Mrs Birling:** You're quite wrong to suppose I shall regret what I did to her.

**Jean:** Her cold, uncaring actions are what leads to Mrs Birling's downfall. She unknowingly condemned her own son in one of the most dramatic scenes of the play. When she says that the baby's father should be the one to take responsibility for Eva.

**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 . . .

**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:** We'll find out more about him, his sister Sheila and his soon-to-be-brother in law, Gerald in the next episode.

**Carl:** We've still got a lot to discuss. So have a listen to the other episodes to find out more.

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