

***An Inspector Calls* by J.B.Priestly**

Act -I

An Inspector Calls is a play in three acts, set in Brumley, an English manufacturing town, in 1912. Arthur Birling has convened a dinner for the engagement of his daughter, Sheila, to her boyfriend, Gerald Croft. Arthur and his wife Sybil seem happy, although Sybil is reserved at the meal. Eric, Sheila's brother, drinks heavily and appears mildly upset. Gerald gives Sheila her ring, and Sheila and Sybil leave the room to try on wedding clothes. Eric goes upstairs. Arthur tells Gerald he knows the Croft family considers themselves social superiors of the Birlings, but that's easily remedied, he says, as he expects a knighthood for his business successes. Gerald promises to relay the news to his mother. Eric returns, and Arthur gives the two young men advice about professional life, saying that people ought to look out for themselves and their families, and not fall prey to socialist propaganda about the collective good. Edna, the maid, announces that an Inspector Goole is here to speak to Arthur.

The Inspector, whom Arthur does not know despite his positions in local government, announces that a girl named Eva Smith has died of an apparent suicide. The Inspector asks Arthur if he knows anyone by that name. Arthur initially denies it, but after seeing a picture, he admits to employing Eva at his factory, and firing her when she incites a failed strike for higher wages. Arthur says he is not sorry for doing so, even though he is sad to hear of the girl's death. Arthur believes that his foremost obligation is to his profits. When Sheila returns to the room, the Inspector begins interrogating her. It is revealed that Sheila got a girl fired from Milward's, a local shop, for giving Sheila mean looks as she was trying on clothing. Sheila regrets to hear that the person she incriminated was none other than Eva Smith, and that she and Arthur are responsible, in part, for Eva's poverty and suicide.

The Inspector turns to Gerald and asks if he knows someone named Daisy Renton. Sheila realizes, from Gerald's expression, that Gerald knows this name. When all but Sheila and Gerald leave the room, Sheila accuses Gerald of having had an affair with Daisy Renton the previous summer. Gerald admits to this. He asks Sheila to hide this information from the Inspector, but she says it won't be possible because the Inspector probably already knows. Act One ends.

Act -II

It begins with the same set. The Inspector questions Gerald about Daisy Renton, and Gerald admits to the affair in front of Sheila and her parents, Arthur and Sybil. Gerald is embarrassed by his indiscretion, but insists his concern for Daisy was authentic. Sheila wonders if she can forgive Gerald enough to continue their relationship. Gerald tells the Inspector he is going to leave for a walk.

The Inspector moves on to Sybil, who, on being questioned, says that she, as director of a charity, refused assistance to a pregnant woman. The Inspector tells them that the girl Sybil turned away was Eva Smith, or, as Gerald knew her, Daisy Renton. The Inspector also says that Gerald was not the one who got Eva pregnant. Sybil says she feels no regret, as Eva/Daisy had claimed she was pregnant but was not married to the child's father. To this, Sybil responded that Eva/Daisy should ask the child's father for money. Sybil blames the unnamed father for the situation, and for Eva/Daisy's suicide. Sheila and Arthur tell Sybil to stop talking. In this moment, Sybil realizes that her son, Eric, must be the father of the child, since Eva/Daisy presented herself to the charity as "Mrs. Birling." Eric returns to the room. Act Two ends.

Act -III

Act Three begins with the same set, Eric admits to an affair with Eva/Daisy, and to a drinking problem that makes many of the details hazy. The Inspector demonstrates that each member of the Birling family, and Gerald, has played a part in Eva/Daisy's suicide, and that all should consider themselves guilty. Before he leaves, the Inspector says that people must look out for one another, and that society is "one body." The Inspector departs. Sheila, wracked with guilt, wonders aloud whether the Inspector is a member of the police force. The family puzzles this out, and when Gerald returns, he says he spoke to a sergeant outside who does not know of any Inspector with the name of Goole, the man who just visited the Birling home. Arthur believes that the family has been hoaxed, and that this is a good thing, since their misdeeds will not now result in public scandal. Sheila resents Arthur's rationalization of the family's behavior, and she says they are still guilty for Eva/Daisy's death, even if the Inspector was not a genuine officer. Gerald, however, notes that no family member saw the picture of Eva/Daisy at the same time, and that the Inspector might have conflated the family's stories by offering pictures of different women, and changing the names from Eva Smith to Daisy Renton.

Sheila wonders whether this would excuse everyone's behavior, but it does not, as Gerald still committed his affair, Eric impregnated an unmarried girl, and Arthur and Sybil behaved uncharitably to young girls in need. Arthur calls the hospital and confirms that no self-inflicted deaths have been recorded for weeks. He says resolutely that Inspector Goole has tricked the family and that there is nothing to fear. Sheila worries aloud that Arthur will ignore the lessons the family was just beginning to learn. The phone rings, and Arthur answers. He alerts the family that a girl has been admitted to the hospital just now, and that her death is a suicide. As the play ends, Arthur relays to the family that a police inspector is headed to the house to begin an inquiry.

- **Analyses of the Play:**

In *An Inspector Calls*, J.B. Priestley presents an unconventional approach to the traditional whodunit of detective fiction, resisting the trope in which an investigator interviews suspects to determine which character committed the crime, often a murder. Instead, the guiding mystery of Priestley's play is not who killed the young woman, Eva (a.k.a Daisy), but how each member of the Birling family contributed to her suicide. By adopting aspects of mysteries, Priestley creates a work that examines collective, capitalist guilt. The play, as events unfold, suggests that an empowered class exploits the underclass without consideration of consequences for its exploitation. The Birling family's collective guilt conveys Priestley's message that it is the social duty of every human being to examine the impact of any action on others and to care for and help them, without self-consideration.

The play's inciting incident occurs when Inspector Goole arrives at the Birling residence to question the family about the young woman's suicide. Strangely, the Inspector does not ask questions about what they know about her death. His questions, instead, prompt each family member to struggle with and eventually face guilt for Eva/Daisy's death. By using the Inspector to draw forth the characters' emerging internal conflicts around responsibility, Priestley highlights how social status and affluence can blind people to others' suffering. As the play moves on, the Birling family and Gerald begin gradually to accept their roles and, therefore, accountabilities in the young woman's downfall.

The events of the rising action reveal how each member of the Birling family has negatively affected Eva/Daisy. The Inspector's questioning unravels the mystery of how each family member has used social standing, influence, and power over others without personal consequence, devastating the young woman's life. Arthur and Sheila ended her employment because she dared to strike for higher wages at the factory. Gerald exploited her sexually by having an affair with her after meeting her in a bar, knowing that his wealth and status ultimately would protect him. Sybil, as a matter of blaming the victim, refused to provide the homeless and pregnant Eva/Daisy with charity when she sought aid, although it is later revealed that her family is to blame for her condition. Each of these events, as the plot develops, highlights ways that greed coupled with the prerogatives of class victimize the poor and vulnerable. Arguably, if even one family member had acted kindly toward the woman, she might not have been driven to end her life.

As the play approaches its climax, the Inspector's questioning focuses on Eric Birling, the likely heir to the family name and fortune, drawing attention to his apparent alcoholism. Priestley uses alcohol as a motif throughout the play, a symbolic catalyst for upper class abuse of the working class and a sign of dissipation. Alcohol is involved when both Gerald and Eric start their affairs with Eva/Daisy, and Eric's drunkenness is a way for him to escape a sense of culpability for her situation. At the play's climax, the family learns that Eric is likely the father of Eva/Daisy's child and that he has been stealing money from the family business to help her—a matter of avoiding scandal. Arthur and Sybil worry, nevertheless, that a public scandal is likely, though they worry not because they had failed to help their grandchild but because of the negative effects it might have on the family's reputation. This self-serving reaction epitomizes Priestley's message about the inhumane treatment of the underclasses in a capitalist society.

After the Inspector's departure, during the plot's falling action, members of the family blame each other for the potentially scandalous situation in which they find themselves. Priestley's genius lies in the twists that come to the surface as the play draws toward its conclusion. Sheila does offer glimpses of caring and compassion for Eva/Daisy when she criticizes her parents for worrying about their reputation rather than their treatment of the young woman. Gerald introduces an ambiguity by suggesting that the whole inquiry may have been a hoax or that there may have been more than one woman; Inspector Goole, after all, had never shown the picture to everyone at the same time. Priestley, by introducing doubt, is able to shift attention from the play's specific events to broader questions about the treatment of all working-class people at the hands of empowered and wealthy families like the Birlings.

At the play's resolution, the group concludes that the investigation may have been a prank, and most of the family, especially Arthur, is relieved that their actions will stay private. Society, they assume, will not know of their indiscretions. However, they get a call that a young woman has committed suicide, and are told that an inspector is coming to their house for an inquiry. Their collective guilt, Priestly implies, will come to light after all. In the end, he suggests that there is no hiding when people abuse and mistreat the poor and vulnerable. The only way for society to flourish is for everyone to consider the common good, rather than personal or familial interests. Individual actions, he makes clear, have collective consequences.