

An Inspector Calls

by J.B. Priestley

Annotated Key Extracts

Colour-coded annotations with analysis

- 4 key extracts from across the play
- Colour-coded phrase annotations
- Context notes for each extract
- Key analysis points for revision

GCSE English Literature | AQA Paper 2, Section A

Grade 9 Targeted

The Inspector's Final Speech

Act 3 — An Inspector Calls

CONTEXT

The Inspector is about to leave the Birling household after revealing how each family member contributed to Eva Smith's death. He delivers his final speech directly to the family — and, symbolically, to the audience.

EXTRACT

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. 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 blood and anguish. Good night.

ANNOTATIONS

"millions and millions and millions"

Tripling / hyperbole — emphasises the vast scale of suffering caused by inequality. The repetition forces the audience to confront the systemic nature of the problem.

"their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness"

List — humanises the working class by giving them emotions and aspirations. Counteracts the Birlings' tendency to view workers as statistics.

"intertwined with our lives"

Organic metaphor — society is a connected web, not isolated individuals. Directly opposes Birling's individualist philosophy.

"We don't live alone"

Short declarative — simple moral truth. Refutes Birling's 'a man has to mind his own business'.

"We are members of one body"

Organic metaphor echoing 1 Corinthians 12:27 (Body of Christ). Gives socialist message religious and moral authority.

"We are responsible for each other"

Anaphoric 'We are' — the pronoun includes everyone, refusing to let anyone exclude themselves from moral duty.

"fire and blood and anguish"

Prophetic tricolon — builds in intensity. For the 1945 audience, this refers to the two World Wars that have already happened. Devastating dramatic irony.

KEY ANALYSIS POINTS

EXAM TIP

Use these analysis points in your essays. Each one connects language/structure (AO2) to Priestley's purpose (AO3).

- The Inspector breaks naturalistic convention — this is not a character speaking but Priestley delivering a political manifesto to the 1945 audience.
- Functions as a Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect): forces the audience out of passive entertainment into active moral reflection.
- The shift from 'remember this' to 'fire and blood' escalates from personal appeal to apocalyptic prophecy.
- The speech is structured as a moral ultimatum: learn voluntarily, or be taught by catastrophe.

Mr Birling's Capitalist Philosophy

Act 1 — An Inspector Calls

CONTEXT

Before the Inspector arrives, Mr Birling delivers a speech to Gerald and Eric about his philosophy of life. This is Priestley's way of establishing the worldview the play will systematically dismantle.

EXTRACT

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. But take my word for it, you youngsters — and I've learnt in the good hard school of experience — that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own — and —

ANNOTATIONS

"cranks"

Dismissive noun — Birling ridicules anyone who believes in collective responsibility, positioning himself as the voice of reason. Ironical, since the 'cranks' are proved right.

"everybody has to look after everybody else"

Birling mocks the exact principle the Inspector will later assert as moral truth. Dramatic irony — the audience knows Birling is wrong.

"mixed up together like bees in a hive"

Birling dismisses the organic metaphor of society as interconnected — yet the play proves this is exactly how society works.

"community and all that nonsense"

Birling dismisses community despite holding civic positions (Lord Mayor, magistrate). Exposes his hypocrisy — public service was for status, not duty.

"the good hard school of experience"

Cliché — Birling presents himself as wise and authoritative, but his 'experience' has taught him nothing about morality.

"a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own"

The play's anti-thesis. Repetition of 'his own' reveals selfishness. Priestley positions this before the Inspector

arrives so the play demolishes it.

"and —"

The dash interrupts Birling mid-sentence — he is cut off by the doorbell (the Inspector's arrival). Priestley literally silences capitalism with the arrival of social conscience.

KEY ANALYSIS POINTS

EXAM TIP

Use these analysis points in your essays. Each one connects language/structure (AO2) to Priestley's purpose (AO3).

- Priestley uses Birling as a dramatic straw man — his philosophy is presented to be knocked down by the rest of the play.
- The Titanic reference earlier ('unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable') has already destroyed Birling's credibility before this speech.
- The interruption by the Inspector's arrival is structurally significant: Birling's philosophy is never allowed to reach its conclusion.
- For the 1945 audience, Birling represents the pre-war Edwardian ruling class whose arrogance led to catastrophe.

Sheila Confronts Her Parents

Act 3 — An Inspector Calls

CONTEXT

After the Inspector has left, Mr and Mrs Birling celebrate the possibility that he was not a real police inspector. Sheila, however, refuses to dismiss the moral lesson.

EXTRACT

SHEILA: I tell you — whoever that Inspector was, it was anything but a joke. You knew it then. You began to learn something. And now you've stopped. You're ready to go on in the same old way.

BIRLING: (amused) And you're not, eh?

SHEILA: No, because I remember what he said, how he looked, and what he made me feel. Fire and blood and anguish. And it frightens me the way you talk, and I can't listen to any more of it.

MRS BIRLING: You're overtired. In the morning you'll feel better and then you'll see things more sensibly.

SHEILA: I'm ashamed of you as well — yes both of you.

ANNOTATIONS

"whoever that Inspector was"

Sheila recognises that the Inspector's identity is irrelevant — the moral lesson stands regardless. This is the mature, critical thinking Priestley wants from his audience.

"You began to learn something. And now you've stopped."

Short, punchy sentences — Sheila speaks with moral clarity. The accusation is devastating: the parents had the chance to change and chose not to.

"the same old way"

Represents pre-war complacency and class arrogance. For the 1945 audience, 'the same old way' is what caused two World Wars.

"how he looked, and what he made me feel"

Sheila's transformation is emotional and embodied, not merely intellectual. She has internalised the Inspector's values.

"Fire and blood and anguish"

Sheila repeats the Inspector's prophecy — she has become his successor, carrying his message forward after he has left.

"You're overtired"

Mrs Birling dismisses Sheila's moral awakening as hysteria — a patronising, gendered response that refuses to engage with the substance of her argument.

"I'm ashamed of you as well — yes both of you"

Role reversal — child judges parents. Moral authority is earned through conscience, not inherited through age. The dash adds emphasis and defiance.

KEY ANALYSIS POINTS

EXAM TIP

Use these analysis points in your essays. Each one connects language/structure (AO2) to Priestley's purpose (AO3).

- Sheila functions as the audience's proxy — she has seen the truth and refuses to unsee it.
- The generational divide is starkly drawn: the parents retreat into denial while Sheila advances into moral courage.
- Mrs Birling's dismissal of Sheila as 'overtired' reflects a patriarchal society that silences women's moral voices.
- Priestley positions Sheila as post-war Britain's hope — the next generation who will build the welfare state.

Mrs Birling's Refusal of Responsibility

Act 2 — An Inspector Calls

CONTEXT

Mrs Birling is being questioned about her role as chair of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation, and her refusal to help Eva Smith when she came seeking assistance.

EXTRACT

MRS BIRLING: Yes. She came to us claiming she was Mrs Birling — which was quite untrue. She gave herself ridiculous airs. She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position.

INSPECTOR: (very deliberately) Her position? Her position was that she was penniless, alone, desperately ill, and that one of you was entirely responsible.

MRS BIRLING: I used my influence to have it refused.

INSPECTOR: You refused her even though you knew what might happen to her afterwards?

MRS BIRLING: As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!

ANNOTATIONS

"claiming she was Mrs Birling"

Dramatic irony — the audience knows (or suspects) Eva used the name because Eric, a Birling, is the father. Mrs Birling's outrage at the 'theft' of her name blinds her to the truth.

"ridiculous airs"

Mrs Birling cannot conceive that a working-class woman could have dignity. Class prejudice prevents her from seeing Eva as human.

"fine feelings and scruples"

The irony is devastating — Eva had genuine moral scruples (refusing Eric's stolen money), while Mrs Birling, who claims moral authority, has none.

"a girl in her position"

Mrs Birling reduces Eva to a class category. The Inspector's echo — 'Her position?' — forces her to confront

Eva's actual circumstances.

"I used my influence to have it refused"

The key confession. Mrs Birling weaponises her charity position – an institution meant to help becomes an instrument of class cruelty.

"a girl of that sort"

Dehumanising phrase – 'that sort' reduces Eva to a type, denying her individuality. Mrs Birling projects her own class assumptions onto someone she refuses to understand.

KEY ANALYSIS POINTS

EXAM TIP

Use these analysis points in your essays. Each one connects language/structure (AO2) to Priestley's purpose (AO3).

- Mrs Birling had the final opportunity to save Eva's life and deliberately chose not to – making her arguably the most morally culpable character.
- Priestley exposes how institutions meant to help the poor are controlled by the very class responsible for their suffering.
- The Inspector's 'very deliberately' stage direction signals that he is building a trap – Mrs Birling is about to condemn the 'father' without realising it is her own son.
- Mrs Birling's complete lack of self-awareness represents the older generation's inability to recognise their own moral failures.