

An Inspector Calls

GCSE REVISION GUIDE SERIES

**Edwardian Context,
Priestley's Purpose
and the Play**

Written by Lynn Doyle

Experienced Teacher

Private Tutor

Resource Author

Scan for more free GCSE
resources



LYNN DOYLE HOME TUITION

CONTEXT AND AUTHORIAL PURPOSE

Understanding the Two Worlds of the Play



The Birlings' comfortable dining room represents the privilege and confidence that Priestley challenges.

This guide explains the world of the Birlings in 1912 and the very different world in which J. B. Priestley wrote the play. The central idea is that private choices have social consequences: each character's treatment of Eva Smith reflects the inequalities of the society around her.

Key dates: the play is set in 1912, first performed in the Soviet Union in 1945, and first produced in Britain in 1946.

1912 AND 1945

1 Two time periods matter

A strong contextual answer does not attach a historical fact to every quotation. It explains how Priestley uses the contrast between 1912 and 1945 to shape the audience's judgement of the characters.

1912 setting	1945 audience
Before the First World War; Britain still had a rigid class system and a large empire.	The audience knew that two world wars had followed and that confidence in the old ruling class had been badly damaged.
Women had no parliamentary vote. Political and legal power remained overwhelmingly male.	Women's wartime work and partial voting rights from 1918 had changed expectations, although equality had not been achieved.
There was no comprehensive welfare state. Support depended on family, limited insurance, the Poor Law or charities.	The 1945 Labour landslide promised wider social protection; the post-war welfare state and NHS were about to be created.
Employers held great power, although unions and mass strikes were challenging low pay and unsafe work.	A mass electorate and organised labour had far more political influence.
Many prosperous people believed in progress, empire and individual responsibility.	The audience could see the danger of complacency and the need for collective responsibility.

Priestley's purpose

Priestley had served in the First World War and later became a prominent broadcaster and social commentator. He supported greater social equality and collective responsibility. In the 1930s he helped establish the Common Wealth Party, which argued for democratic reform and public ownership. The Inspector acts as Priestley's moral voice: society must not allow wealth and status to protect people from responsibility.

The final telephone call prevents the family from treating the evening as a harmless trick. Whether or not the first Inspector was a real police inspector, the consequences of exploitation remain real.



J. B. Priestley working in his study in 1940. National Media Museum, Daily Herald Archive — no known copyright restrictions.

THE WRITER'S MESSAGE

2 Priestley's experiences and purpose

Priestley and the First World War

Priestley enlisted in the British Army in 1914 and served during the First World War. He experienced trench warfare, was wounded and lost friends. He later criticised the class divisions he had observed between ordinary soldiers and some officers. The war challenged the confident Edwardian belief that Britain's established leaders would automatically guide society wisely.

This experience helps explain the force of the Inspector's warning about "fire and blood and anguish". Priestley had seen what large-scale suffering looked like. To a 1945 audience, the words could evoke not one war but two.

Priestley during the Second World War

Priestley was not a soldier returning from the Second World War. He was already in his forties when it began. Instead, he became an influential civilian broadcaster. In his widely heard BBC radio talks, the *Postscripts*, he reflected on wartime life, praised ordinary people's courage and argued that the shared sacrifice of war should lead to a fairer peace.

His broadcasts sometimes worried political leaders because they moved beyond morale and towards criticism of inequality. Priestley believed that Britain should not defeat fascism abroad only to preserve poverty, privilege and insecurity at home.

Why write the play in 1945?

- Britain had just endured a second devastating world war. The public was deciding what kind of country should be rebuilt.
- Wartime rationing, evacuation, military service and shared danger had made interdependence visible. Individual survival depended upon collective action.
- The 1945 Labour election victory showed strong support for housing, employment, social security and health reform. Priestley's message therefore spoke directly to a national debate already taking place.
- Priestley feared that, once the emergency ended, wealthy and powerful people might try to return to the old inequalities.

Why set the play in 1912?

- 1912 represents the apparently secure Edwardian world immediately before disaster. Birling believes that wealth and progress guarantee stability, but the audience knows that war is approaching.
- The time gap creates dramatic irony. Birling is wrong about war and the Titanic, so the audience is encouraged to distrust his political and moral opinions as well.
- Setting the action before the welfare state exposes how dangerous unemployment, pregnancy and poverty could be for a woman without family protection.
- Priestley can place 1912 capitalism on trial from the viewpoint of 1945. The Birlings become a warning against rebuilding Britain on the same values.

The key message

People are connected, and power creates responsibility. A society that allows employers, consumers, men, wealthy families and charities to use their power without compassion will repeatedly produce victims like Eva Smith. Guilt should lead to learning and change, not merely fear of scandal.

Priestley's warning is both hopeful and threatening. Sheila and Eric show that change is possible; the older Birlings show how easily privilege resists it. If society refuses peaceful reform and collective responsibility, it will face repeated suffering—"fire and blood and anguish".

PLOT OVERVIEW

3 Main events of the play

Act One

1. The Birling family celebrate Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft. The marriage could unite two wealthy manufacturing families and improve Mr Birling's social position.
2. Mr Birling gives a confident speech praising individualism. He dismisses talk of war and calls the Titanic "unsinkable", creating dramatic irony for the later audience.
3. Inspector Goole announces that a young working-class woman, Eva Smith, has died after drinking disinfectant.
4. Mr Birling admits that he dismissed Eva from his factory after she helped lead a strike for higher wages. He treats the decision as ordinary business.
5. Sheila recognises Eva from Milwards. In anger and jealousy, she used her influence as a wealthy customer to have Eva dismissed.
6. Gerald reveals that he knew Eva under the name Daisy Renton, shifting the investigation towards his relationship with her.

Act Two

7. Gerald explains that he rescued Daisy from the advances of Alderman Meggarty, installed her in rooms and began an affair. She depended on him, but he eventually ended it.
8. Mrs Birling admits that, as a leading member of a charitable committee, she refused the pregnant young woman help. She judged her for using the name "Mrs Birling".
9. Mrs Birling insists that the unborn child's father should accept full responsibility, not realising that the father is Eric.

Act Three

10. Eric admits that he met Eva, forced his way into her lodgings during one encounter, began a sexual relationship with her and made her pregnant. He stole money from his father's business to support her.
11. The Inspector delivers his warning that "we are members of one body" and that failure to learn this lesson will bring "fire and blood and anguish".
12. Gerald discovers that no Inspector Goole appears to be on the police force. A telephone call suggests that no girl has recently died at the infirmary.
13. The older Birlings celebrate, while Sheila and Eric remain ashamed. A final call announces that a girl has died and a police inspector is coming, restarting the investigation.



Inspector Goole's arrival interrupts the Birlings' celebration and begins the chain of revelations.

THEME FOCUS

4 Class, wealth and social power

Edwardian Britain was sharply hierarchical. Birth, property, education, accent, occupation and social connections affected a person's opportunities. The landed aristocracy remained prestigious, while wealthy industrialists such as Mr Birling could possess money without the same inherited status. His desire for a knighthood and his pride in being an alderman show his wish to climb socially.

Group	Position and expectations	Connection to the play
Aristocracy and landed upper class	Inherited titles, estates and elite networks carried the greatest social prestige.	Gerald's parents, Sir George and Lady Croft, rank above the Birlings socially.
Industrial and professional middle class	Factory owners, merchants and professionals could be wealthy and politically influential.	Mr Birling believes commercial success proves his judgement and authority.
Lower middle class	Clerks, shop workers, teachers and skilled employees might value respectability but had limited security.	The play shows how reputation and employment could determine survival.
Working class	Factory hands, labourers and servants usually had low wages, little savings and insecure work.	Eva can be dismissed by Birling, Sheila and later Milwards with no meaningful protection.

Capitalism and socialism

Mr Birling expresses an individualist capitalist view: a businessman should protect his own interests, keep labour costs down and avoid responsibility for strangers. The Inspector offers a socialist and collective alternative: wealth creates obligations, people depend upon one another, and the vulnerable should not carry all the risk.

- Mr Birling: "a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own".
- The Inspector: "We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other."

Exam link: Priestley does not present class merely as background. Class creates the unequal power that allows every Birling to affect Eva's life while she has almost no power over theirs.



The Birling family's wealth gives them comfort and influence, but Priestley exposes their moral failures.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

5 Work and the lives of working-class women

Women formed a major part of the Edwardian workforce, but the kind of work available depended heavily on class. Many middle- and upper-class women were expected not to undertake paid manual work after marriage. Working-class women often had no such choice.

Common work	Typical conditions	Relevance to Eva Smith
Domestic service	Long hours, strict hierarchy, tied accommodation and little privacy; dismissal could mean losing both wages and a home.	Domestic service was one of the largest areas of female employment and shows how dependent women could be on employers.
Textiles, clothing and factory work	Repetitive work, low wages, danger from machinery and instant dismissal remained common.	Eva begins as a machine worker at Birling and Company and asks for higher pay.
Laundry and cleaning	Hot, physically demanding and poorly paid work, sometimes involving harsh chemicals.	Shows the narrow, exhausting choices available to women without savings.
Shops and department stores	More respectable in appearance, but workers faced long hours, strict rules and pressure to please wealthy customers.	At Milwards, Sheila's status as a customer outweighs Eva's livelihood.
Clerical work and typing	A growing field for literate women, but pay and advancement were limited.	Not all women could obtain these comparatively desirable posts.
Casual work and prostitution	Women without secure work or family support could be pushed into dangerous informal or sexual labour.	Eva's vulnerability increases after repeated dismissals and the loss of Gerald's support.

There was no universal national minimum wage. The Trade Boards Act 1909 introduced legally enforceable minimum rates only in a small number of especially low-paid “sweated” trades, many employing women. Eva's strike is therefore credible: collective action was one of the few ways workers could challenge wages.

Dress and leisure could make class differences immediately visible, while working clothes and domestic uniforms reinforced occupational hierarchy.



Women in Edwardian factories often faced long hours, low wages and little protection.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

6 Strikes, trade unions and industrial unrest

The years from about 1910 to 1914 are often called the Great Unrest. Miners, railway workers, dockers and transport workers took industrial action over wages, hours and conditions. Important disputes included the 1911 Liverpool transport strike and the national coal strike of 1912. Eva's participation in a pay strike places the play directly within this climate.

Development	Why it matters
Trade Disputes Act 1906	Strengthened trade unions' ability to organise industrial action by protecting them in important circumstances from being sued for losses caused by a strike.
Growth of trade union membership	Workers gained a collective voice, but individual employees and strike leaders could still be victimised or dismissed.
Great Unrest 1910–1914	A wave of strikes challenged employers and exposed the distance between national prosperity and workers' living conditions.
1912 national coal strike	The dispute led to the Coal Mines Minimum Wage Act 1912, but this was a sector-specific measure, not a general minimum wage.
Women and union action	Women workers also organised. Their low pay made wage campaigns urgent, although many unions and industries remained male-dominated.

The General Strike of 1926

The General Strike happened fourteen years after the play is set. It began when the Trades Union Congress supported miners resisting longer hours and lower wages. It lasted nine days, while the miners' dispute continued much longer. It should not be described as an event known to the Birlings in 1912.

Why it is still useful: Priestley and his first audiences knew that conflict between workers, employers and government continued after the First World War. The strike therefore belongs to the historical journey between the play's setting and its performance, reinforcing the seriousness of disputes about pay, power and social responsibility.

Exam link: Mr Birling sees Eva as a replaceable cost and labels the strikers troublesome. Priestley invites the audience to see that suppressing reasonable demands creates conflict rather than social stability.



Industrial unrest exposed the conflict between wealthy employers and workers demanding fair treatment.

GENDER AND POWER

7 Women, voting and gender expectations

In 1912

Women could not vote in parliamentary elections, although some rate-paying women had limited rights in local elections.

Suffragists used constitutional campaigning; suffragettes used more militant tactics. Arrest, force-feeding and public controversy intensified before the war.

Marriage and motherhood were treated as central female roles. Respectability was judged by strict sexual standards.

Upper-class daughters were often expected to marry suitably and represent the family well.

Change after 1912

The Representation of the People Act 1918 gave the vote to women aged 30 or over who met property-related qualifications, while nearly all men gained the vote at 21.

The Equal Franchise Act 1928 gave women the vote on the same terms as men, at age 21.

The Sex Disqualification Removal Act 1919 opened parts of the professions and public life to women, although discrimination continued.

Wartime employment and political change widened expectations, helping a 1945 audience view Sheila's growth as significant.

The play's women

- Sheila initially benefits from wealth and behaves like a protected daughter, but she becomes morally independent and challenges her parents.
- Mrs Birling exercises power through class and charity, yet she supports a social system that restricts women. Her authority depends partly on her husband's status and her own family background.
- Eva is judged more harshly because she is a woman, unmarried and pregnant, and because she uses a married title, while Eric and Gerald escape the same level of judgement for their behaviour.

An unmarried pregnant woman could face dismissal, stigma, homelessness and separation from her child. The Poor Law and private charity offered limited help, often accompanied by investigation and moral judgement. Mrs Birling's committee therefore has the power to decide who is "deserving".

Exam link: Priestley exposes a sexual double standard. Gerald can return to respectable society, while Eva carries the economic and social consequences.



The campaign for women's suffrage challenged Edwardian assumptions about gender and political power.

RESPONSIBILITY AND WELFARE

8 Poverty, charity and Edwardian laws

Britain had begun to introduce social reforms before 1912, so the period was not entirely without support. However, provision was limited, conditional and incomplete. There was no comprehensive welfare state, no NHS and no general right to benefits capable of protecting a woman in Eva's position.

Law or reform	What it did	Limitations and AIC link
Factory and Workshop Act 1901	Consolidated rules on factory safety, hours and the employment of women and children.	Enforcement and coverage were limited; workers still faced dangerous conditions and dismissal.
Education Provision of Meals Act 1906	Allowed local authorities to provide school meals to children in need.	It was permissive rather than an immediate universal entitlement.
Workmen's Compensation Act 1906	Extended employers' liability to compensate many workers injured at work.	It did not provide general income security or prevent exploitation.
Trade Disputes Act 1906	Protected important aspects of lawful trade-union action.	It did not guarantee that an individual striker would keep her job.
Education Administrative Provisions Act 1907	Required medical inspection of children in state elementary schools.	Inspection did not automatically mean free treatment everywhere.
Children Act 1908	Strengthened child protection and created separate juvenile courts.	It did not remove family poverty.
Old Age Pensions Act 1908	Introduced a means-tested, non-contributory pension from age 70.	Many people did not live to 70; strict conditions and low payments limited support.
Trade Boards Act 1909	Set minimum rates in a few severely underpaid trades.	There was no general minimum wage for workers such as Eva.
Labour Exchanges Act 1909	Created exchanges intended to connect unemployed workers with vacancies.	A vacancy service could not guarantee secure or adequately paid work.
National Insurance Act 1911	Introduced contributory health insurance for many lower-paid workers and unemployment insurance in selected trades.	Coverage was incomplete, benefits limited and dependants not protected in the modern sense.
Shops Act 1911	Required a weekly half-day holiday for many shop workers and regulated some hours.	Retail work remained demanding and employees still relied heavily on employers.

The reforms show that Britain was beginning to accept some collective responsibility. Priestley pushes this principle much further: help should not depend upon a wealthy committee deciding whether a distressed woman deserves compassion.



Private charity could be judgmental and inconsistent, leaving vulnerable people without support.

DRAMATIC METHODS

9 War, the Titanic and dramatic irony

Mr Birling speaks in spring 1912, shortly before the Titanic sank and only two years before the First World War began. Priestley's audience already knows that Birling's confident predictions are catastrophically wrong.

Birling's claim or attitude	What the audience knows	Effect
The Titanic is "unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable".	The ship sank in April 1912 after striking an iceberg.	Birling's repetition and certainty make him appear foolish and undermine his authority.
There is no likelihood of war.	The First World War began in 1914; the Second ended in 1945.	Priestley turns hindsight into a moral warning against complacent leaders.
Progress will bring peace and prosperity.	Industrial conflict, depression, fascism and two wars followed.	Material progress without social responsibility is shown to be inadequate.
A man should look after himself and his family.	Both wars required collective sacrifice and state organisation.	The audience is encouraged to reject narrow individualism.

"Fire and blood and anguish"

The Inspector's warning would remind a 1945 audience of the violence of two world wars. It may also evoke religious judgement. Priestley suggests that societies which refuse peaceful reform will learn through suffering. The line is prophetic within the 1912 setting but painfully familiar to the later audience.

The younger and older generations

Sheila and Eric accept that the family's actions matter even when they think no girl has died. Mr and Mrs Birling care more about scandal and punishment. This generational contrast gives the play cautious hope: society can change if people learn, but history may repeat itself when those with power refuse.



The Titanic's 1912 sinking makes Mr Birling's confidence painfully ironic.

EXAM SKILLS

10 Linking events to context

Event in the play	Contextual connection	Priestley's message
Birling dismisses Eva after the strike.	Great Unrest, insecure employment, weak individual protection and disputes over wages.	Profit does not excuse treating workers as disposable.
Sheila has Eva dismissed from Milwards.	Class deference and the power of wealthy customers over shop workers.	Small acts of spite become dangerous when power is unequal.
Gerald keeps Daisy as his mistress.	Sexual double standards and women's economic dependence.	Kindness mixed with power and secrecy is not the same as equality.
Mrs Birling refuses charity.	Patchy welfare, moral tests and the division between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor.	Charity without empathy can reproduce class prejudice.
Eric exploits Eva and steals money.	Male privilege, sexual hypocrisy and the shame attached to unmarried pregnancy.	The respectable family conceals abuse and corruption.
The family fears scandal.	Reputation protected status, marriage prospects and commercial relationships.	The powerful may care more about appearance than harm.
The Inspector demands collective responsibility.	Priestley's socialist beliefs and the growth of welfare thinking by 1945.	Every person's choices affect the wider community.
The final call repeats the crisis.	A 1945 audience has witnessed the consequences of ignoring warnings.	Lessons that are rejected must be faced again.

A useful paragraph pattern

Point: Priestley uses Mrs Birling's charity work to expose how class prejudice controlled access to help.

Evidence: She calls Eva's use of the name Birling a "piece of gross impertinence".

Analysis and context: The judgemental noun "impertinence" shows that Mrs Birling values class boundaries above Eva's desperation. In 1912, before a comprehensive welfare state, a vulnerable woman might have depended on private charity, so the committee's prejudice had material consequences.

Link to intention: Priestley encourages the audience to replace selective charity with genuine collective responsibility.

FINAL REVISION

11 Quick revision timeline

Date	Development	Why remember it
1901	Factory and Workshop Act	Some regulation existed, but factory workers remained vulnerable.
1906	Trade Disputes Act and Liberal welfare reforms begin	Union action gained protection and government accepted more social responsibility.
1908	Children Act and Old Age Pensions Act	Early state welfare, but limited and conditional.
1909	Trade Boards Act	Minimum wages only in selected sweated trades.
1910–14	Great Unrest	Mass strikes make Eva's wage dispute historically credible.
1911	National Insurance Act; Shops Act; Parliament Act	Limited insurance and workplace reform; political power also shifting.
1912	Play set; national coal strike; Titanic sinks	Birling's confidence contrasts with instability and coming disaster.
1914–18	First World War	Contradicts Birling and transforms society.
1918	Some women over 30 gain the parliamentary vote	A major step, but not equal suffrage.
1926	General Strike	Later evidence of continuing conflict over wages and power.
1928	Equal Franchise Act	Women vote on the same terms as men at 21.
1930s	Depression; Priestley supports social reform	Deepens his criticism of inequality.
1939–45	Second World War	Collective sacrifice strengthens arguments for social provision.
1945	Play first performed; Labour wins landslide	Audience is ready to debate welfare, equality and rebuilding.
1948	NHS begins	A major part of the post-war welfare settlement.

Final reminders

- Use context to explain power, consequences and Priestley's purpose—not as a detached history fact.
- Keep 1912, 1926 and 1945 clearly separated.
- Remember that 1918 brought only partial female suffrage; equal voting terms arrived in 1928.
- Eva is a fictional individual but also represents many vulnerable workers: the surname "Smith" suggests ordinariness and universality.
- The Inspector's lesson matters even if his identity remains uncertain.

Selected sources for checking historical context

UK Parliament Living Heritage on women and the vote; The National Archives on Liberal welfare reforms, women's work and suffrage; UK legislation records for the Acts named in this guide; and British Library resources on Edwardian society, labour and women's lives.

LYNN DOYLE HOME TUITION

Need a Little More Help?

I offer personalised online tuition for students studying GCSE English Language and English Literature.

Lessons can focus on:

- Building confidence
- Improving analytical writing
- Developing Grade 7–9 responses
- Exam technique and revision strategies
- One-to-one support tailored to each student's needs

EXPLORE MORE FREE RESOURCES

Visit the Lynn Doyle Home Tuition Resource Hub for revision guides, exam advice and information about online tuition.

Lynn Doyle Home Tuition

Experienced Teacher | Online Tutor | Resource Author

www.lynndoylehometuition.com

ldoyletutor@gmail.com

