Class and power

The time period **between 1912, when the play is set, and 1945, when it was written**, was an era of **huge social inequality.** Social class separated people. It determined the shape your life would take. **Moving between social classes was rare.**

Political allegiances were usually based on social class, with industrialists and propertied classes being represented by **conservatism** and the workers and less advantaged being represented by **socialism.**

Throughout the world, people who were traditionally powerless were beginning to revolt and make their voices heard. Empires fell and imperialism was challenged. The **Russian Revolution occurred in 1917**, ending a system of rule by rich tsars, who had allowed most to live in brutal poverty. In the same year, an uprising against British rule in Ireland took place. **Strikes and industrial action became common.** **Political change occurred** and **those who had previously been excluded from the process of democracy fought for the right to make their voices heard**. After years of campaigning, **women finally won the right to vote in Britain in 1928.**

Fearing that they might lose some of their own power and wealth, **those in power viewed such changes as negative.**

Edwardian era and class etiquette

At the time the play is set (1912), Britain had just come out of the reign of King Edward VII, a larger than life man who enjoyed extravagance and excess. He loved good food, sport and pretty women. The fashionable and highest members of society followed his example and many in the upper classes enjoyed a life of leisure and socialising, filled with the strictest rules of etiquette.

Even after the king’s death in 1910, the culture of the upper classes continued to be one of opulence and festivity. They overdid things and tried desperately to outdo each other. Outside appearances were of paramount importance. Husbands and wives could have affairs as long as family life remained secure. If the upper class’s strict code of behaviour was followed and everyone had enough money to maintain appearances, then one was accepted in the Edwardian period. However, this life of extravagance was reserved for the very richest. Most people in Britain were not part of this privileged minority.

War

*An Inspector Calls* was **written at the end of the Second World War (1945).** It demonstrates how an uncaring society leads to disastrous consequences for those who are not lucky enough to be born into affluent families, and how a lack of community spirit leads to war and conflict.

J. B. Priestley was a **socialist** who **hoped that a positive consequence of war could be change and the chance of a better future.** The occurrence of the Second World War showed that this had not been the case after the First World War (1914-18). However, in this play, Priestley suggests that change is possible if people learn from the mistakes of the past. All it takes, according to the play, is honesty and a willingness to accept responsibility and to initiate change.

**The Lead-up to 1914**

In the five or six years before 1914, there had been **mass unrest among the working classes in Britain.** The number of people receiving charitable aid from the Church or from associations like the fictional Brumley Women’s Charity Organisation in ‘An Inspector Calls’, had increased; **of the 33 million people in the country, 10 million were living in destitution.** In **1906 j**obless people marched from the Midlands to London to protest at Downing Street, and in this same year, the Liberal Party gained a landslide victory against the Conservatives, signalling the unhappiness of the population and a change in people’s attitudes.

1n **1908**, there was a cotton workers’ strike and a suffragettes’ demonstration, as votes for women became another hot topic politically. In response to Mr Birling’s attempts to shield Sheila from events, the Inspector tells him that his daughter ‘isn’t living on the moon’. Priestley’s audience at the time would have understood how relevant this statement was, given the changes in attitudes towards women.

In **1909**, the new government introduced a ‘People’s Budget’- raising taxes in order to pay for social reform. the following year there was a miners’ strike and seven hundred mills in Lancashire locked out workers who were demanding higher wages. Priestley clearly drew on this when he created the characters of Mr Birling and Eva Smith.

The fact that **2,500 children died in 1911** **due to a heat wave** and **London was then seen as the second unhealthiest city in the world** must have influenced Priestley’s writing.

**1912 – the year in which the play is set**

In **1912, nationwide riots** occurred and **300,000 mill workers protested against low wages**, once again being locked out by the owners. Low pay and rising prices meant that the working classes could barely survive.

By **1912, 2% of Londoners were dying each week from the cold.** This was also the year when plans to extend National Insurance to include medical aid for the poor were introduced, so Mrs Birling’s refusal to help Eva Smith is set against this backdrop.

**1912** was also the year when the **Titanic sank.**

**Between the Wars**

With men away at war and plans for compulsory conscription, **women were urged to work in factories**. Strikes continued in this period and **women workers started to demand equal pay**. By the **end of the First World War, ten million men had died.** Priestley had suffered himself, having been exposed to a German gas attack and been declared unfit for active service. Rationing was introduced on petrol, gas, coal, electricity and meat and the school leaving age was raised to 14.

In **1918,** 2,225 people in London died in a ‘flu epidemic. Also in this year, the abolition of workhouses was proposed and women voted for the first time. Strikes continued and by **1921** unemployment figures had risen to 2.2 million. Throughout the 1920s, workers’ unions continued to use strikes as a tool to demand higher wages in the face of rising costs of living. When Mr Birling talks of ‘Capital versus Labour agitations’ in the play he is referring to strikes.

In **1933, Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany**. The Fascist movement was gaining popularity in Britain, with anti-Jewish violence rising throughout Europe. **The Great Depression began in 1929** with mass unemployment. By 1939 the Second World War had started. In **1942 the welfare state was proposed,** something of which Priestley, as a left-wing supporter would have been in favour.

By **1945**, the year Priestley wrote the play, the Second World War had ended with 55 million people dead, the Russian Revolution had occurred and the atom bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. Priestley had seen all of this, so in setting the play in 1912, before either war had happened, and at a time of innocence and hope, he conveys his message of collective and social responsibility even more powerfully.