Class and society in “An Inspector Calls”

**The Setting: Place** – Brumley, an industrial town (probably Bradford in Yorkshire) – factory owners ran things as they wanted them. Brumley seems to be an important town – Birling had been its Lord Mayor, it had a police force and a Royal Visit is mentioned in the play; also Birling expects a knighthood for his services to society.

**The Setting: Time** – just before WW1 when the differences between rich/poor, upper/lower classes were more marked – after the war this began to change. The Edwardian period (1901-1914) was a time of false security. In the first Act of the play Birling imagines a future with no war or industrial unrest and the audience – now and in 1945 when the play was first performed – know this is false.

**Brumley Women’s Charity Organisation** (of which Mrs Birling is an influential member) – suggests that a number of women in the town were poor and in need of help. These organisations relied on the support of rich citizens and were common in Victorian and Edwardian towns. Mrs Birling has the power to decide whether Eva (and others) get help or are left to suffer alone.

**Alderman Meggarty**(see page 35) – poor and oppressed people (like Eva) are powerless and could become victims of rich and privileged men like him

**The action of the play** all takes place in the Birling home, so what we see is on their terms and from their perspective (it’s as if the story of Eva Smith comes into their lives like a bad smell). It’s a real, normal environment in which Priestley then plays out a rather supernatural plot.

**The Birlings**: Sybil Birling is socially superior to her husband. Birling, like many low class men of the time who got rich through industry, may have married a land-owning woman (with high status but little actual money). At the engagement party Birling himself mentions that Gerald’s (upper class) parents might feel he is marrying ‘beneath himself’.

**Politics**: the Labour Party had only just started and workers’ rights were not taken seriously. Birling (p 11-16) is harsh towards his striking workers and only thinks in terms of keeping labour costs down. By agreeing, Gerald shows he shares this view.

**How the Birlings and Gerald used their wealth, social position and influence in ways that affected the life and death of Eva Smith**:

* ***Arthur Birling*** is a ‘pillar of the community’ in the sense that he was Mayor and is expecting a knighthood but his speeches and actions towards Eva show he feels no responsibility towards others – his community
* ***Birling*** uses his superior position and friendship with the Chief Constable to put the Inspector down
* *Sheila* misuses her power and influence as the daughter of a rich family by threatening to quit the dress shop, Milwards, if Eva is not sacked
* ***Poor and out of work***, ***Eva*** turns to prostitution and is at the mercy of men like Alderman Meggarty
* ***Gerald*** sets Eva up as his mistress: it was easy for a rich man to persuade or force a poor girl to have sex and a married man with a mistress was accepted by society (if he was discreet); if a girl got pregnant however, she was left to cope alone
* ***Eric*** also takes advantage of Eva. In spite of the social differences between them, it is Eva who refuses to marry Eric or take his money
* ***Sybil Birling*** is snobbish in her attitude to Eva – because the girl calls herself ‘Mrs Birling’ and ‘has too much to say’ she refuses to help her and thinks the father should be made an example of (not knowing it’s Eric)

## “An Inspector Calls” - A Chain of Events

Enter the Inspector

(*just as Birling makes his speech about “community and all that nonsense”*)

He shows the photo to Birling who remembers sacking her

Sheila and Eric are shocked Gerald agrees with Birling

Inspector shows Sheila the photo

(*she realises her jealousy and irritation led to Eva being sacked*)

Inspector reveals Eva Smith now calls herself Daisy Renton

Alone with Gerald, Sheils warns him not to conceal anything

Sheila feels hurt but respects Gerald’s honesty

Inspector returns and shows Gerald a photo

Gerald admits having had Daisy as his mistress

Mrs Birling tries to stop the Inspector from making more enquiries

Sheila is afraid her mother may also be involved

Mrs Birling admits Eva asked her for help

(*and realises Eric is probably the father of Eva’s child*)

Eric confesses to getting Eva pregnant/stealing money

The Inspector issues a warning and leaves

Eric and Sheila feel guilty/seem changed by their experience

Gerald and Arthur Birling prove that Goole is not a real inspector

The Birlings ring the mortuary – no suicide

The phone rings: a girl has just died

and an Inspector is on his way round