Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

An Inspector Calls

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Plot

- An evening in spring 1912, in the industrial town of Brumley. The wealthy Birling family (Arthur, Sybil, Sheila and Eric) are celebrating Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft when Inspector Goole arrives. A young woman, Eva Smith, has died after swallowing disinfectant.
- Arthur Birling sacked Eva from his factory for leading a strike for higher wages. Sheila, in a jealous temper, had her sacked from Milwards, a department store.
- Eva, now calling herself Daisy Renton, became Gerald's mistress until he ended the affair. Eric got her pregnant and stole money from his father's office to help her. Mrs Birling persuaded her charity committee to refuse Eva's plea for help.
- The Inspector leaves after a final speech about responsibility. Gerald finds out there is no Inspector Goole in the local police, and a call to the infirmary reveals no recent suicide. The older Birlings relax, but Sheila and Eric stay changed.
- Then the phone rings: a girl has just died, and a police inspector is on his way.

Themes

- **Social responsibility**, social class, age and the generations, gender, guilt, and time.

Context

- The play is set in 1912, just before the Titanic sank and the First World War began, so Mr Birling's confident predictions are **dramatic irony**: he calls the Titanic 'unsinkable'.
- J.B. Priestley was a socialist. The play was first performed in 1945, as Britain began building the welfare state after the Second World War. It argues that people are responsible for each other.

- The Inspector's warnings of 'fire and blood and anguish' remind a 1945 audience of two world wars.

Characters

- Mr Birling: a self-satisfied businessman who cares about profit and status. Mrs Birling: cold and snobbish; she refuses to accept any blame.
- Sheila: starts spoiled but accepts her guilt and changes. Eric: drinks too much; he is ashamed and changes. Gerald: charming, but helps the older Birlings pretend nothing happened.
- Inspector Goole: controls the questioning and acts as Priestley's voice, reminding them that 'we are members of one body'.

How to get top marks

- Use the play's two dates. Written in 1945 and set in 1912, it lets the audience know what the Birlings don't, and that **dramatic irony** is Priestley's main weapon.
- Treat the Inspector as Priestley's voice, not a real detective. He has a purpose: to teach responsibility.
- Compare the generations: Sheila and Eric change, Arthur and Sybil don't. And don't forget the phone call: the ending is why the lesson repeats.

Key terms

Dramatic irony	When the audience knows something a character doesn't.
Socialism	The belief that society should share wealth and look after everyone.
Capitalism	An economic system based on private businesses run for profit.
Social responsibility	The duty to care for other people in society.
Stage directions	Instructions in a play about setting, lighting and how actors behave.
Cliffhanger	An ending that leaves the audience in suspense.
Morality play	A play that teaches a moral lesson.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. When is An Inspector Calls set?
2. When was the play first performed?
3. What are the Birlings celebrating when the Inspector arrives?
4. Why did Mr Birling sack Eva Smith?

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5. Why did Sheila have Eva sacked from Milwards?
6. What did Mrs Birling do?
7. What did Eric do?
8. Why are Mr Birling's speeches about the future an example of dramatic irony?

Answers

1. 1912
2. 1945
3. Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft
4. She led a strike for higher wages
5. She was jealous and in a bad temper
6. Persuaded her charity committee to refuse Eva help
7. Got Eva pregnant and stole money from his father's office
8. The audience knows he is wrong about the Titanic and the war

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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