



AQA Literature Paper 2 – ‘An Inspector Calls’ – Mr and Mrs Birling

Question:

How does Priestley present pride through his depiction of the characters of Mr and Mrs Birling?

Key Vocabulary:

- **Self-worth** – How much you value yourself.
- **Foil** – When a character serves to provide a dramatic contrast to another.
- **Didactic** – Designed to teach the audience a lesson.
- **Juxtapose** – Put two things next to each other to highlight the contrast between them.
- **Dramatic irony** – When the audience know something at least one of the characters doesn't.
- **Irony** – When things are completely different from how the character sees or presents them, usually for comic or dramatic effect.
- **Unpalatable** – When something is disgusting to you and you are unable to swallow it.
- **Remorse** – Feeling sorry for what you have done.
- **Interrogate** – Aggressively question someone.
- **Repetition** – Repeating the same word for effect.
- **Allusion** – A reference to something else well known.
- **Triadic Structure** – Three words or ideas together for effect.
- **Intransigent** – Refusing to change your beliefs or your ways.

Thesis:

In J.B. Priestley's 1945 play 'An Inspector Calls', we see how pride, and particularly pride in one's position in society, is a defining factor in the behaviour of both the older Birlings. Indeed, it is perhaps due to their inflated self-worth that Mr and Mrs Birling are unable to learn the necessary lessons from the death of Eva Smith until it is too late and therefore serve as **foils** to the Inspector and to Priestley's **didactic** message.

Argument and Analysis (AO1 / AO2):

1. Initially, Mr Birling comes across as a foolish character who takes a certain amount of pride in the fact that he values his business and profit over the welfare of his workers.

- In Act 1 Mr Birling proclaims, 'just because the miners came out on strike, there's a lot of wild talk about possible labour trouble in the near future. Don't worry. We've

passed the worst of it.' - Birling speaks in short sentences, showing the absolute conviction he feels in his own argument.

- 'There's too much at stake these days. Everything to lose and nothing to gain by war.' Birling juxtaposes everything to lose with nothing to gain, showing again that he believes absolutely in his own words. He is a proud man, who values his own knowledge. However, this only serves to make him seem foolish - pride comes before a fall!
- 'and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable.' Birling's description of the Titanic creates a sense of dramatic irony and shows him to be hugely proud of human achievement. Once again, though, this only serves to make him seem foolish and undeserving of any respect from the audience.
- 'I refused, of course.'/'Did you say 'why?' Birling cannot believe that there would be any question around why he refused his workers more money - his shock at the Inspector's words suggests that this was a matter of pride as well as business sense.
- 'Well it's my duty to keep labour costs down.' The key word here 'duty' is interesting as it shows Birling takes a great degree of pride in minimising his costs, almost as if his business is a child and he its 'dutiful' parent. Ironically, he feels no such pride for his actual human workers who he could have done more to look after.
- 'If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be asking for the earth.' Birling's use of metaphor here suggests that he is proud of depriving people 'the earth'. Again, the irony is they only wanted a little more money in order to be comfortable.

2. Similarly, whilst being interrogated by the Inspector, Mrs Birling too shows that she is perversely proud of the decisions she made, even when she learns of their terrible consequences.

- 'first, she called herself Mrs Birling-' Mrs Birling's pride has been injured here. The idea that a working class(!) girl would take *her* name is completely unpalatable to her.
- 'Yes, I think it was simply a piece of gross impertinence – quite deliberate – and naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case.' Mrs Birling's pride in her superiority to Eva Smith means she has no shame in admitting her prejudice to the case. She quite simply sees herself as better than this girl and therefore able to treat her in any way she feels fit with no regret or remorse.
- 'It didn't take me long to get the truth – or some of the truth – out of her' Mrs Birling feels a degree of pride in the fact that she was able to get 'the truth' out of Eva Smith, as if it was her job to interrogate her rather than help. The irony here is that you could argue Eva Smith was sent to interrogate the Birlings, a test which the older ones most certainly failed.

- 'I did nothing I'm ashamed of or that won't bear investigation.' Even with the full story and its terrible consequences, Mrs Birling still maintains her pride in what she has done and who she is. Thus she is blinded by her pride and unable to change and become a better person.

3. During the Inspector's final speech we learn that the kind of class pride shown by the older Birlings is leading the world towards disaster.

- 'One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us' The repetition here serves to stress the harm that this kind of pride can still cause if it remains unchecked.
- '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.' The listing of abstract nouns here is designed to break down the pride that the older Birlings feel. They have felt throughout this process that their status in society gives them some kind of superiority. Here, the Inspector is stressing how the pride of the upper classes is what drives them away from their fellow humans and has allowed them to see them as less worthy.
- 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body.' This biblical allusion is again intended to tear down the prideful and tunnel-vision beliefs of Mr and Mrs Birling and make them see how within society, we must learn to be one rather than divided.
- 'if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.' The Inspector's final warning, in the form of this triadic structure, could be read as a plea to throw away the kind of selfish pride that has led to the Birlings treatment of Eva Smith. If we are to make a better world, Priestley is suggesting that we must lose these ideas that allow us to see ourselves as better than one another.

Key Context (AO3)

- Priestley writing after the second world war when there was a strong appetite for societal change was a committed socialist. His beliefs that we need to create a fairer and more equal world can be strongly linked to ideas of the pride of the middle and upper classes.
- The fact that the two world wars took place after the time the play was set could be argued to be the fire, blood and anguish prophesied by the Inspector.