

Discuss the dramatic role of the Inspector in 'An Inspector Calls' by J.B Priestley.

Isabell Long

March 14, 2010

The purpose of the play is to teach responsibility for others to the Birlings and to make them realise that they should not be so selfish. The middle classes are arrogant, especially the Birlings in this play, so the Inspector tried to teach them. They are evidently very financially comfortable, and another purpose of the play is to teach people to care for others and share what they have.

The role of the Inspector is central to the play's meaning because the Inspector is an outsider and provides an insight into J.B Priestley's socialist views. Priestley chose to set the play in 1912 because life was good then and very comfortable for the middle and upper classes. People like Arthur Birling in the play were adamant that there was not going to be a war, and yet just two years later in 1914 the first World War broke out. The play was written after the end of not only the first World War but the second World War.

The Inspector arrived suddenly at the Birling's house as they were celebrating their daughters' engagement. His arrival was dramatic and unexpected as he arrived just as Mr. Birling was in the middle of saying how "men have to mind their own business and look after themselves", a very important stage in the play. When the Inspector arrives, the Birlings are shocked and don't know what to do. In the stage directions of the book of the play, it states "the lighting changes from light, happy and celebratory to hard, dark and suspicious", a complete contrast. The Inspector is described as "a man in his fifties, dressed in a plain suit and carefully spoken" and he had a "disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he was addressing before actually speaking" which suggests he studies people's movements and eyes to feel their mood and weak points before phrasing and asking his questions and asks them pointedly. Mr. Birling is struck by his arrival, we can tell this

by the way he “stops and listens”, and tension builds.

The Inspector, whose name we later find out is Mr Goole, is particularly manipulative. His methods of investigation are questionable but effective. He refuses to let more than one person in the room see the photograph of the girl at any one time and conducts his enquiries in a bizarre way, for instance he refuses to let anyone else speak until he has finished interrogating the first person. He does not hesitate when interrupting the Birlings, and Mrs. Birling accuses him of being “rude and impertinent” when he interrupts her. Sheila and Eric, Mr. and Mrs. Birling’s children, are influenced by the Inspector and think that Eva Smith’s death is awful, whereas the older generation don’t think it has much to do with them and are not worrying. When the Inspector showed the photograph to each member of the family, he refused to show the others at the same time. It is for this reason that no one can be sure that he was showing them the same photograph, but they think he was and they feel appropriately saddened by what he has told them that they tell him what he wants to know. An example of this is Gerald Croft gave himself away when he saw the photograph by letting out a cry and then adding “What? Do you mind if I get myself a drink?”, and Sheila “let out a stifled sob” when she saw the picture. The Inspector has no real interest in the law, and that is apparent when he is asked why he is asking all these questions and he replies simply “I am here to ask questions” instead of the response you would expect to get from an officer of the law which would be something like “it is my duty to find out the truth”.

At the end of the play the Inspector makes a long, final, very meaningful and appropriate speech about how there are “millions and millions of Eva Smith’s” and various other warnings. He is saying that there is more than one Eva Smith in the world and so the issues she faced will continue until the upper or middle classes in the world realise the plight of the poor. His final speech begins “just remember this” which suggests he is about to offer a warning or prediction. The speech touches on the lessons the Birling and Croft characters should have learnt. He says at one point “we don’t live alone, we are all members of one body” which ties in strongly with Mr. Birling’s speech at the start when he was saying how “a man should look after himself and his family”. Mr. Birling also mentioned in his speech at the beginning of the play that “other people are not our responsibility” which makes the Inspector’s speech even more relevant to what Mr. Birling said, because Birling had no care about other people apart from himself and his family, he is selfish. The Inspector portrays Eva Smith as a symbol of the struggle of the working class, and this in turn is an example of J.B Priestley’s views. As a socialist, Priestley believed that everyone had to look after each other.

The Inspector also makes an important reference to the war when he says “if men will not learn a lesson then there will come a time when lives are lost in fire and blood and anguish”, and there is is clear that he was mentioning the war. “Fire and blood and anguish” is an important part of that sentence because it refers to the devastation the war is going to leave behind with it and how people will die in fires, covered in blood and full of hatred for no good reason other than there was a war and it destroyed the day to day lives of many people.

The Inspector and the way he has conducted his enquiries has a great dramatic influence on the Birling family and despite Mr. and Mrs. Birling’s refusal to tell him anything and the fact they showed they didn’t believe they had anything to do with Eva Smith’s death, the Inspector still managed to get them to say things relating to circumstances before her death that could have contributed to her death, especially with regard to Mrs. Birling who before had accused him of being “impertinent” and asking questions that “he had no right to ask”, but then she told him what he wanted to know which was that she had refused Eva Smith entry to her women’s refuge on account of her lying first when she came to ask for help. Mr. Birling reacts suddenly at the start with “well we cannot help you, Inspector” in a very dismissive manner and continues to say that until the Inspector crosses him and seems to already know what Mr. Birling did, so Mr. Birling just tells him again what he wants to know, much to his disgust. Sheila is much more affected by events than the older generation of Birlings, as is Eric, and Sheila is very upset by the trauma the girl suffered and thinks it’s immediately her fault because she got her sacked from her job. Eric disappears near the end of the play as he knows he is going to get interrogated soon and doesn’t want to be found out, however when he returns the family and the Inspector have already established that it was Eric who impregnated the girl when drunk one night and that he drank heavily regularly, which meant he had to say what he did and that he stole money to help her live from his father’s business, and he was not happy about that and feels almost as awful as Sheila.

The way the Inspector behaves has an impact not only on the characters in the play but on the audience too as they feel the impact of everything the Inspector says; whether they are watching the play being acted out or reading the book of the play, the Inspector is powerful. The Inspector has a great influence on the family and on the audience, especially with his last speech talking about the future and how much “fire and blood and anguish” will be felt all around if they don’t do something to stop it and look after people around them. Inspector Goole seems to know what each of the characters have done even before they have said anything and when one thinks again

about his name, Goole, it sounds similar to ghoul — maybe Priestley wanted to portray the Inspector as some sort of ghost that in the end disappears but will change the Birlings (and ours, if we take on board what he says in relation to our own lives) forever?