

AIC Context

Class system

1912

- There was a rigid class system within 1912, providing **little social mobility** (unable to move between the classes, lower to upper etc) within society. Thus, those who belonged to a class within society, were **confined and restricted by this**- most significantly the lower classes (as symbolised through Eva who was unable to advance herself within society without drastic consequences).
- This rigid divide was a continuation of the Victorian eras **fixed social structure**.
- They were divided into upper, middle and working-class individuals, with the **upper class making up only 5% of the population**. Poverty was rife round the early 20th century, 25% of the population lived in poverty, whilst **10% lived below subsistence** (not enough to live) level.
- The driving force behind this was underpayment of workers (Priestley creates Eva as an indictment of this inhumane treatment of the working classes).
- The Birlings classify as middle class as they had a servant, Edna.

Link to play: Priestley is critical of the lack of social mobility in 1912. He creates Eva as **emblematic of the inhumane treatment** the lower classes faced due to this restrictive class system. He also constructs Mr Birling as a pompous unlikeable character to **vilify the individuals who perpetuate this rigid system**.

1945

- In the early 20th century, there were laws in place that meant only property owners could vote, such as the **Second Reform Act 1867**.
- However, an increased social mobility arose when the **Equal Franchise Act 1928** was introduced- all men and women over 21 were permitted to vote. Not only was this a progressive step forward for women's rights, but for the oppressed lower classes as they now had a political voice.
- The acts to **enfranchise** the lower classes and women showed progression towards the working classes. However, mass prejudices still existed with there still being class segregation existent in society. Hence, Priestley aims to highlight the detrimental impacts of class to his 1945 audience through the example of 1912 society: forcing his audience to reflect on how to eliminate this oppressing class divide.

Link to play: The increased social mobility, particularly for women, can be seen through Sheila's development of a voice throughout the play. This could symbolise how women had gained a political voice. Although Eva does not have a voice herself, Priestley constructs the Inspector to speak on behalf of her and the lower classes. This could symbolise how the lower classes were not more represented despite the once completely rigid class system.

TOP TIP



For An Inspector Calls, as it is based in 1912 but written in 1945, examiners love you to compare context across the era and how this has impacted Priestley's message

Politics

1912

- Britain was largely capitalist and Conservative.
- Although there were acts introduced in the early 20th century to support the working classes such as: **1909 wage councils, 1906 children given free school meals and in 1911 there was sickness benefits for workers.**
- These marginal improvements were made when the **Liberal Party** came into power in 1905. The Liberals were supported by the **Labour party** (who favoured a more socialist approach) as they were more aligned with the liberation of the working classes, opposed to the **Conservative party**.
- However, despite the Liberals supporting the ideas of **personal liberty and social reform**, they favoured a **laissez-faire** approach within the economy.
- This created an optimum environment for capitalist business owners, they had free reign to decide the prices on their goods and simultaneously exploit their workers. Despite there now being some support for the working classes, this was not enough to prevent their exploitation.

Laissez-faire= the idea that the government should have minimal intervention within the economy. Trade is not restricted and the price of goods is decided largely by the business owners.

Link to play: Capitalism is personified through Mr Birling, he would have been a member of society who would have strongly favoured the laissez-faire approach as this meant that he could exploit his workers for extra profit.

1945

- There was one of the **biggest electoral swings** in the 20th century in 1945. The Labour party, a newly formed party, won the general election by a **landslide victory** of around 10%.
- This was the first general election since 1935 and became a shock to the Conservative party who proved popular throughout WW2. The Labour parties appeal to the public was their **strong commitment to the Beveridge Report**, placing an emphasis on **welfare rights**- leading to the establishment of the National Health service (our now NHS) and social security (insurance, retirement etc).
- Polls found that the majority of the British population favoured the report, as post WW2 society felt the need to be united opposed to divided due to the devastating loss of lives throughout the war- the Labour party paved the way for this

The Beveridge Report- it underpinned the need for a welfare state for all

Link to play: The electoral swing from capitalism to socialism could be seen to be evident within Sheila and Eric- they **had a huge swing from capitalism to socialism** when introduced to the Inspector (who would have promoted welfare rights). The general need for society to be united in society is replicated in Sheila and Eric understanding that the segregation of classes was not beneficial and needed to be abolished.

J.B Priestley

- His earlier life– as a young boy, he was surrounded **by socialism and socialist ideologies**. His father was a passionate socialist, leading to these views being absorbed from a young age
- Priestley fought in WWI, yet was **openly scathing of the institutions**, he said “**The British army specialised in throwing men away for nothing**”– his uncensored political voice is evident within the play
- His contribution in WWI lead to his realisation of the **vast inequalities that plague society**.
- In **1945, he was a co-founder of the common wealth party**. This was a socialist party that favoured equality, morality and **common ownership** (less should be privately owned, more owned by the public).
- The common wealth party helped galvanise support for the Labour parties landslide victory of 1945.

Link to play: Priestley’s strong socialist ideologies are **personified through the Inspector**. The Inspector acts as a **moral compass** for the Birlings, aiming to guide them away from their **dehumanising capitalist worldwide views** by introducing them to socialism. Thus, Priestley **vilifies capitalists**, particularly through Mr and Mrs Birling, to make socialism seem a more favourable societal approach.

Women

1912

- Women's rights had remained stagnant since the Victorian era.
- Women were **disenfranchised** (no vote).
- **Patriarchy/ patriarchal society** (male dominated society).
- Women were seen as the **property of their fathers and husbands** (Sheila clearly displays this) with no political or legal rights.
- Women were seen as **inferior** to their husbands or other male counterparts. Their role as a woman did not **surpass the patriarchal expectations** of them- to have children and be housewives.
- **1867 the London Society for Women's Suffrage** was created to campaign for women's rights.
- Marginal gains in Women's rights were made when in **1882 the Married Women's Property Act** meant that women were allowed to have their own legal identity and keep property (most wouldn't have any).
- During the 1910's, the women's suffrage movement had **gained momentum** and had begun to bring attention to the movement- women however were still inferior.

Link to play: Sheila is presented as **disenfranchised** at the beginning of the play- her **infantile language and short dialogue** representing how women were oppressed and silenced politically and socially in 1912. Also, Eva's animalistic treatment can't be disregarded just as being down to classism. Her status as a lower-class woman made her more susceptible to this abuse.

1945

- Women's contribution to the war effort, sustaining the home front, was a **pivotal** turning point for women. They were now seen as **valuable** and important members of society- before their importance was overlooked
- Arguably, without the **Women's suffrage** moment, their rights would have not become permanent
- Before WW2, the following laws were passed:
 - o **Women's Suffrage** moment became more violent, and some died as martyrs for the cause.
 - o **1918**- women over 30 granted the vote. Women can now stand as MPs.
 - o **1923**- the Matrimonial Causes Act- same grounds for divorce by men and women.
 - o **1928**- all women gain equal voting rights to men.

Link to play: The change in the 1912 of women being more outspoken in their need for rights may be used by Priestley within the character of Sheila. Her uncensored and developed voice may emulate the politics of women at the time. Women were not entirely equal in society; however, a shift was seen in society post WW2 with people treating each other with more humanity and compassion following the devastating loss of life

Summary

CONTEXT	1912	1945
Class system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigid class system with little social mobility- this was a continuation of the Victorian eras fixed social structure. • Early 1900s, 25% lived in poverty, 10% lived below subsistence (enough to live). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal Franchise Act 1928- all men and women over 21 could vote. Lower classes had a voice too. • Despite enfranchisement (right to vote) still prejudices around working classes.
Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Britain was capitalist and conservative. • Some acts to support working classes like 1906 giving children free school meals- not enough support however. • Liberal government supported social reform (change in society) but had a laissez-faire approach with the economy- this meant the government had little intervention in the economy and businesses could set their own rates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biggest electoral swings in 20th century. In 1945 Labour party won by a landslide victory (massive amount). • Shock to the conservative party who proved popular in the war. • Committed to Beveridge Report which emphasised the need for National Health Service (NHS) an social security (retirement etc).
J.B Priestley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He was surrounded by socialism and socialist ideologies. • He was scathing about WW1 which he fought in. • In 1945, he was co-founder of the common wealth party (socialist party who favoured equality and helped Labour win in 1945). 	
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They were disenfranchised (no vote). • They were inferior to their husbands and fathers in the patriarchal (male dominated) society. • 1867 the London Society for Women's Suffrage was created to campaign for women's rights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's effort on Homefront was a pivotal turning point- seen as valuable. • Before WW2, changes were still made like in 1928 when all women gained equal voting rights to men. • Women had gained more rights but not equal. Inequality still plagued society.