

## HOW DOES PRIESTLEY USE THE CHARACTER OF THE INSPECTOR TO SUGGEST WAYS THAT SOCIETY COULD BE IMPROVED?

Write about:

- What society is shown to be like in the play and how it might be improved
- How Priestley presents society through what the Inspector says and does.

[30 marks] AO4 [4 marks]

Priestley creates the Inspector as the antithesis and foil to Mr Birling to be didactic in the ways that **society could improve**. As the Inspector is the embodiment of socialism, juxtaposing Mr Birling who is the embodiment of capitalism, he highlights how **society could be improved** through reducing the ignorant capitalist mindset and replacing this with a socialist one. He personifies capitalist ignorance through Mr Birling as he is pompous in boasting to the Inspector that he was “an alderman for years”. Mr Birling uses the lexis “years” to place emphasis to the Inspector on his well-established status, yet as the Inspector ignores this, Mr Birling is both dumbfounded and aggravated as he is unaware of how to interact with somebody unphased by classism. Thus, this is the epitome of what **society should aim to abolish in order to improve**—classism, ignorance and pompousness.

Contrastingly, the Inspector remains composed and intolerant to Mr Birling’s pretentious and supercilious ways when interacting with him. The Inspector breaks Mr Birling’s egotistical dramatic monologue, where he expresses his self-proclaimed omniscience that the “titanic is unsinkable”. Not only does the dramatic irony undermine his ego, but the Inspector’s arrival also causes Mr Birling’s speeches to shorten as he [cutting through, massively]. Consequently, the Inspector’s intolerance to

Mr Birling’s blatant unscrupulousness, it causes Mr Birling’s egotistical speeches to shorten emulating how the introduction of socialism, which Priestley makes synonymous with morality, causes a reduction in egoistical and selfish individuals gaining power in society—this being key to **improving society**. Priestley introduces a key conflict of ideas that plagued society through the Inspector and Mr Birling—socialism vs capitalism. Socialism was the belief that wealth should be evenly distributed in society; socialists favoured the welfare system and promoted equality to abolish oppression. Capitalism however, was focused on the personal gain of the individual and wealth not being distributed—the wealth earned by the individual should be kept. Thus, as Priestley personifies this through the Inspector and Mr Birling, he portrays capitalism in a detrimental light to the audience and shows how **society can be improved** through abolishing the stagnant, regressive and selfish views of capitalism. By replacing these ideals with socialism, he shows the audience how this would promote a more equal society that aims to eliminate oppression rather than enforce it.

Priestley creates the Inspector as his dramatic vehicle in order to carry his strong political message about **ways society could be improved**. The Inspector acts as Priestley’s mouthpiece relaying how compassion and unity is pivotal in the union and **improvement of society**: “we are members of one body”. The collective pronoun “we” highlights the desperate need for collective responsibility by the

Birlings’—a microcosm for the parsimonious capitalist society of 1912. Most significantly, the Inspector’s choice of words echoes the biblical teaching, used in baptism, that we are “members of his body” in Christ. Thus, alike to Jesus, the Inspector shows the Birlings’ the **ways society can be improved** through highlighting the Christian need for togetherness. Alike to Jesus providing salvation for mankind, the Inspector’s final speech can be seen to be the salvation for the Birlings’.

Alternatively, in his final speech, Priestley uses the Inspector to highlight how the dehumanising behaviour of the upper classes towards the working class needs to be abolished in order to improve society. He is scathing of Eva’s treatment through the triple simile: “as if she was an animal, a thing, not a person”. The beatific image of “an animal” highlights their blatant disregard for her humanity through their dehumanising and exploitative treatment of her. This is exacerbated through the neglectful verb “thing”, intensifying how due to Eva belonging to a lower social class, the Birlings’ wilfully regarded her with a lack of compassion or recognition of her being a living being—Priestley uses this as exemplary for the reasons society needs to improve. Thus, through Priestley projecting his message through a 1912 society, he aims to critique the fixed social structure of 1912 and how society should never regress back to this. In 1912, society had little social mobility, alongside a rigid class divide—a continuation of the Victorian era’s fixed social structure. In the years following, society saw Acts, such as the Equal Franchise Act 1928, enfranchising the working classes and paving the way to a more equal society. Priestley utilises the Inspector, especially his final message, to hold up a mirror to his 1945 audience to examine the progress made in society in terms of equality between the classes. He highlights how there should be no regression back to the 1912 attitude, however society can still be improved by abolishing these oppressive and exploitative attitudes towards the working classes altogether.

Lastly, Priestley uses the Inspector as a moral compass to the Birling's to highlight how in order for the Birling's **to improve**, they have to recognise the detrimental impact of their actions. Thus, responsibility has to be taken in order to improve a person on an individual level as well **as society on a whole level**. The Inspector, from the start of his appearance in the play, emphasises how pivotal responsibility is as he tells Mr Birling "It's better to ask for the earth than to take it". The syntax on "ask" prior to "take" is used by the Inspector to highlight the order of importance that is required for **society to improve** and be collectively responsible- we must "ask" and share, opposed to the capitalist idea of "taking" to benefit oneself. Moreover, the idea of to "take" connotes to "steal", an idea that is scorned in the bible as it is a mortal sin. As the Edwardian era was highly religious, the religious teachings would be seen as integral to society. Thus, capitalists ideals completely dismiss these teachings- socialism could be seen to be bringing society back to its moral foundations and be a practical solution for society to improve on their immoral ways. By Priestley making the Inspector have a profound positive change on characters such as Sheila and Eric, making him synonymous with responsibility, he reinforces that there is a simple solution to improve societies neglectful nature- to be accountable and responsible for your individual actions. Priestley's contemporary audience would be in agreement with this remedy for society, as in 1945 there was an electoral swing with Labour winning the election by a landslide victory of 10.7%. The Labour party favoured social reform, personal liberty and individual responsibility, hence a 1945 society largely agreed that society could be improved by being more responsible and compassionate. Thus, Priestley capitalises on this large emerging socialist view by making the Inspector synonymous with responsibility to show his audience that responsibility can diminish the parsimonious attitudes in society, as well as encourage positive change.

In a final effort to concatenate, Priestley highlights through the Inspector a plethora of ways society could be improved. He alludes to his audience that improvements could stem from diminishing ignorant capitalist views whilst simultaneously promoting unity and responsibility in society. Thus, he ultimately shows that the improvement of society is synonymous with adopting responsible socialist beliefs.