

# Grade 9 An Inspector Calls Essay

NOVEMBER 2020 PAPER

## JB Priestley: *An Inspector Calls*

Either

0 1

Mr Birling says, '...a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own'.

How far does Priestley present Mr Birling as a man who cares only for himself and his family?

Write about:

- what Mr Birling says and does
- how far Priestley presents Mr Birling as a man who cares only for himself and his family.

[30 marks]  
AO4 [4 marks]

or

0 2

How far does Priestley present male characters as irresponsible in the play?

Write about:

- one or more of the male character(s)
- how far Priestley presents one or more of the male character(s) as irresponsible.

[30 marks]  
AO4 [4 marks]

## PLAN

- Mr B= irresponsible in act 1 and act 3
- Gerald= is he a victim? Still remains irresponsible
- The inspector= paragon of responsibility, is a moral compass to the Birling's

## HOW FAR DOES PRIESTLEY PRESENT MALE CHARACTERS AS IRRESPONSIBLE IN THE PLAY?

Mr Birling is presented as the epitome of irresponsibility as he wilfully refuses to acknowledge his wrongdoings; his stagnancy and irresponsibility is exacerbated through the cyclical structure within the play. Mr Birling's continual lack and denial of responsibility is prevalent as he ridicules ideas of socialism as he knows that it is synonymous with responsibility: "That fellow obviously didn't like us. He was prejudiced from the start. Probably a socialist or some sort of crank". The adverb "obviously" shows his arrogance, ignorance and how rapid he is to dismiss anything that would make him face his responsibility, he turns rather defensive and aggressive at the prospect of someone threatening his respectability, which may again stem from a place of insecurity. Thus, Mr Birling serves to be microcosmic for the older stagnant generation of capitalists as he doesn't allow there to be any question of him being responsible. Priestley presents Mr Birling as stagnant within his capitalism and irresponsible, he employs a cyclical structure as the play ends in the same manner it begins, with Mr Birling offering Gerald a drink. Alcohol is used as a motif of superficial wealth and materialism, but also irresponsibility- it serves as a reminder of the hedonistic lifestyle capitalists indulged in. Therefore, Mr Birling is the epitome of the hedonist 1912 capitalists that plagued society and reflects the detrimental impact of Britain being largely capitalist and Conservative at the time. Priestley therefore constructs Mr Birling as the archetype of irresponsible capitalists to vilify and expose ideas of capitalism to his audience. He demonstrates capitalist ideas lead to an irresponsible regressive society opposed to a progressive responsible society- the antithesis of what a post WW2 society would want.

Alternatively, Gerald's irresponsibility is more complex. Gerald's worldwide irresponsible view, is merely a product of his upbringing and thus he is almost presented as a victim of his society, trapped within his social standing as he is puppeteered by the views of his parents. It is clear Gerald conforms to the archetype of an irresponsible capitalist as in response to Mr Birling's capitalist suggestion that Gerald's relations with Sheila would allow them to amalgamate businesses to push for "lower costs and higher prices". Gerald replies "Hear, hear! And I think my father would agree to that." On a surface level, this displays Gerald as supportive of irresponsible capitalist values, with the preoccupation of maximising profits in a selfish manner, even at the expense of others. Upon deeper inspection, however, Gerald is perhaps an opportunity to explore how these views became hardwired and internalised; throughout Act One Gerald references his "mother" and "father" on multiple occasions showing how his irresponsibility is an internalised unconscious belief. However, the empathy of Gerald being a victim is rapidly shattered in Act 3 when he is quick to suppress and downplay the events of the evening stating "Everything's all right now, Sheila. (Holds up the ring.) What about this ring?" exposing his remorse seen earlier in the play as specious and performative. The use of the noun "ring" as a metonym for marriage displays Gerald's materialistic view of marriage, it ignores any sense of emotion or love and reinforces how he uses materialism, once again, to cower away from responsibility. He reverts to this symbol of traditional power and possession to reassert himself; he finds comfort in the ingrained societal beliefs which make life 'easy' for him and make it 'easy' for him to be irresponsible. Thus, Gerald's ease to slip back to being irresponsible exposes the individuals in 1912 who profited of the rigid class system as they were allowed to be irresponsible in the upper echelons of society. The lack of social mobility in 1912 led to 25% of individuals living in poverty. Thus, Priestley constructs Gerald to be a microcosm of individuals who easily retreat into their protected class to infuriate the audience that people in society who are irresponsible, epitomised through Gerald, are allowed to retreat into their money and materialism while others suffer. Priestley advocates socialism as the answer to this unfairness within society.

Contrastingly, unlike to the irresponsible male characters of Mr Birling and Gerald, the Inspector is the antithesis of irresponsible as he is a paragon of responsibility and acts as a moral compass to the Birlings. He emphasises the immense need for collective responsibility, this explores where he critiques Mr Birling directly for it being “better to ask for the earth than 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 be collectively responsible- we must “ask” and share, opposed to the capitalist ideas of “taking” to benefit oneself. As Priestley’s mouthpiece, the Inspector propagates the message of responsibility, showing how it is synonymous with socialism, to shatter the [pink and intimate] view of the Birlings. Moreover, Priestley presents the Inspector as the exact opposite of irresponsibility through his final speech when he appears prophetic when he uses the triplet “fire and blood and anguish”. The polysyndeton reinforces the sempiternal torture they will face if they continue to part with their responsibility- his prophetic, omniscient element makes this message seem more daunting and important about responsibility. The Inspector’s use of religious allusions would have been salient in a highly religious Edwardian society. Religion underpinned morality within the era, thus any deviation from religious teachings, especially embodying of the 7 deadly sins, would have been seen as the ultimate sin. Thus, Priestley uses the Inspector as a dramatic vehicle to carry his message of socialism and responsibility through a religious lens. He is didactic to his audience that socialist tendencies and beliefs, encourage morality on a personal and Godly level. This would make his audience see how deviation from God is linked to irresponsibility, which is promoted by capitalism, thus making his audience see socialism as the only way to reunite with God.

In a final effort to concatenate, Priestley utilises the male characters in the play to highlight how the male characters who were capitalist, were both inextricably bound to being irresponsible. However, he constructs the Inspector, the only male character of the 3 who is socialist, to be the antithesis of irresponsibility. Thus, Priestley shows how socialism promotes responsible individuals, and consequently a progressive society, capitalism does the opposite.