

DRAMATIC METHODS

**Dramatic pauses and cliff-hanger:** Priestley uses many dramatic pauses to create tension and cliff-hangers throughout the play. The cliff-hangers are used not only to build drama, but to give the audience space to contemplate and question their own actions, and opinions on the actions of the characters.

**E.g** A significant dramatic pause is used at the end of Act One when the Inspector says to Sheila and Gerald 'Well?'

**Dramatic Irony:** characters are unaware of something that the audience is aware of. Having just lived through two world wars, the audience are able to see the irony of Mr Birling's early speeches in which he is optimistic about the future. The audience knows he is wrong, which Priestley does to undermine Mr Birling as a character and show the audience his faults. eg "The Germans don't want war. nobody wants war".

**Repetition:** In real life people repeat themselves - Priestley uses this technique to add a sense of realism and character to his dialogue. Eric says 'He could. He could have kept her on instead of throwing her out.' In this case, the repetition shows that Eric is a little uncertain of himself, he hesitates and then repeats himself. Therefore repetition could also be used to indicate frustration, emphasis on the point, or uncertainty.

**Stage directions:** Priestley uses stage directions in order to convey social standing or a power dynamic. For example, at the beginning of the play Arthur is seated at the head of the table: this reflects his sense of self importance. He is also sitting a long way from his wife, perhaps suggesting some distance between them. Eric is also seated downstage, apart from the rest of the family; this is an early hint that he is perhaps hiding something from his parents. Stage directions are also used to portray each character’s emotion whilst delivering their lines. E.g '(rather impatiently) Yes, yes. Horrid business.'

**Fluency and length:** Priestley varies the length of the lines the characters deliver. At first, Mr Birling speaks with enormous fluency, delivering long, self-assured speeches. In contrast, Eric initially delivers lines with pauses and breaks in them. Short, snappy dialogue speeds up the action. Longer speeches can deliver key themes and ideas eg. The Inspector’s final speech.

Eg. Priestley gives Sheila the short line “because I was in a furious temper” when explaining her actions at the start of the play. By the end, her speeches have become longer and more contemplative, showing remorse for her actions.

**Sound effects:** Notice how the phone and the doorbell often interrupt Mr Birling’s speeches. This is Priestley’s way of undermining the credibility of what Mr Birling says.

CONTEXT AND WRITER’S INTENTIONS

**Priestley set the play in the year 1912:** Just before WWI and the sinking of the Titanic. A moment of rising international tensions and industrial expansion. The end of Victorian era saw the demise of the rigid class system, although class was still a very prominent part of how society was run. Labour Party, founded in 1900, gaining momentum. The Russian Revolution began in 1917.

**Priestley wrote the play in 1945:** People were recovering from six years of warfare, danger and uncertainty. Class distinctions were greatly reduced as a result of two world wars: rationing, evacuation and the armed forces all helped people to pull together for a common goal. Women had a more valued place in society. There was a desire for social change.. Following WW2, Labour Party won a landslide victory over Winston Churchill and the Conservatives.

**J.B Priestley:** Priestley was a committed socialist and a great deal of his writing conveys his political beliefs. Priestley was very critical of social inequality of life in Britain in the last half of the 20th century. He had a war-time radio broadcast, so would have been a well-known name.

**Socialism:** Supported by Priestley, Seen explicitly in Birling’s dismissive mention of the ‘Bernard Shaws and H.G Wellses’ both the noted Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and the father of science iction H. G. Wells (1866-1946) were well-known and outspoken socialists. Socialism is based on the empowerment of a society's lower classes (such as Eva Smith)— the people who make and manufacture goods – and the idea that the community as a whole owns and regulates the means of production, distribution and exchange.

**Capitalism:** Mr Birling is a stereotypical capitalist. Even down to the stage directions where his wealth is shown through his ‘portliness’; fatness was a luxury and showed disposable income. By making Mr Birling such a morally corrupt character, J.B Priestley makes his critique of capitalism’s corrupting nature clear.

**Gender roles:** women had very set gender roles in Edwardian England—in particular upper class women who were expected to marry to secure their future and their fortunes. A marriage partner was an absolutely critical choice and might not have been made out of love for that partner. After WWII, gender roles changed—women had done work during WWII that usually men would have done. Perceptions were shifting towards women. In 1928 women finally had the right to vote on the same terms as men (over 21 years old). Suffragette movement fought for women’s right to vote and created social change.

GENRE

An Inspector Calls is a play which fits into three possible genres:

1) A well-made play

**What is it?:** A well-made play is a popular dramatic genre from the 19th-century. In a well-made play **the plot is intricate and complex** and the action builds to a climax.

**Why is it effective?:** This structure allows J B Priestley to manipulate the audience. They do not know what happened to Eva Smith and so each revelation about her treatment by the Birlings and Gerald Croft adds to the drama. Each revelation is more shocking than the last and so Priestley cleverly builds to the climax.

2) A morality play

**What is it?:** Morality plays were popular during the 15th and 16th-centuries. Historically **they sought to teach the audience lessons** that focused on the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. Whilst characters who committed these sins were punished, morality plays showed that if a character repented then they could redeem themselves.

**Why is it effective?:** Priestley uses the morality play structure to teach a 20th-century audience a series of lessons that relate to his beliefs about social responsibility, age, gender and class. The audience is invited to enjoy judging these characters - they are also forced to question their own behaviour.

3) A crime thriller

**What is it?:** A crime thriller is a genre that tells a **gripping tale based around a crime**. The audience receives clues on who has committed the crime and will enjoy trying to guess what happened before the end of the action. *An Inspector Calls* is a crime thriller because the action centres around the suicide of Eva Smith.

**Why is it effective?** The crime thriller genre encourages the audience to become involved in the events of the play. In this case they would be considering who is 'more' to blame for the death of Eva Smith. Ultimately, Priestley makes the audience suspects, their behaviour is questioned and they are left wondering if they had committed any 'crimes' like the Birlings had.

SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS

How does Priestley use Eva Smith to present ideas about poverty in *An Inspector Calls*?

Write about

- What Eva’s life is like in the play
- How Priestley uses Eva to represent the lives of poor people

How does Priestley present Gerald’s relationships with women in An Inspector Calls?

Write about

- The way Gerald treats women in the play
- How Priestley presents Gerald’s relationship with women

EXAM TIPS

You’ll have a choice of two questions for An Inspector Calls. **Answer only ONE.**

Usually there will be a choice of a ‘character’ question or ‘theme’ question. We find the ‘theme’ question is a better choice to gain maximum marks.

Plan your answer—what’s your thesis/big idea you’re going to lead your essay with? What evidence do you have? You might analyse structure and dramatic devices as well as zoom in on the language choices Priestley makes.

Remember the characters aren’t real. They are constructs used to give us a message.

