

01 To what extent do you agree that Mrs Birling is the most to blame for the death of the character Eva Smith in “An Inspector Calls”?

Write about:

How Priestley presents Mrs Birling is presented as being to blame

How Priestley presents ideas about blame in the play

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

It is clear that whilst Mrs Birling is heavily to blame for the death of the character Eva Smith, it would be ignoring Priestley’s main message of the play if we did not state that all were to blame for the tragic suicide of the character Eva Smith due to our selfish ways.

As mentioned above, there is no doubt that Mrs Birling (who represents the female members of the upper classes at the time the play was set and beyond) must take some responsibility for the death of Eva Smith. Whilst being interviewed by the Inspector, rather than demonstrate a sense of remorse or empathy the character states, “I think she only had herself to blame”. Not only does the use of the personal pronoun demonstrate that the character highlights her personal view of the character but also highlights the sense of individualism which the writer highlights is the reason members of society (represented by the character Eva Smith) feel forced to commit such extreme acts. Moreover, the sentence replicates a comment uttered earlier by the character’s husband which not only suggests that both figures are equally to blame but also reinforces the notion that this selfish behaviours, such as ignoring Eva Smith’s plea for charity, harms those less fortunate.

Moreover, there is no doubt that other characters are also just as responsible for the death of Eva Smith. Both Mr and Mrs Birling state it is their “duty” to harm the working class with the character Mr Birling stating that his “duty” is to “keep labour costs down”. The noun phrase “labour costs” is used by the writer to represent the working classes which clearly demonstrates that Mr Birling (and the capitalists he represents) consider it their job to suppress and actually harm the working class as seen through the adjective “down” which can represent the emotions of the working class as well as their physical position within society. Many of the audience of the time would have been reminded of the national strikes in 1911 which actually lead to the military killing strikers who simply no longer wanted to be kept “down” by those in power. Priestley’s reference to the national strikes is explored further in a quote used earlier by the character Mr Birling who suggests that “if you don’t come down sharply on these people they will soon ask for the Earth”. The verb “sharply” once more highlights the physical and psychological harm those in power are prepared to use in order to harm the “millions” whom Eva Smith represents. In addition the demonstrative phrase “these people” reinforces the sense of division Mr Birling and those he represents feel towards the working class, thus demonstrating that it cannot be Mrs Birling alone who is to blame.

Finally, the notion that we must all take some portion of the blame when it comes to the death of Eva Smith is demonstrated through the Inspector’s final speech; “ One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do”. The adjective “intertwined” not only highlights a sense of being connected, but just like a piece of rope, Priestley is suggesting that we are stronger for working with the rest of society, rather than acting selfishly. Also, by using the phrase “millions still left with us” Priestley suggest that we (through the use of the collective noun “us”) must ensure that we do not allow society to “suffer” in the “fire, blood and anguish” which “millions” have already experienced due to the two world wars many in the audience would have lived through- highlighting that we are therefore at fault for the death of Eva Smith.

Overall, Priestley wants the audience to understand that to create a better society for all, we must all remember that we are “links in a chain” which therefore highlights the notion that Mrs Birling alone cannot be to blame for the death of Eva Smith and that if we are to avoid any future “anguish” we must act now in order to avoid another tragic “suicide”.