

## A quick summary

J B Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* centres on the suicide of a young woman known as Eva Smith.

During the play, the wealthy and comfortable Birling family are celebrating Sheila Birling's engagement to Gerald Croft when their meal is interrupted by the visit of Inspector Goole, who is investigating Eva's death.



The family are shocked by Eva's death, but all of them refuse to take any **responsibility** for what has happened. The Inspector questions each and every member of the family and shows them that their lives are all connected to Eva and her death in some way.

### In more detail:

The Birlings are celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling (the Birlings' daughter) to Gerald Croft, whose family own a rival business to that of Arthur Birling – Sheila's father. The family are celebrating with champagne, cigars and many other luxuries that only a wealthy middle or upper class family of the time could afford.

Mr Birling seems very keen to impress Gerald and even speaks to him in private away from the rest of his family; Sheila mentions about Gerald having not come near her the previous summer; and Eric appears very nervous and anxious around his family. Although the atmosphere is mostly positive, there are hints that there are problems hidden under the surface.

Mrs Birling and Sheila leave the dining room to allow the men to speak on their own. Mr Birling gives Eric and Gerald advice about looking after yourself and not concerning yourself with others. As he is giving this speech, there is a ring at the door.

Edna, the maid, brings in a man who is known as Inspector Goole. A detailed description is provided of Goole and he is said to be serious but also demanding respect. He tells the family that he is investigating the suicide of Eva Smith, who had died after drinking a large quantity of disinfectant.

The Inspector shows Mr Birling a photo of Eva Smith (although



makes sure no one else sees it) and Birling admits that Eva used to work at his factory. However, she was later fired for being one of the ring-leaders of uprising and strike action after Birling refused to give any of his workers even a small pay rise. Birling argues that he pays usual rates to his workers and he is not responsible for what happened to Eva after she left his employment.

Sheila comes into the room and the Inspector wants to ask her some questions. It is revealed that Eva found work at a clothes shop after being fired by Birling. However, Eva was fired once more when the Inspector explains a customer complained about her. Sheila admits she was that



customer and the reason she got Eva fired was because a dress that Sheila tried on did not suit her and when Eva tried it on, it did. Sheila also believes she caught Eva laughing at her.

When Sheila finds out what happened to Eva, she immediately feels responsible for her death – in complete contrast to her father.

The Inspector then reveals Eva, unemployed once more, changed her name to Daisy Renton. Gerald Croft, Sheila's fiancé, gives away that he knew Daisy by his reaction. Sheila sees this.

The Act ends and the audience are waiting to find out how Gerald is connected to Daisy.

Sheila and Gerald are alone on stage and Gerald admits he did know Daisy, but Sheila explains to Gerald that the Inspector has already worked this out.

Mrs Birling tries to get rid of the Inspector but he remains.

Gerald reveals to Mrs Birling that her son Eric drinks a lot – she initially refuses to believe him – and he admits that he once had a relationship with Daisy. Sheila works out that this was during the one summer when he wouldn't go near her.

Gerald explains that he met Daisy at the Variety Theatre (which was known for prostitutes), and that he stopped Alderman Meggarty – an important man or 'dignitary' – getting involved with her, or essentially he 'rescued' her from his clutches.

Gerald helped Daisy by letting her stay in a friend's flat but she eventually became his mistress, which meant he was having an affair with her behind Sheila's back.

Gerald decided to later break off their relationship and gave her money to help her in the future.



Mrs Birling says she believes this relationship was 'disgusting', although Gerald does argue back. However, Sheila appreciates Gerald's honesty and says she respects him more now than she did.

Gerald asks to leave the room to get some fresh air after now realising Daisy has died. The Inspector allows him to do this, and during the time he is away the Inspector begins to interrogate Mrs Birling.

Mrs Birling eventually admits that she saw Eva/Daisy before she died. Mrs Birling was the chair of a local charity: the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation and Daisy, calling herself Mrs Birling, asked for financial help.

It is revealed that Daisy was pregnant at the time, and Mrs Birling used her power as chairwoman of the charity to deny her access to financial assistance.

Mrs Birling found it impudent or insulting that Daisy took on the name 'Mrs Birling' and she also felt the money and responsibility should come from the baby's father. Mrs Birling seems to take pride from her decision, although Sheila quickly realises the missing link here: Eric is the father. This happens after Mrs Birling has said the father of the child should be made an example of. Mrs Birling realises, just as Eric enters at the end of the scene, that her son is the father and she has effectively killed her own grandchild. The act ends on this note.

Eric asks for a drink and his parents refuse, but the Inspector explains it would help Eric through and so they agree.



Eric explains how he met Daisy at the same theatre bar as Gerald; they both got drunk and Eric accompanied Daisy back to her flat. There, Eric became very violent and Daisy reluctantly agreed to let him in where they slept together. They met again two weeks later and slept together once more.

Daisy revealed to Eric that she was pregnant with his baby, and he proposed to her. However, she refused stating he did not love her. Instead, she received gifts of money from him, but turned these down when she found out Eric was stealing the money from his father's business.

Mr and Mrs Birling are incensed that Eric has stolen £50 from them (a lot of money in 1912, it would be thousands of pounds now).

All of the family have been involved in her death, but a divide forms between the younger characters and the older family members. Whereas Eric and Sheila are willing to accept responsibility for what has happened, Mr and Mrs Birling (and to a degree Gerald) want to cover up their involvement to protect their reputation.

The Inspector then gives his famous 'fire and blood and anguish' speech, where he explains society must change or there will be violence. Goole says that everyone must feel responsible for everyone else.

Gerald and Mr and Mrs Birling begin to question the role of the Inspector: was he a real inspector? Was this all a hoax? Did the Inspector show the same photo to everyone?

Birling rings the local police station and finds out there is no Inspector Goole working there.

Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald begin to grow in confidence once more, knowing their reputations are intact and believe they can go back to where they were. However, Sheila and Eric have changed and cannot ignore what has happened.

A phone call comes from the police which Mr Birling answers: the police explain a young girl has committed suicide and a police inspector is coming over to ask them some questions.