‘AN INSPECTOR CALLS’ Activity worksheets

On a spring evening in 1912, the prosperous Birling family celebrates the engagement of their daughter to a promising young businessman. They make a toast to the future and individual prosperity. However, an unexpected caller quickly turns their merriment to bewilderment with the news of a young woman’s tragic death. The inspector’s enquiry - who is responsible? As the evening unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that the innocence of everyone in the room is in question.

THE CHARACTERS

Arthur Birling
Gerald Croft
Sheila Birling
Sybil Birling
Edna
Eric Birling
Inspector Goole

SETTING

The drawing room of the Birlings’ house in Brumley, an industrial city in the North Midlands. It is Spring 1912.
THE PLAYWRIGHT J.B. Priestley

J B Priestley wrote An Inspector Calls after the First World War and like much of his work contains controversial, politically charged messages.

John Boynton Priestley was born in Yorkshire in 1894. He knew early on that he wanted to become a writer, but decided against going to university as he thought he would get a better feel for the world around him away from *academia*. Instead, he became a junior clerk with a local wool firm at the age of 16.

When the First World War broke out, Priestley joined the infantry and only just escaped death on a number of occasions. After the war, he gained a degree from Cambridge University, then moved to London to work as a freelance writer. He wrote successful articles and essays, then published the first of many novels, *The Good Companions*, in 1929. He wrote his first play in 1932 and went on to write 50 more. Much of his writing was ground-breaking and controversial. He included new ideas about possible parallel universes and strong political messages.

During the Second World War he broadcast a massively popular weekly radio programme which was attacked by the Conservatives as being too left-wing. The programme was eventually cancelled by the BBC for being too critical of the Government.

He continued to write into the 1970s, and died in 1984.

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/)
BEFORE SEEING THE PLAY

Glossary I

**County:** of or denoting aristocratic people with an ancestral home in a particular county

**Drawing-room:** a room in a large private house in which guests can be received and entertained

**Enquiry:** an act of asking information

**Infirmary:** a place for the care of those who are ill or injured; a hospital

**Lodgings:** rented rooms, usually in the same residence as the owner

**Strike:** when employees refuse to work as a form of organized protest

**Tipsy:** slightly drunk

Activity 1: Read the text below then discuss

Context

In order to understand the play it is important to know the context in which J.B. Priestley wrote it. ‘An Inspector Calls’ was written after the Second World War. Keen to pioneer a new ‘morality’ in politics, Priestley’s chief concerns involved social inequality in Britain and the need for nuclear disarmament. The characters we see are not the same as those at the plays conclusion. The events of the evening change everyone, as well as their expectations of the future. Inspector Goole is instrumental in disturbing the harmony; a purposeful, mysterious character who forces the characters to confront each other's social responsibility, snobbery and guilt. But is the inspector as genuine as he seems? All these changes take place because of the visit of Inspector Goole. But who is Inspector Goole? And who is the girl whose suicide he is apparently investigating? Priestley deliberately set his play in 1912 because the date represented an era when all was very different from the time he was writing. In 1912, rigid class and gender boundaries seemed to ensure that nothing would change. Yet by 1945, most of those class and gender divisions had been breached. Priestley wanted to make the most of these changes. Through this play, he encourages people to seize the opportunity the end of the war had given them to build a better, more caring society.

- Why do you think J. B. Priestley concerns are social inequality and the need for nuclear disarmament?
- How is Inspector Goole described?
- Why in your opinion the word 'snobbery' is used?
• What does ‘rigid class’ refer to?
• What does ‘gender boundaries’ refer to?
• The author wanted ‘to build a better, more caring society’. Do you think this is important? Why?

**Activity 2: Reading Comprehension**

**PLOT**

At the Birlings' home in 1912, Arthur Birling, a wealthy mill owner and local politician, and his family are celebrating the engagement of his daughter Sheila to Gerald Croft, son of a competitor of Birling's. In attendance are his wife Sybil Birling and his son Eric. Unexpectedly Inspector Goole arrives and explains that a woman called Eva Smith killed herself by drinking strong disinfectant. He implies that she has left a diary naming people, including members of the Birling family. Goole produces a photograph of Eva and shows it to Arthur, who acknowledges that she worked in one of his mills. He admits that he dismissed her for her involvement in a workers' strike. He denies responsibility for her death. Sheila recognizes Eva's photograph as well. She confesses that Eva served her in a shop and Sheila contrived to have her fired. She admits that Eva's behaviour had been blameless and that the firing was motivated solely by her jealousy towards a pretty working-class woman. Sybil enters the room and Goole continues his interrogation, revealing that Eva was also known as Daisy Renton. Gerald admits that he met a woman by that name in a theatre bar. Goole reveals that Gerald had installed her as his mistress, and gave her money before ending the relationship. As an ashamed Gerald exits the room, Sheila signals that their engagement is over. Goole identifies Sybil as the head of a women's charity to which Eva/Daisy had turned for help. She eventually admits that Eva, pregnant and destitute, had asked the committee for financial aid and says that the father of the baby is a drunken young man who steals money. Sybil convinces the committee that the girl is a liar and the application should be denied. Despite vigorous cross-examination from Goole, Sybil denies any wrongdoing. Goole makes Sybil admit that the "drunken young man" should give a 'public confession, accepting all the blame'. Eric enters the room and admits that he drunkenly forced Eva to make love with him and stole £50 from his father's office to pay her off when she became pregnant. Arthur and Sybil break down, and the family dissolves into screaming recriminations. Goole accuses them of contributing to Eva's death. He reminds that actions have consequences. "If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish." Gerald returns, telling the family that there may be no 'Inspector Goole' on the police force. Arthur makes a call to
the Chief Constable, who confirms this. Placing a second call to the local infirmary, Gerald determines that no recent cases of suicide have been reported. But in the end something unexpected happens…

Are these statements true or false?

Arthur Birling is Sybil’s husband.
Eric Birling didn’t attend the celebration.
Sheila Birling is going to get married to Gerald Croft.
Inspector Goole was invited to the celebration.
Eva Smith drank strong disinfectant by accident.
Arthur Birling recognizes Eva Smith’s photograph.
Eva Smith wasn’t involved in a workers’ strike.
Sheila was jealous of Eva Smith.
Gerald admits that he met a woman called Eva Smith.
Gerald gave her money until their relationship ended.
Sybil turned for help to women’s charity.
Eva Smith was going to have a child.
Sybil accepts her responsibility for Eva’s death.
Eric stole money in order to help Eva Smith.
Eric parents are not worried about what he did.
Inspector Goole says that they are all responsible for Eva’s death.
THE CHARACTERS

FAMILY TREE

SYBIL BIRLING
A successful society hostess. As the wife of a prominent businessman and politician, Mrs. Birling is the perfect picture of respectability. She keeps a good table and a beautiful home. She is a gracious hostess, always conscious of what is proper. She feels it the duty of one in her position to be involved in the local charity work of the city, and she performs that duty admirably. She never forgets, however, the distinctions of class must be preserved.

SHEILA BIRLING
As the only daughter of wealthy parents, Sheila has been given every luxury. She has been educated as a gentleman’s daughter which would have included such basic subjects as reading, writing, languages, but it also would have trained her in poise, social graces and proper etiquette. She is now ready to take her place in the world of fashionable society. Sheila is engaged to Gerald Croft; an exciting event for the Birling family since the Croft family is clearly above them on the social ladder.

GERALD CROFT
The son of Sir George and Lady Croft. Gerald’s family owns Crofts Limited; a rival company to Birling Industries. In choosing Sheila as his wife, Gerald is marrying slightly “beneath” him socially, a fact that his mother does not approve of. Both he and Mr. Birling agree, however, that bringing both these companies together in the same family will be beneficial to both their interests. His marriage is not a marriage of convenience however; he is sincerely in love with Sheila Birling.

ARTHUR BIRLING
A successful businessman. As the owner of Birling & Co., Mr. Birling is one of England’s rising upper middle class citizens. He has provided a good life for his wife and children. He is a prominent man in local politics and has high hopes of being awarded a knighthood for his service to his political party.

ERIC BIRLING
The only son of Mr. and Mrs. Birling. Eric has been given more education than his father had the opportunity for. After attending English private school, he was sent on to study at a university. Eric has been working in his father’s business for about a year, but his father does not seem impressed with Eric’s contributions. Eric has more compassion for the lower classes than his father does and this creates tension in their relationship.

THE OTHERS

EDNA
The Birling’s maid. She is Irish by birth and has just immigrated to England.

INSPECTOR GOOLE
Nothing for certain is known about Inspector Goole, except the obvious fact that he does not behave like a police inspector.
NORTH MIDLANDS
(WHERE THE PLAY TAKES PLACE)

The North Midlands is an area in central England that includes the northern parts of Staffordshire, Nottinghamshire, and Derbyshire. These counties contain some of the most beautiful scenery in England.

During the Industrial Revolution, the railways and canals built through this part of England enabled the lace and cotton industries to grow enormously. Because the land was naturally rich in coal and iron ore, mining also became an important industry for the area.
WHY 1912?

There are no recorded interviews with J.B. Priestley which give a direct answer to why Priestley wrote the play in 1946 but set it in 1912. Judging by what we know of J.B. Priestley it is possible to guess. J.B. Priestley fought in WWI, and was a radio newscaster during WWII. He witnessed both of these wars that were being fought in order to save society. In *An Inspector Calls* written just after WWII, J.B. Priestley seems to be asking the question, “Just what kind of society are we fighting to save?”

The social issues that were so prevalent in the labor strikes of 1912 were still important in 1946, because the very definition of society means that human beings don’t live alone and that each one is responsible for their actions towards the other. By setting his characters in a time of innocence and hope, Priestley can speak even more strongly to his audiences who have lived through a time of despair. The pride and complacency of the Birling seems all the more foolish to an audience who knows what is about to happen to the English people. The lessons that Eric and Sheila learn are even more poignant when one realizes that very soon all classes in England, upper, middle and lower, will be involved in the same tragic war.
LIFE IN 1912

Politically

The Liberal Party* under Prime
Minister Asquith had been in power since the
General Election of 1910. Among the political
issues receiving the most attention at the time
was the need to improve working conditions for
the average English employee, and the question
of voting for women.

In 1911 the Shop Act had legislated a
maximum 60 hr workweek and had entitled
every employee to a half-holiday each week.
These conditions still sound harsh compared to
our modern workday, but they were a definite
improvement for the time. There was also a
great deal of discussion surrounding the issue of
a National Minimum Wage.

A vote for women was the other hot
political topic of the day. A group of women
known as the Suffragettes had been
campaigning for some time to gain the right to
vote, and their protests had become increasingly
aggressive. In March of 1912, for example, the
Suffragettes smashed shop windows in
Piccadilly Circus, and in Regent and Oxford
streets. Flaming rags were thrown into postal
boxes, golf greens were ruined by acid, and two
small railway stations suddenly burst into
flames. Even in St. Paul’s Cathedral, a bomb
was found beneath the Bishop’s throne. All of
these protests were specifically designed to
create sensational news that would keep the
cause of women’s votes in the press. None of
these actions resulted in loss of life, but the
Suffragettes declared an all out war on public
property.
Culturally

In 1911 the great Russian ballet company directed by Diaghilev was invited to England as a part of the Coronation celebration for the new King George. By 1912, all of fashionable London had fallen in love with the exotic, oriental scenery and vibrant costumes of ballets like Sheherazade and The Sleeping Princess. These Russian/Oriental influences were copied in women’s fashions and in interior decorating for several years afterward.

Some of the great Russian ballerinas like Tamara Karsavina and Anna Pavlova even left the Russian company and did solo tours in English music halls.

On the opposite end of the cultural scene, the musical revue, ‘Hullo, Ragtime’ was also taking London by storm. Young people of the upper classes were captivated by this strange, jazzy, American music. Soon ragtime songs were also playing in music halls throughout England, and strange dances like the Bunny Hop, the Turkey Trot and the Tango were becoming all the rage.
CLASS SYSTEM IN BRITAIN

Upper Class British Life in 1912

The social life of the upper classes of Britain was one of laborious* leisure. The “idle” rich crammed their days full of social duties and enclosed their “carefree” lives with the strictest rules of etiquette. During the year of his reign, King Edward’s personality had dominated the culture of the upper classes. He was a larger than life man who enjoyed good food, good sport, and pretty women; he pursued life with zest and the fashionable society of England enthusiastically followed his lead.

Even after the King’s death in 1910, the culture of the upper classes continued to be one of extravagant display as the Edwardians outdid themselves trying to outdo each other. J. B. Priestley remarked in his book “The Edwardians” that he believed the upper classes subconsciously knew their time was coming to an end because there seemed to be almost a desperation to the way they overdid everything. The Edwardians didn’t just serve delicious dinners; they served twelve course meals. Their women didn’t simply dress well; they had different kinds of dresses required for every meal and for each part of their day. On a normal day a woman of society changed her clothes six times. The trunks designed for women traveling into the country for a weekend were nicknamed “Noah’s Arks.”

This kind of life style focused all of the Edwardian’s attention on the outside show. A man could be rude to his family, but never to his acquaintances. Both husbands and wives could have affairs as long as the public appearance of happy family life was maintained. As long as one behaved according to the rules, and had enough money to maintain appearances then one had the Edwardian’s stamp of approval.

Class System in Britain

The life of the upper class described above was only experienced by a handful of people. Most people in Britain were not a part of that privileged set. The Birlings, for example, though wealthy would not have been part of the ‘high society.’ They would be more appropriately described as upper middle class. Mr. Birling did not inherit his money; he worked hard for it and must continue to work at earning it. The middle class during the Edwardian Era was also very concerned about appearances, but their concern was more for respectability, than for a flamboyant display of wealth. The life of the middle class could be better described as comfortable rather than colorful. It was the conservatives of this class who resented the ideas about socialism* and equality more than the rich. Since they owned the factories, which employed the workers and dealt with the lower classes on an every day basis, it was they who felt threatened by any change to the status quo.

The lower class of Edwardian England was composed of girls like Edna, the maid and Eva Smith, the factory worker. Often they were people who had come from English country towns to the big cities in search of work. Their workdays were long and their living conditions poor. Their children received only the most basic education.
Glossary II

Squiffy
A slang word meaning “drunk.” Other synonyms include “loaded,” “plastered,” “sloshed,” “soused,” and “tipsy.”

Kaiser
The official title of the German Ruler, equal in status to the English King and the Russian Tsar. Kaiser Wilhelm II, who ruled Germany in 1912, was the last German leader to use that title.

George Bernard Shaw
(1856-1950) An Irish playwright and theater critic. Shaw was also a leading spokesman for socialism. He was well known as an advocate for woman’s rights and the equality of income.

H.G. Wells
(1866-1946) A popular English novelist famous for his writings in science fiction. Wells’ first novel, The Time Machine (1895), poked fun at the class division in English society. Like Shaw, Wells was also a proponent of socialism.

Lord Mayor
The title given to the mayor of a large city. The Mayor was appointed by the town council from among the council members. The Mayor automatically became the chairman of the council meeting, and was given the ceremonial title of ‘first citizen’.

Magistrate
Also known as a Justice of the Peace, a magistrate acted as a judge for the prosecution of minor offences.

Socialist
A political ideology that first became popular in the late 19th and early 20th century. Although there are many different branches of socialism they all share a common belief in an egalitarian society with an economy that benefits all people rather than just a few.

Egalitarian
The moral theory that equality ought to prevail throughout society.

Laborious
Hard-working, tough, diligent, and difficult.

Victorian Era
From 1837-1901 during the reign of Queen Victoria. This era was marked by the industrial revolution and the rise of the British Empire.

Edwardian Era
1901 to 1910 during the reign of King Edward. This era was marked by a rigid class system and a growing appreciation for art.

Left-Wing Politics
On the political spectrum it coincides with socialism, liberalism and in extreme cases communism. Left-wing politicians fight for equality, civil rights, and labor rights.

Conservative Party
The right wing of the political spectrum. Conservatives tend to be opposed to fast moving change and prefer slow moving change over a long period of time. They defend capitalism, traditional values, and preservation of wealth and power.

Liberal Party
They advocate for human rights and civil liberties and sometimes for the redistribution of wealth; taking the wealth from the rich and giving it to the poor.

Tsar
A male emperor or ruler. Term primarily used in Russia.

Liberalism
A political theory believing in political and civil liberties along with the innate goodness of all human beings.

Alderman
A member of the town council. Each alderman represented a city district, and worked with the mayor to run the city government.

AFTER SEEING THE PLAY

Activity 3: Character description

Choose a character and describe it. You must mention if you think that character changes at the end of the play or not and explain why. Use the adjectives below to help you.

proud optimistic selfish cold irritable dismissive patronizing prejudicial jealous curious snob compassionate perceptive wise assertive embarrassed nervous drunk nervous furious attractive authoritative mysterious