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How does Edna the maid contribute to the play?

A Character Analysis

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'An Inspector Calls' is a play by J.B Priestley, written for the traumatised survivors of the Second World War. It has themes based heavily on change and caring for each other. The play follows the stubborn, bourgeois Mr Birling and his family as they are interrogated by the unsettling Inspector Goole. 'An Inspector Calls' has long been analysed and interpreted, uncovering the intelligent crafting of both the characters and the plot to deliver a striking, timeless message. The message can be summed up in Goole's final words:

"Goole *We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish."*

Naturally, it is the Inspector, the Birlings and Gerald who are the individuals remembered after reading the play-text or watching the production. However, as any good director will argue, it is the smaller details which make all the difference. They help to create a more relatable environment for the spectator. This is certainly applicable within 'An Inspector Calls'. For example, the use of detailed description about the furniture give key clues as to what class the Birlings are, and therefore influences how the reader interprets the motives and actions of the characters. Why then, shouldn't a subsidiary character, who gets little more of a mention than the furniture, not also contribute to the play?

I believe that Priestley shaped his play so tightly that every character has a purpose. Therefore, within this essay, I will analyse **Edna the maid** to see what her purpose is, and how that purpose affects the play as a whole.

At first glance, it seems that Edna contributes very little to the play. After all, she is only there to show the Inspector in. Her lines seem very stereotypical of her role as a maid in an upper-crust working class residence. However, once properly studied, it seems that Edna may be more than just a compliant door opener...

Interestingly, while Priestley explains how the set should be and introduces the characters, Edna is the last to be mentioned

"At rise of curtain, the four Birlings and Gerald are seated at the table... Edna the parlourmaid, is just clearing the table,"

Hierarchy is a key concept within 'An Inspector Calls'. It could be argued that it is what drives the main characters actions. Priestley immediately establishes that Edna is at the bottom of the hierarchy and not of any real importance in the eyes of the Birlings and Gerald. He does this by describing her as "the parlourmaid", emphasising the



An Inspector Calls Summary

Fill in the blanks in this summary of 'An Inspector Calls' and then keep it for your revision.

One evening in the spring of _____ the _____ are celebrating their daughter's engagement to _____ who is also present. Heated and self-_____ and _____, sitting along with their son _____, are pleased with themselves. Being _____ the happy couple, and Gerald presents Sheila with a _____ which absolutely _____ her.

Birling makes a lengthy _____ not only congratulating Gerald and Sheila, but also commenting on the state of the _____ the politics _____, particularly referring to the example of the "_____". "Blaise, which set sail the week earlier. Being older himself at _____."

The _____ leave the room, and _____ follows them. Being and Gerald _____ the fact that Gerald might have "done better for [himself] society", Sheila is Gerald's _____, defining Gerald as Gerald that he is in the room for a _____ on the _____.

When Eric returns, Birling continues giving advice, and he is particularly annoyed by "_____ for himself" conditions when the _____ (PCC).

It is an _____ who returns a _____ from Birling. Birling is surprised, as an ex-_____ and an alderman, that he has never seen the Inspector before, though he knows the _____ public face pretty well. The Inspector explains that he is here to investigate the _____ of a _____ who died two hours ago in the laboratory after committing suicide by _____, the name was Eric Smith, and the Inspector brings with him a _____ which he shows to _____ but not to anyone else.

It is revealed that _____ worked in Birling's works, from which she was _____ after being a _____ in an unsuccessful _____ to demand better _____ for Birling's workers. The Inspector outlines that "a chain of events" might be _____ for the girl's death, and _____ for the rest of the play. _____, a _____ member of the family, asking questions about the part they played in _____'s life. We then discover that _____ Birling encountered Eric Smith at _____, where _____, probably isolated that she was _____ Sheila feels tremendously _____ about her part in Eric's death. It becomes clear that each member of the family might have _____ of the responsibility.

Eric Smith then, we discover, changed her name to Daisy _____ and it is by this name that she encountered _____, with whom she had a _____ produced _____ Sheila is not as _____ as one might expect; indeed, she seems to have already _____ why Gerald was absent from their relationship last summer. He put her up in a _____ he was looking after, made love to her, and gave her gifts of _____ but after a while, he _____ the relationship. Gerald asks the Inspector, whose counsel

Questions for "An Inspector Calls"

- How does Priestley present the character Sheila during the course of the play? How do you think the Inspector affects some of Birling's views?
- 'An Inspector Calls' has been called 'a play of contrasts'. Write about how Priestley presents some of the contrasts in the play.
- What do you think Priestley is trying to tell us about responsibility in the play? You should write about:
 - what some of the characters say, and do
 - the methods Priestley uses to present his ideas on responsibility.
- How does Priestley present Gerald in 'An Inspector Calls'? You should write about:
 - what Gerald says and does
 - how other characters respond to him
 - the methods Priestley uses to present Gerald.
- Write about the differences between Sheila and Eric Birling in the play. You should write about:
 - what they say and do
 - their different attitudes
 - the methods Priestley uses to present Sheila and Eric Birling.
- How does Priestley present Eric in 'An Inspector Calls'? You should write about:
 - what Eric says and does
 - how other characters respond to him
 - the methods Priestley uses to present Eric.
- Priestley criticises the selfishness of people like Birling. What methods does he use to present this selfishness?
- How does Priestley show that tension is at the heart of the Birling family?
- To what extent is it possible to feel sympathy for the character of Eric Birling?

Mrs Birling: Now, Arthur, I don't think you ought to talk business on an occasion like this.

Sheila: Neither do I. All wrong.

Birling: Quite so, I agree with you. I only mentioned it in passin. What I did want to say was – that Sheila's a lucky girl – and I think you're a pretty fortunate young man too, Gerald.

Gerald: I know I am – this once anyhow.

Birling: (*raising his glass*) So here's wishing the pair of you – the very best that life can bring. Gerald and Sheila.

Mrs Birling: (*raising her glass, smiling*) Yes, Gerald. Yes, Sheila darling. Our congratulations and very best wishes!

Gerald: Thank you.

Mrs Birling: Eric!

Eric: (*rather noisily*) All the best! She's got a nasty temper sometimes – but she's not bad really. Good old Sheila!

Sheila: Chump! I can't drink to this, can I? When do I drink?

Gerald: You can drink to me.

Sheila: (*quite and serious now*) All right then. I drink to you, Gerald.

//for a moment they look at each other//

Gerald: (*quietly*) Thank you. And I drink to you – and hope I can make you as happy as you deserve to be.

Sheila: (*trying to be light and easy*) You be careful – or I'll start weeping.

Gerald: (*smiling*) Well, perhaps this will help to stop it. (*he produces a ring case.*)

Sheila: (*excited*) Oh – Gerald – you've got it – is it the one you wanted me to have?

Gerald: (*giving the case to her*) Yes – the very one.

Sheila: (*taking out the ring*) Oh – it's wonderful! Look – mummy – isn't it a beauty?
Oh – darling –
(*she kisses Gerald hastily.*)

Eric: steady the buffs!

Sheila: (*who has put the ring on, admiringly*) I think it's perfect. Now I really feel engaged.

Mrs Birling: So you ought, darling. It's a lovely ring. Be careful with it.

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