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# An Inspector Calls

## Women in the Play

GCSE English Literature | J.B. Priestley | AQA



A clear revision guide to how Priestley presents women, class inequality, and social responsibility.



Sheila Birling



Eva Smith



Sybil Birling



Key Quotes



Essay Support





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# How Priestley Presents Women

*Big ideas, context, and key themes*



## BIG IDEA

Priestley presents women in different ways to expose gender inequality, class prejudice, and the need for social responsibility.



## CONTEXT

- Written in 1945, set in 1912.
- Patriarchal society gave men more power than women.
- Working-class women had few rights or protections.
- Priestley challenges selfish upper-class attitudes.



## SHEILA BIRLING

Starts sheltered and materialistic, but develops empathy and responsibility. Priestley uses her to show that change is possible.



## EVA SMITH

Represents vulnerable working-class women. Though absent from the stage, she becomes the moral centre of the play.



## SYBIL BIRLING

Represents cold upper-class prejudice. She judges poor women harshly and refuses compassion.



## INSPECTOR GOOLE

Acts as the moral voice of the play, exposing how society fails women like Eva Smith.

## KEY THEMES



Class



Gender



Responsibility



Power



Inequality



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# Character and Quote Analysis


*What each character reveals about women in the play*



## 1. Sheila Birling

“ But these girls aren't cheap labour — they're people.”

 **Technique:** Contrast and moral awakening


 **Analysis:** Sheila begins to recognise the humanity of working-class women. Priestley presents her as a younger character who can learn, change, and challenge injustice.



## 2. Eva Smith

“ Young and pretty and warm-hearted.”


 **Technique:** Positive adjectives


 **Analysis:** Eva is humanised as kind and vulnerable. Priestley uses her to represent exploited working-class women whose suffering is often ignored.



## 3. Sybil Birling

“ Girls of that class —”

 **Technique:** Dismissive tone and class prejudice


 **Analysis:** Sybil reduces poor women to a social category rather than seeing them as individuals. Priestley criticises her lack of empathy and rigid class attitudes.



## 4. Inspector Goole

“ Each of you helped to kill her.”

 **Technique:** Direct address and accusatory tone

 **Analysis:** The Inspector forces the family to confront collective responsibility. He exposes the wider social system that damages women like Eva Smith.



### Exam Link

Always connect the quote to Priestley's message about society, not just the character alone.



# How to Write a Strong Essay

*A simple structure for top-grade analysis*

1



## Read the question

Focus on how women are presented and what Priestley is criticising.

2



## Start with a thesis

Give a clear overall argument about gender, class, and responsibility.

3



## Use short evidence

Choose brief quotations that directly support your point.

4



## Analyse the method

Comment on language, tone, structure, or characterisation.

5



## Explain the effect

Show what Priestley wants the audience to think or feel.

6



## Link to the message

Finish by connecting your ideas to Priestley's social criticism.



## Useful Vocabulary

- patriarchal
- inequality
- prejudice
- responsibility
- empathy
- exploitation
- authority
- transformation
- class
- social criticism



## Mini Paragraph Model

*Priestley presents Sheila as a character capable of change. When she says, 'these girls aren't cheap labour — they're people', the contrast shows her moral development. Priestley uses Sheila to challenge how upper-class society treats working-class women and to suggest that empathy can lead to progress.*



**Top Tip:** keep linking each quote back to Priestley's wider criticism of society.