**How does Priestley use the character of Eva Smith to present ideas about responsibility?**

**Exemplar Essay**

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***An Inspector Calls* (1945) by J B Priestley (1894-1984)**

**How does Priestley use the character of Eva Smith to present ideas about responsibility?**

**Essay Framework**

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| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Introduction**: Eva Smith’s role in *An Inspector Calls* is absolutely central, and yet she remains elusive, as she never appears on stage. | Inspector: ‘agony’  ‘millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths’ | suicide, ambiguity, one person, representative, working class, society, social responsibility, social change, socialism |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph One:** A key aspect of Eva Smith’s role is to provoke empathy, leading to an acceptance of responsibility. | Inspector: ‘we are members of one body’, ‘agony’, ‘burnt her inside out’, ‘she lies with a burnt-out inside on a slab’  Eric: ‘My God!  Sheila: ‘how horrible!’  Birling: ‘Just keep quiet, Eric, and don’t get excited’  Mrs Birling: ‘You are behaving like an hysterical child’  Inspector: ‘it would do us all a bit of good if sometimes we tried to put ourselves in the place of these young women’  Sheila: ‘Yes, I expect it would’ | intense suffering, respond, shock, calm, emotion, over-emotional |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Two:** Priestley aims to build sympathy for Eva so that she will be seen entirely as an innocent victim of other people’s selfish actions: Eva herself is not held responsible. | Inspector: Eva was fired ‘for wanting twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and six’ | power and wealth, socialist government, misrepresented, strike, act of industrial warfare |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Three:** Priestley shows that Sheila is clearly responsible for Eva Smith’s sufferings. | Inspector: ‘jealous’, ‘punish the girl just because she made you feel like that’  Sheila: ‘You began to learn something. And now you've stopped. You're ready to go on in the same old way’  ‘Father threw this girl out because she asked for decent wages. I went and pushed her farther out, right into the street, just because I was angry and she was pretty.’ | selfish spite, guilty, full responsibility, accuses her parents, misrepresentation, equal blame, unreasonable, innocent victim |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Four:** Priestley removes any responsibility from Eva herself by presenting her suicide as something which was done to her, rather than as something she did herself. | Inspector: **‘chain** of events’  ‘may have **determined** what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have **driven** her to suicide.’  Sheila: ‘between us we **drove** that girl to commit suicide’  Eric: ‘we did her in all right’ | external influences, free will, social determinism, no control,  free moral choices |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Conclusion:** In conclusion, Priestley uses the character of Eva Smith to present responsibility as something which rests entirely with those who have wealth and power: the working classes are innocent victims of oppression. |  | blame, sufferings, oppressed masses, revolution, 1917, Russia, 1945, London, 1946, Labour, socialism, force of arms, force of law |
| **Notes:** | | |

**How does Priestley use the character of Eva Smith to present ideas about responsibility?**

Eva Smith’s role in *An Inspector Calls* is absolutely central, and yet she remains elusive, as she never appears on stage, but haunts the play from the moment the Inspector arrives and announces that she committed suicide and died in ‘agony’. Priestley even casts doubt on whether she is in fact one person or multiple people, and this ambiguity is never entirely resolved. This must be a deliberate decision on Priestley’s part, because he wants to write a play that is generally applicable. He does not want his play only to be about the sufferings of one working class woman; he wants her sufferings to be generally applied to the plight of the working classes, to the ‘millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths’ that the Inspector invokes in his closing speech. The overall point is about society, and about social responsibility, so Eva Smith must be generally representative of the poor and oppressed if she is to be Priestley’s tool for presenting his message that society must be radically changed through the transfer of power from individuals to the socialist state.

A key aspect of Eva Smith’s role is to provoke empathy. If the Birlings and Gerald, and the audience, can be made to feel what she feels, to share in her suffering, then they will be more ready to accept that they are responsible for her, and by extension, for those like her, who lack power and wealth. If society is ‘one body’, then naturally, any part of it that feels pain should make the rest of the body suffer with it. Thus Priestley begins the Inspector’s interrogations with an emphasis on the pain of Eva Smith’s death. The word ‘agony’ is crucial here, emphasising as it does the intense suffering of her final hours. Priestley returns to this multiple times, with the Inspector using phrases like ‘burnt her inside out’, or ‘she lies with a burnt-out inside on a slab’. The way that the characters respond to this is an indication of how prepared they are to accept responsibility. Eric and Sheila are clearly more shocked right from the moment of hearing the news, with Eric exclaiming ‘My God’, and Sheila ‘how horrible!’. Birling, however, is determined to keep cool, telling Eric to ‘keep quiet’ and not to ‘get excited’. Both of the elder Birlings repeatedly accuse their children of being ‘hysterical’, indicating that they consider their reaction to be over-emotional. But emotion is precisely what Priestley aims to create, so that the Birlings, Croft, and of course, the audience, can put themselves in the position of the suffering poor. As the Inspector says, ‘it would do us all a bit of good if sometimes we tried to put ourselves in the place of these young women counting their pennies, in their dingy little back bedrooms’. Sheila, the most ready to empathise and to accept responsibility, of course agrees: ‘Yes, I expect it would’.

Having shocked the Birlings, and the audience, with the graphic details of Eva Smith’s death, Priestley aims to build sympathy for her so that she will be seen entirely as an innocent victim of other people’s selfish actions. Thus the idea of responsibility is focused entirely upon those with power and wealth, and focused upon the idea that they should no longer have this power and wealth, and by implication, it should be given over to a socialist government that will make wiser use of it. Eva’s role in the strike is subtly misrepresented by Priestley in order to remove any possibility of blame being attached to her actions. The Inspector says, for example, that Eva was fired ‘for wanting twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and six’, but of course, she was not fired for this - she was fired for organising a strike, an industrial act of war which could have wrecked Mr Birling’s business. But as Priestley wants Eva to be an innocent victim, and for all of the responsibility to rest with the Birlings and Croft, he does not wish to dwell upon the idea that a worker might have responsibilities to their employer.

In the case of Sheila, Priestley creates a situation where responsibility clearly attaches to the one with wealth and power, and the accusation of the Inspector is very pointed. He leaves no doubt in the audience’s mind that Sheila acted entirely out of selfish spite. She ‘punish[ed’ Eva just because she was ‘jealous’ of her and because she was in a ‘furious temper’. Sheila accepts full responsibility for what she did, and evidently feels very guilty and determined to act differently. She becomes the strongest voice amongst the Birlings in favour of the idea that they must change their lives and adopt a new attitude towards the working classes, and she is furious with her parents when they revert to complacency in Act Three, following the discovery that the Inspector was not a police officer: ‘You began to learn something. And now you've stopped. You're ready to go on in the same old way’. Priestley uses Sheila to summarise the accusations of the Inspector, thus presenting them in a way which attaches equal blame to all of their actions: ‘Father threw this girl out because she asked for decent wages. I went and pushed her farther out, right into the street, just because I was angry and she was pretty.’ Once again, this is a misrepresentation of Birling’s reasons for firing Eva, which presents her as an innocent victim and Mr Birling as entirely unreasonable. It also places Sheila’s obviously unjust action exactly on a level with her father’s. In making the defence of business interests and acts of selfish spite entirely morally equal, Priestley is ensuring that the audience attaches all responsibility to the Birlings and Croft, and none to Eva.

Another way in which Priestley removes any responsibility from Eva herself is by presenting her suicide as something which was done to her, rather than as something she did herself, as if the Birlings poured the disinfectant down her throat. After interrogating Birling, the Inspector talks about the ‘chain of events’ which followed, and how what Birling did ‘may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide.’ The key words here are ‘chain’, ‘determined’ and ‘driven’, because they all present Eva’s actions as being caused by external influences, not by her own free will. Priestley clearly applies Marxist social determinism here, but very selectively. Eva is not to be blamed for her actions, because they were ‘determined’ by factors outside her control, but the Birlings are to be blamed, and no one can be blamed unless they have free will. It makes no sense to accuse someone of an evil action if they have no control over their actions. Once again, Sheila adopts the Inspector’s language, asserting that ‘between us we drove that girl to commit suicide’, and Eric puts it more bluntly, but making the same point, with ‘we did her in all right’. The very notion of responsibility depends upon the principle of free will, because people can only be held responsible for their own choices. Priestley wants all of the responsibility to rest upon the Birlings and Croft, so they are the only ones who are presented as being able to make free moral choices. They are the ones who murdered Eva Smith’s unborn child. No responsibility whatever is to be attached to the pregnant Eva who actually drank the disinfectant.

In conclusion, Priestley uses the character of Eva Smith to present responsibility as something which rests entirely with those who have wealth and power. According to Priestley, they are to blame for social ills, for the sufferings of the oppressed masses whom she represents. Unless they accept this responsibility and support social change, then they will be punished in ‘fire and blood and anguish’ - violent change like that which had taken place in 1917 in Russia. The play’s first audience in Russia in 1945 would have applauded this message, as would many of those who watched it for the first time in London in 1946, as the Labour Party introduced socialist reforms, confiscating wealth and power not through violence but through the force of law. In order to keep his emotive message simple and powerful, Priestley carefully avoids attaching any blame to Eva Smith herself, to the point where even her suicide is represented as someone else’s fault. If she is an entirely innocent victim, then someone else can always be held responsible, and it is always someone else who needs to change.