**How does Priestley explore the importance of social class in *An Inspector Calls*?**

**Exemplar Essay**

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

**How does Priestley explore the importance of social class in *An Inspector Calls*?**

**Essay Framework**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Introduction**: As a socialist, Priestley has a keen interest in social class. |  | working class, middle and upper class, victims, oppression, social position |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph One:** Social status is a tool by which Birling bolsters his pride and his power. | ‘cranks’  ‘community and all that nonsense’  ‘social superior’  ‘an old country family – landed people’  ‘lower costs and higher prices’ | represents capitalism, humble origins, social position, knighthood, power and influence |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Two:** Mrs Birling’s concept of social class is also presented entirely negatively. | ‘girls of that class’  ‘You mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl. If you do, then the Inspector will just break it down.’ | Lord Mayor, magistrate, influence the Inspector, superior social position, dismissive |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Three:** Marriage is shown by Priestley to be strongly linked to social class, and to the desire to maintain or improve one’s social status. | ‘fairy prince’  ‘couldn't last – hadn't expected it to last’ | no intention of marrying,  upper class, working class, unthinkable, eligible |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Four:** In contrast to the villain of the play, Mr Birling, the working class Eva Smith is presented as an innocent victim. | ‘for wanting twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and six’  ‘Father threw this girl out because she asked for decent wages’  ‘millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths’ | cruel, heartless, capitalist oppressors, working class victims, reasonable, unreasonable, oppressed masses, threat of revolution |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Conclusion:** In conclusion, social class is a central aspect of Priestley’s play. |  | social hierarchy, clear distinction, oppressors, innocent victims |
| **Notes:** | | |

**How does Priestley explore the importance of social class in *An Inspector Calls*?**

As a socialist, Priestley has a keen interest in social class, and the overall thrust of the plot of *An Inspector Calls* is to present the working classes as victims of oppression at the hands of the middle and upper classes. The villains of the play, Mr and Mrs Birling, are presented as being obsessed with social class. In Mr Birling’s case, he is determined to climb higher in the class system, and very proud of the progress he has made so far. In Mrs Birling’s case, she is complacently aware of her high social position, and exploits it to separate herself from the sufferings of those lower down. Marriage is presented in terms of social class in the play, with a very strong hint that the main purpose of marriage is not children or love, but the desire to consolidate or improve one’s social position. Priestley’s presentation of marriage in these terms evidently owes much to Karl Marx’s scorn for it as a mere bourgeois institution designed to perpetuate the power and wealth of a particular class.

Mr Birling is the character whom Priestley intends for the audience to dislike the most, as he is the strongest representative of the capitalist class, and speaks clearly in favour of defending its interests against the ‘cranks’ who propose socialist theories about ‘community and all that nonsense’. Priestley makes clear that Birling has climbed higher in the class system through various means. Firstly, Birling’s accent is still ‘provincial’, in contrast to his children, who have received an upper middle class education, the ‘public-school-and-Varsity life’. This marks Birling out as having risen from relatively humble origins through his efforts. He is caught between his pride at having done so and his eagerness to consolidate his social position, which involves to some extent turning his back on his origins. He has married above himself socially. Mrs Birling is described by Priestley as his ‘social superior’, and he is delighted that his daughter is marrying into a family that is upper class: ‘an old country family – landed people’. He is hoping for a knighthood, which would make up for his having risen from humble origins. The key point in all of this is that social status is a tool by which Birling bolsters his pride and his power. It is all for the benefit of himself and his family, not something he intends to use for anyone else’s benefit. This is particularly clear in his hope that the marriage of Sheila and Gerald will bring business benefits, as the rival manufacturers will join together to work for ‘lower costs and higher prices’. Thus social class is seen in Marxist terms, as a material means by which individuals build their power and influence at the expense of others.

Mrs Birling’s concept of social class is also presented entirely negatively. She is proud of her husband’s having been Lord Mayer and being a magistrate, and like him, she begins by trying to use these aspects of power and influence to put pressure on the Inspector. She also distances herself clearly from the working classes by claiming that she couldn’t possibly understand what causes ‘girls of that class’ to act as they do. She is almost presenting them as a different species, but she only does this when it suits her, because later in the play, she claims to understand Eva well enough to know that a ‘girl of that sort’ would never refuse money. Thus her superior social position is presented by Priestley in the same way as her husband’s - a means by which she builds her pride and power and dismisses or oppresses those of lower social status. Sheila, influenced by the socialist ideas of the Inspector, tries to break down class barriers, asserting that her mother must not try to build ‘a wall’ between herself and Eva Smith, because the Inspector will only ‘break it down’.

Marriage is shown by Priestley to be strongly linked to social class, and to the desire to maintain or improve one’s social status. Birling has married above himself socially and hopes that his daughter will do likewise by marrying the son of Sir George and Lady Croft. In contrast, Gerald’s affair with Eva Smith is entirely extramarital. Although, as the Inspector says, he had some ‘affection’ for her, the relationship is entirely unequal. As the one with higher social status, all of the power is on his side. He is the upper class ‘fairy prince’, as Sheila bitterly puts it, who rescues the working class woman from poverty, but in doing so, takes advantage of her gratitude to begin a sexual relationship with her. The possibility of Gerald marrying Eva is completely discounted. Eva herself admits that she knew that the relationship ‘couldn't last – hadn't expected it to last’, which shows that she knows that Gerald had no intention of marrying her. Gerald’s upper class status means that it would be unthinkable for him to marry a penniless working class girl. Interestingly, it is Eva who rejects the possibility of marriage when it comes to Eric, claiming that it would be ‘wrong for both of them’, despite the fact that she is pregnant with Eric’s child. Marrying Eric would be the sensible, practical thing to do from the point of view of providing for herself and her child, and her refusal to do so suggests that Priestley is rejecting marriage as something bound up with practical considerations of providing for children, and instead asserting a Romantic notion of self-fulfilment as its goal.

In contrast to the villain of the play, Mr Birling, the working class Eva Smith is presented as an innocent victim who has suffered at the hands of the cruel and heartless middle and upper-class characters. Priestley presents her entirely as a victim because he wants to convince the audience of the socialist view of the world, which divides it into capitalist oppressors and working-class victims. When describing the strike, Priestley subtly shifts the descriptions of what Eva did and how Birling responded in order to remove all possibility of blame from her, and to present Birling as entirely heartless. 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. Sheila adopts the Inspector’s position, refusing to assign any blame to Eva, and describing the strike in similar terms: ‘Father threw this girl out because she asked for decent wages’. Thus the working class demand is presented as entirely reasonable, and the capitalist rejection entirely heartless and unreasonable. Having established Eva as an innocent victim of capitalist oppression, Priestley goes on to represent her case as typical, as she stands for the ‘millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths’ - the oppressed masses who will rise up and revolt, according to Karl Marx’s theory, if their demands are not met.

In conclusion, social class is a central aspect of Priestley’s play. All of the characters are clearly located in the social hierarchy, and Priestley makes a clear distinction between those in the middle and upper-classes, who are guilty of oppressing the poor and must repent, and the innocent victims of their selfish actions, the working classes. Ironically, he is building up a wall between the classes just as effectively as Mrs Birling. Just as Mrs Birling does, he sees all of the virtue on one side of the wall, and only blame on the other. The only difference is that he places the villains and heroes on different sides of the class divide.