Mr Bruff
ONLINE REVISION

# MR Bruff's Guide To

# J.B. PRIESTLEY'S 'AN INSPECTOR CALLS'

2nd Edition

**CHARACTER ANALYSIS: Edna**

In 'An Inspector Calls', every character is in some way representative of a section of society–through the character of Edna, Priestley demonstrates the mistreatment of the domestic working class.

Although Edna is a minor character in the play, there are a couple of key moments worthy of analysis. Firstly, it is Edna who shows Inspector Goole into the dining room in Act 1, announcing 'an inspector's called'. This line of dialogue is the closest line we have in the play to the title 'An Inspector Calls'. By putting the words in Edna's mouth, Priestley clearly establishes this as a significant moment. It symbolises that Priestley is giving a voice to the working classes, heralding new ways of thinking with his socialist ideas. Edna, a working-class woman, ushers in the inspector, who is about to challenge the values and beliefs held by the Birlings and Gerald.

Priestley also gives Edna the important task of changing the lighting in the room when the inspector arrives and Mr Birling commands 'Show him in here. Give us some more light'. The change of lighting on the stage moves from 'pink and intimate' to 'brighter and harder'. Here, Inspector Goole has a physical impact on the room, and the 'pink and intimate' lighting is indicative of the overly optimistic rose-tinted glasses through which the Birlings view their lives of middle-class privilege. Inspector Goole brings with him a harder sort of light—a spotlight of interrogation which will illuminate the truth. It is Edna who brings the inspector into the dining room and who changes the lighting: Priestley could be suggesting that it will be the working classes who will deliver the truth to the middle and upper classes. And this is what we see in the play—the life of working-class Eva Smith is used to challenge the Birlings and Gerald, making them face the true consequences of their actions. It is working-class Edna who brings in the inspector and changes the lighting that signifies that challenge.

We do not only analyse characters through how the speak and act, but also through how others speak to or about them. When Birling orders Edna to 'Show him in here. Give us some more light', the language and structure of his dialogue is worthy of analysis. As Tom Briars Delve points out, these two simple sentences are bluntly short and monosyllabic, suggesting no attempt at politeness from Birling to Edna. Both also start with clear imperatives, 'Show' and 'Give', as if Birling expects his orders to be followed instantly. Such off-hand comments may appear insignificant, but they subtly add to the dramatic force of Eva's narrative, highlighting the pressure on working-class women to unhesitatingly obey their middle-class employers, even if working conditions are unfair.

In 1912, when the play was set, the use of maids and servants in the homes of middle- and upper-class families was more common than by 1946 when the play was first performed in England. To the 1946 audience, Edna's very presence on stage would feel old-fashioned, and Priestley's deliberate inclusion of a maid would serve as a reminder to the audience of the outdated practice of employing working-class people for very little money to work long hours, completing jobs that could have easily been done by the owners of the house. For example, Edna is ordered to pour port, serve food, answer the door: none of the tasks she completes require any special skill, and they could all be done by the Birling family themselves. In fact, when Mr Birling offers to answer the door himself late into Act 3, Mrs Birling casually remarks 'Edna'll go. I asked her to wait up'. This intrusion into Edna's life demonstrates how the Birlings see Edna as merely an employee. They do not care that their actions are impinging upon her wellbeing. Edna cannot sleep because the Birlings want her up to do more tasks for them, even though we can assume that typically she would have finished work by this time.

It is also worth noting that the Birlings' successes are never shared with Edna; for example, she is not invited to join in the toast for the engagement. Priestley seems to be condemning this mistreatment of the working class—when the play was first performed in two theatres in Moscow in 1945, her character would have confirmed communist beliefs about the lazy, wealthy elite living a life of privilege at the expense of the poor. The 1946 London audience, however, would consider the

treatment of Edna as out of date and overly formal. This would further alienate the Birlings from the audience, presenting them as people whose views and attitudes you would not wish to replicate or repeat.

Although Edna speaks only a few lines on stage, she still has more of a voice than Eva. Both Edna and Eva are two women from the working class, and both seem to suffer in some way at the hands of the Birlings. Eva never appears on stage, and yet her voice is channeled through Inspector Goole. When Goole tells the Birlings 'There are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths', he is advocating the absent Eva, who is unable to speak up for herself; however, there is also no one who speaks up for Edna. Edna's silence could be interpreted as symbolic of the lack of power that the working poor had. Women were not given the vote until 1918, six years after the play is set, and only women over the age of 30 with minimum property qualifications could vote. This would have excluded working-class women like Edna, who had to wait until 1928 before they were given the vote. Edna's silence therefore represents how working-class women had no voice in society and could not vote, so had no political voice to influence how society was run.

Edna would not have had the same freedom of movement as those in the middle classes, but she would have been even more restricted due to living with the Birlings. Her situation would have been more awkward if she had ever wanted to leave and ask for references. In 1912, employees did not have the same working rights as they did in 1946. The later strengthening of the unions meant a contemporary audience would appreciate how precarious Edna's position would have been had she wished to leave.

To conclude, Priestley might not use Edna to say very much, but it is just as important to consider what is not said when viewing her importance in the play. The working poor suffered in many ways, and not all of them are obvious at first glance. Through his depiction of Edna, Priestley encourages us to consider how, even when they are being paid, the poor are exploited.