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| *An Inspector Calls –* Essential Background Knowledge | | |
| Dramatic Irony | True meaning understood by the audience but not the characters. On the most basic, pantomime level, “He’s behind you!” | Mr Birling’s world view is quite deliberately positioned as inaccurate. A contemporary audience would have knowledge of most, if not all, of the falsehoods he proclaims. |
| Foreshadowing | Subtle prediction of later action. Also known as a harbinger. | Birling offhandedly mentions the need to avoid a “scandal”. Later, and more weightily, the Inspector foretells the coming of “fire and blood and anguish”. |
| Author’s Voice | When a writer speaks to the audience/reader through their characters. | The Inspector’s, and therefore, by extension, Priestley’s, world view is conveyed whenever he makes statements regarding social responsibility. |
| Antithesis | The complete and direct opposite. | The Birlings, especially Mr Birling, and Gerald are starkly contrasted against the Inspector. In turn, this functions as the antithetical positioning of socialism and capitalism. |
| Morality Play | An allegorical drama presenting a lesson about good conduct and character. | The Birlings and Gerald are of questionable moral character and all commit at least one deadly sin. Sheila, for example, allows herself to be overcome with envy and then wrath. |
| Socialism | An economic and political belief system that promotes egalitarianism and fairer distribution of wealth. | Priestley was a vocal socialist and therefore his “massive” and “stern” message of socialism is delivered through the Inspector. |
| Capitalism | An economic and political belief that promotes the importance of the individual and private ownership. | The preoccupation with class that is evident in the play exemplifies the hierarchical and, according to Priestley, exploitative nature of capitalism. |
| Marxist Theory | A broad and complex political and economic theory dealing with class struggle and the inevitability of class war. | The Birlings and Gerald are, quite deliberately unsubtlety, symbols of the exploitative bourgeoisie. Conversely, Eva Smith and Edna are symbols of the downtrodden proletariat. One of the most obvious tropes in Marxism is that of the greedy, “heavy” factory owner and the faceless and voiceless worker masses. |
| Eternal Recurrence/Return | An ancient belief that events will play out and repeat themselves forever. | Priestley’s work was often concerned with time and non-linear interpretations of it. The cyclical nature of the play, as well as the parallelism of the ringing doorbell/phone, supports a predetermined sense of fate. |
| Psychoanalytic literary criticism | A way of approaching author and character motivations through the prism of Freudian and Jungian concepts. | There are myriad ways of approaching An Inspector Calls through psychoanalysis. These include: the construction of Jungian personas or “walls”; the dark, primal impulses of the id/shadow in so called “respectable” characters; the Inspector functioning as the moralising voice of the super ego. |
| Narcissism | More broadly a sense of self-adoration but more specifically a psychological condition typified by a lack of empathy, a grandiose sense of self-importance, and the need to be admired. | A number of characters demonstrate a variety of narcissistic qualities yet Mr Birling could almost be considered a quintessential narcissist. |