Themes
Priestley is evidently a compassionate playwright with a clear socialist agenda. Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message by highlighting the different levels of responsibility accepted by the Birling family. For example, Mr and Mrs Birling are presented as immoral, injudicious and lacking in compassion as they refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and they are clearly used as dramatic vehicles to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the elder generation. In contrast, Sheila and Eric can be seen as compassionate, remorseful and morally superior and are used as dramatic vehicles to promote socialism, encourage the collapse of social boundaries and highlight the changing values of the younger generation. Priestley intends for the audience to detest Mr and Mrs Birling but respect the inspector along with Sheila and Eric as we reflect on our own behaviours and begin to build a more caring and equal society.

Questions

1. What is Priestley like and what type of agenda does he have?
2. How does Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message?
3. How are Mr and Mrs Birling presented? What are they dramatic vehicles for?
4. How are Sheila and Eric presented? What are they used as dramatic vehicles for?
5. How does Priestley want us to feel about the different characters and why?
Towards the end of Act 1, Priestley uses assertive language and personal pronoun to present Mr Birling as a dismissive and injudicious character who does not listen to the Inspector’s prophetic message and refuses to accept responsibility. This can be seen following the Inspector interrogation, when Mr Birling confidently says “I can’t accept any responsibility.” This highlights Mr Birling’s arrogant and dismissive nature as he evidently has a narrow minded and simplistic understanding of Eva’s death. Given his position as the patriarch of the Birling family, Mr Birling is unable to fathom that his discharge of Eva started the “chain of events” that led to her untimely demise as he is entirely new to the concept of being criticised or questioned. This further illustrates that Mr Birling is morally inferior to his children - who are used to represent the changing values of the younger generation – as it is clear that, unlike Sheila and Eric who acknowledge that “we all helped to kill her”, Mr Birling is stubborn and will never listen to the inspector’s prophetic message because he is terrified of tainting his reputation, or worse still, causing a “public scandal” The use of personal pronoun “I” emphasises Mr Birling’s individualist nature as it is clear that Mr Birling only thinks about himself. We realise that Mr Birling does not believe in “community”, as sees the idea of being “like bees in a hive” as just “nonsense”, and instead believes that “a man has to make his own way.” Priestley intends the audience of 1945 to despise a man with such an egotistical understanding of the world as he wants us to reflect upon our own treatment of others as we question the stubborn elder generation of 1912 who had traditional, capitalist views and were not used to being held to account.

What does Priestley use and what does this show about Mr Birling?
What does Mr Birling confidently say?
How does this show Mr Birling is arrogant and dismissive?
What is Mr Birling unable to fathom and why?
How does this show Mr Birling is stubborn?
Why does Priestley want us to despise Mr Birling?
Priestley is evidently a compassionate playwright with a clear socialist agenda. Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message by highlighting the different reactions towards the inspector from elder and younger generations. For example, the elder generation – namely Mr and Mrs Birling - are presented as immoral, injudicious and lacking in compassion as they refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and they are clearly used as dramatic vehicles to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the elder generation. In contrast, the younger generation represented by Sheila and Eric can be seen as compassionate, remorseful and morally superior and are used as dramatic vehicles to promote socialism, encourage the collapse of social boundaries and highlight the changing values of the younger generation. Priestley intends for the audience to detest Mr and Mrs Birling but respect the inspector along with Sheila and Eric as we reflect on our own behaviours and begin to build a more caring and equal society.

Questions

1. What is Priestley like and what type of agenda does he have?
2. How does Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message?
3. How are the elder generation presented? What are they dramatic vehicles for?
4. How are younger generation presented? What are they used as dramatic vehicles for?
5. How does Priestley want us to feel about the different characters and why?
Priestley intended to highlight the changing values of the younger generation and it is through his portrayal of Sheila Birling that he illustrates a shift towards socialism within the younger members of society. He uses juxtaposition to illustrate Sheila’s socialist tendencies when she openly questions her father and says “but these girls aren’t just cheap labour – they’re people” highlighting that she is adopting a humanist point of view whereby she understands that girls like Eva Smith are also valuable members of society. This shows that she is instinctive, insightful and perceptive as she realises that her father’s individualist desire for “lower costs and higher prices” is impacting the most vulnerable “people” in society. The transition in her character from the beginning of the play illustrates how society is capable of changing and shows that even those that are naïve and privileged can be taught to accept that “we are members of one body.” The passionate language used when Sheila states that Mr Birling’s workers are “people” provokes empathy for Eva and encourages us to begin to admire Sheila’s increasingly outspoken nature. The phrase “aren’t just cheap labour” illustrates that Sheila is desperately trying to negate the capitalist views she has been brought up with and immediately shows that she is morally superior to her parents who remain focused on their own success. An audience in 1945 would be surprised to see a daughter of the 1912 upper classes opening question and criticize the patriarchal control within her family and yet, given the elevated position of women in society following the war, would admire her bravery and socialist perspective.

What did Priestley intend to highlight?
What shift does he illustrate through Sheila Birling?
How does Sheila question her father and what does she say?
How does this show she has a humanist point of view?
What does the transition in her character show?
Priestley is evidently a compassionate playwright with a clear socialist agenda. Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message by highlighting the Birling family’s different reactions towards the division in society. For example, Mr and Mrs Birling immoral, injudicious and elitist as they refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and they are clearly used as dramatic vehicles to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the elder generation. In contrast, the younger generation represented by Sheila and Eric can be seen as compassionate, remorseful and morally superior and are used as dramatic vehicles to promote socialism, encourage the collapse of social boundaries and highlight the changing values of the younger generation. Priestley intends for the audience to detest Mr and Mrs Birling but respect the inspector along with Sheila and Eric as we reflect on our own behaviours and begin to build a more caring and equal society.

Questions

1. What is Priestley like and what type of agenda does he have?
2. How does Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message?
3. How are Mr and Mrs Birling presented? What are they dramatic vehicles for?
4. How are Sheila and Eric presented? What are they used as dramatic vehicles for?
5. How does Priestley want us to feel about the different characters and why?
Within An Inspector Calls, Eric can be seen as a character with socialist values who disapproves of division in society. From the onset of the play, Priestley employs assertive language to hint that Eric is morally superior to his parents and show that he does not agree with social division. This can be seen when Eric questions his father’s treatment of his workers and says “Why shouldn’t they try for higher wages?” This instantly suggests that Eric has socialist tendencies because even though he has been brought up in the capitalist world of privilege, he evidently has empathy for the plight of the working classes and understands their need for greater pay. This also alludes to the notion that Eric is morally superior to his parents as his views directly juxtapose Mr Birling’s belief in “lower costs and higher prices” and suggest that, unlike Mr Birling, Eric places value on staff welfare as opposed to simply being concerned by wealth and reputation. Furthermore, this highlights that Eric is being used by Priestley to represent the changing values of the younger generation as even from the start of the play it is clear that he has the compassion for the working classes that his parents lack. Eric’s assertive manner shows that he is clearly not intimidated by his father’s influence and power and is still confident to question his father’s out dated capitalist beliefs with a sense of authority. At this point in the play, the audience within 1945 would be impressed with Eric’s socialist values as following the election of the labour party, socialism was growing in popularity across the UK. We can see that Eric’s behaviour is contesting expectations of young men in 1912 as during this time period, it would be very rare to see the younger generations of the upper classes questioning their parents’ views.

How can Eric be seen?
What language device does Priestley use and what does this show about Eric?
What does Eric say when he questions his father?
How does this show Eric has empathy for the plight of the working classes?
How does we know that Eric is not intimidated by his father?
Priestley is evidently a compassionate playwright with a clear socialist agenda. Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message by highlighting different reactions towards women. For example, characters such as Gerald and Mr and Mrs Birling are presented as immoral, injudicious and misogynistic as they refuse to accept gender equality and they are clearly used as dramatic vehicles to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the traditional views held by the elder generation. In contrast, the younger generation are suggested to be far more compassionate towards women; this is represented by Sheila who can be seen as remorseful and morally superior. She is used as dramatic vehicles to promote socialism, encourage the collapse of social boundaries and highlight the changing values of the younger generation. Priestley intends for the audience to detest Mr and Mrs Birling but respect Sheila as we reflect on our own behaviours and begin to build a more caring and equal society in which women are treated well.

Questions

1. What is Priestley like and what type of agenda does he have?
2. How does Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message?
3. How are Mr and Mrs Birling presented? What are they dramatic vehicles for?
4. How is Sheila presented? What is she used as dramatic vehicles for?
5. How does Priestley want us to feel about the different characters and why?
Priestley employs dismissive language to show that Gerald is a misogynistic character who refuses to accept full responsibility for his actions and blames his gender for his mistreatment of female characters. When questioned about whether he “adored” the attention given to him by Daisy, he admits that he did but that reminds the inspector that “nearly any man would have done.” Here, we see that Gerald is begrudgingly admitting some sense of guilt but only following the prompting of the inspector and Sheila – it is clear that he feels upset by the events yet maintains a sense of detachment as if he is unable to see the correlation between his involvement in the “chain of events” and Eva’s ultimate downfall. This also then shows that Gerald is desperate to deflect blame from himself by claiming that his behaviour is normal for all men – perhaps suggesting that he is so embedded within the patriarchal society of 1912 – which overtly promoted male dominance - that he is unable to detangle his own behaviour from his gender. At this point, we see that Gerald prioritises defending his behaviour, or protecting himself from “public scandal”, rather than changing his attitudes or perspectives. Thus, he differs from the rest of the younger generation –namely Sheila and Eric- who accept that “we all helped to kill her” and focus on changing their natures rather than finding excuses to justify immoral acts in the way that Gerald does. Indeed, Gerald can be seen as perceptive and analytic as he attempts to reason with the inspector in an attempt to explain his behaviours, and even investigates the validity of the inspector’s message but it is clear that he is so preoccupied with protecting his untainted reputation that he ignored the principle of the inspector’s words. A 1945 audience would be frustrated to see that Gerald is unable to move away from the traditional capitalist views held by the upper classes as the behaviour of Sheila and Eric had given them hope that society was changing for the better.

What language device does Priestley use and what does this show about Gerald?
What does Gerald blame for his mistreatment of female characters?
What does he remind the inspector?
What is he unable t see the correlation between?
What is Gerald trying to protect himself from?
Hypocrisy introduction.

Priestley is evidently a compassionate playwright with a clear socialist agenda. Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message by highlighting the Birling family’s hypocrisy. For example, Mr and Mrs Birling immoral, injudicious and hypocritical as they refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and they are clearly used as dramatic vehicles to criticize capitalism, the arrogance of the upper classes and the ignorance of the elder generation. In contrast, the Inspector questions their hypocritical natures and is presented as an omniscient, prophetic and empathetic character who is used as a dramatic vehicle to socialism and encourage the collapse of boundaries within society. Priestley intends for the audience to detest Mr and Mrs Birling but respect the as we reflect on our own behaviours and begin to build a more caring and equal society.

Questions

1. What is Priestley like and what type of agenda does he have?
2. How does Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message?
3. How are Mr and Mrs Birling presented? What are they dramatic vehicles for?
4. How is the Inspector presented? What is he used as dramatic vehicles for?
5. How does Priestley want us to feel about the different characters and why?
Within Act 2, Priestley employs an imperative verb to present Mrs Birling as dismissive and hypocritical. When asserting her lack of responsibility, Mrs Birling authoritatively says “Go and look for the father of the child. It’s his responsibility.” At this point, dramatic irony allows the audience to see Mrs Birling’s hypocritical nature as she is damning of the father’s involvement and dramatically blames him for his actions, yet immediately regrets this public outburst when discovering that her own “half shy, half assertive” son Eric is in fact the “father of the child.” This also alludes to the notion that Mrs Birling is morally inferior to her own daughter Sheila who immediately accepts responsibility for her actions and claims that she will “never ever do it again to anybody” unlike Mrs Birling whose immediate reaction is to enforce blame onto others. This then exposes the dichotomy between the younger and elder generations; it is clear that Mrs Birling works to represent the hostile and unyielding elder generation who refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and instead blame others for Eva’s comeuppance. The imperative “go” illustrates Mrs Birling’s frustration and shows that she is no longer attempting to conceal her anger with the inspector and is now using her higher social status to instruct him as to how to behave. The use of assertive short sentences would again encourage an audience in 1945 to be disgusted with Mrs Birling as her dismissive attitude towards Eva’s demise would be sickening to a society that had endured years of death and destruction during WW1 and WW2 – to see such an evasive perspective towards death would be horrifying after such suffering. Unfortunately, Mrs Birling’s attitude is reflective of upper class members of the bourgeoisie in 1912 whose attitudes towards the working classes were incredibly derogatory and mirrored the division in society.

What language device does Priestley use and how does this present Mrs Birling?
What does Mrs Birling authoritatively say?
What does the dramatic irony allow the audience to see and why?
How does this show Mrs Birling is morally inferior to Sheila?
What does the imperative “go” suggest?
Social change introduction.

Priestley is evidently a compassionate playwright with a clear socialist agenda. Priestley shows the importance of his collectivist message by using the inspector, and the younger generations as a mouth piece for social change. Throughout the play we see the Inspector presented as an omniscient, prophetic and empathetic character who is used as a dramatic vehicle to socialism and encourage the collapse of boundaries within society. Likewise, Sheila and Eric are presented as morally superior to their parents as they accept responsibility for their actions and start to promote social change. Priestley intends for the audience to respect the inspector along with Sheila and Eric as we reflect on our own behaviours and begin to build a more caring and equal society in which we realise that we are, in fact “all mixed up like bees in a hive”

What is Priestley like and what type of agenda does he have?
How does Priestley show the importance of his collectivist message?
How is the Inspector presented? What is he a dramatic vehicle for?
How are Sheila and Eric presented? What do they start to promote?
How does Priestley want us to feel about the different characters and why?
Priestley employs an inclusive pronoun and metaphorical language to remind the Birling family – and the audience – that “we are members of one body” and that society needs to change. Here, Priestley is showing the inspector as omniscient and prophetic and this is highlighted further by the elusion to biblical references which emphasise the Inspector’s belief in human love and parity. We see that the inspector is promoting equality and desperately trying to remind us that we are all “we don’t live alone” and that we must accept that “we are responsible for each other” because he is desperate to see society change. This entire extended speech is composed of complex sentences, which are referential, and short sentences that are expressive and passionate. Priestley makes great use of these short sentence structures in order to deliver his opinions as facts and in turn present the Inspector as authoritative and influential. This intended effect is to make both the characters and the audience inspect their own consciences and in turn consider they on behaviour in the hope that this will create social change. Furthermore, the use of short sentences may perhaps symbolise the current limits of society, which could be challenged if everyone accepted each other. The Inspector’s use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ juxtapose with the language of Mr and Mrs Birling who normally use ‘I’ as their primary concern is themselves and this expose their contrasting natures. The use of ‘we’ further emphasises Priestley’s ideas of collective responsibility and reminds us that we must “learn that lesson.” Through the Inspector’s final dramatic speech, Priestley skilfully warns the audience of the potential social disasters of failing to support or help those in need in society and as such the audience would perhaps be uncomfortable during this moment within the play, yet would admire the socialist message being spread through the words of the inspector.

What does Priestley employ and what does this remind the Birling family and the audience?
What does this show about the inspector?
What is the inspector promoting and desperately trying to remind us?
Why does Priestley want the audience to inspect their own consciences?
How does the inclusive pronoun “we” juxtapose the language of Mr and Mrs Birling?