The Theme Of Responsibility To Other People In An Inspector Calls By J.B. Priestley

‘We do not live alone. We are members of one body.’ How does this play highlight the theme of responsibility to other people?

The play highlights that during the early 1920s the rich did not hold themselves responsible for the poor in society. As a result play's upper class characters find their selfish and inconsiderate actions actions may have led to the suicide of a young innocent lower class women, Eva Smith. Priestley was a committed socialist and wanted to provoke in his audience a sense of moral outrage on behalf all the millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths whose “hopes and fears,their suffering and their chance of happiness” could be determined by the whims of a greedy privileged few.

Priestley uses the despicable character of Mr Birling to exhibit how grasping rich business owners only cared for making money and did not have any regard for “community and all that nonsense”. Birling focuses on profits and has scant regard for his workers’ welfare.This is displayed through Mr Birling's lack of remorse after finding out about his connection to Eva Smith’s suicide. He considers her along with the rest of the working class to be “cheap labour”. The adjective “cheap” connotes something that is worthless implying that the elite saw the lower classes as expendable and easily replaced. The noun “labour” suggests the rich dehumanise their workers seeing them as tools of production rather than individuals Furthermore unlike the characters Sheila and Eric, Mr Birling, along with Mrs Birling and Gerald, does not learn from the Inspector’s visit as after finding out there is no Inspector Goole on the police force he says “it makes all the difference”. This insinuates he only ever cared about the consequences that may threaten his “chance of a knighthood” and not how he and his family were complicit in Eva’s tragic demise causing us to see him a selfish and morally corrupt person. Mr Birling is portrayed this way to cause the audience to detest him as he is the embodiment of everything Priestly despises in Edwardian Society as he is a capitalist and cannot change.

Mrs Birling to illustrates how the upper classes were wilfully blind to their social responsibilities and he is critical of their charitable endeavours which only benefit those who fit the right moral criteria. This is highlighted through Mrs Birling’s moral superiority and complete lack of sympathy to the misfortunes of Eva Smith because she disapproves of her, “as if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!”. Initially, when the Inspector starts questioning Mrs Birling she is shocked and disgusted by his accusations but as soon as he starts asking about the charity she is chair of, the Brumley Women's charity, she speaks (with dignity): “yes. We’ve done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases.” Her openness to talk about herself and her works highlights how she only thinks about her reputation instead of the people she is supposed to be helping thus allowing the reader to see her as a representation of how the upper classes were selfish and uncaring. Furthermore although Mrs Birling’s claims to be head of a committee that helps “deserving cases” when a “deserving” case (Eva Smith) came for help she did all in her power to stop her getting help suggesting to the reader that she is only in this committee to improve her status and to feel good about herself and not because she genuinely cares; and even after admitting that she purposely tried to get Eva Smith’s plea

denied she still fails to take responsibility for her role in Eva’s suicide, blaming it on her husband and daughter and then ”the man who was the father of the child”.This passing of the blame only illustrates to the reader how the rich ignored their moral obligation to the wellbeing of the poor. She wants the father of Eva’s child to be punished because she presumes he must have been a lower class person and cannot comprehend that an upper-class gentleman would ever be involved in such a scandalous and “disgusting” affair. Mrs Birling is not only hypocritical but a snob who feels she is morally superior because of her class.

In the play, ‘An Inspector Calls’ Priestley uses Inspector Ghoul to highlight the theme of responsibility of others. Priestly does this by making the Inspector a conscience for the Birling’s as he does not seem to fit into any of the Social Classes but uses his authoritative and imposing nature to force confessions from the Birlings. An example of this is found when the inspector accuses Sheila of using “the power” she had to “punish the girl”. Here, we see Sheila at Millwoods abuse her social status to express her jealousy and annoyance at Eva Smith, cruelly snatching her last chance of having a stable life in life. The noun “girl” indicates to someone who is vulnerable and innocent this is used by Priestly to highlight that though Eva Smith is around the same age as Sheila her Bourgeois lifestyle allows her to be considered more of a mature and respected person suggesting to the audience that there was a clear distinction between the classes with the highly admired rich living extravagant lifestyles and the mistreated poor barely making eats meat. The repetition of the pronoun “you” illiterates that it is just her fault and no one else's as it was her bitterness that ultimately caused the firing of Eva Smith suggesting to the reader that the upper classes mistreat their position in society. Furthermore, the Inspectors speech at the near the end of his departure solidifies the idea that the upper classes abuse their responsibility “We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.” The repetition of the pronoun ”we” at the beginning of each sentence is used to emphasise to the reader how everyone should be a team and the line “we are members of one body” implies that physically humans are all equals but money allows people to be more equal than others highlighting to the reader Priestley's beliefs about the exploitation of power in the class system.

In conclusion Priestly wanted to use the unequal and irresponsible society of 1912 to get people thinking about the same issue plaguing society in 1945 as going through the war made the working class question there place in society and if they really wanted to be under the power of the upper-classes.