Theme of Responsibility in the Play An Inspector Calls: Critical Analysis

The theme of responsibility is central to the play “An Inspector Calls” and through the actions of the characters, Priestley demonstrates to the audience that everyone has a collective responsibility to each other in society. He engages the idea by contrasting the older generation to the younger one, and explicitly draws out the difference between those who have accepted their responsibility and those who haven’t. “An Inspector Calls” was written in 1945, during the Second World war but was set in 1912. Priestley chose to do this so that the audience can learn from their mistakes in the past and make the world a fairer and nicer place to live in.

Firstly, the pompous and injudicious Mr. Birling begins by showing that he believes that he has a responsibility to “his own” and no-one else. The pronoun “his” has an implied ownership and suggests his materialistic personality. He calls socialists “cranks” and criticises their belief as he wants nothing more than “lower costs and higher prices.” This links to capitalism and shows that Mr. Birling believes his responsibility is to business and earning money, therefore he appears to be quite towards people from lower classes. “Yes, yes. Horrid business.” portrays Mr Birling’s dismissive attitude and how he links everything to business when a young girl had just died. His uncaring attitude is also demonstrated in his treatment of Eva Smith who is viewed as “cheap labour” opposed to a human being. This makes his a very abominable character for an audience who have just lived through war. The use of dramatic irony in mentioning the “unsinkable” Titanic and the idea that “there isn’t a chance of war” shows that his speculations are untrustworthy and inprudent. In fact, the audience should believe the very opposite of this character. Mr Birling refuses to take any responsibility in the death of Eva Smith primarily by pretending not recognising her then dismissing the Inspector’s questions. As well as Mr Birling, Gerald has a very contemptuous attitude towards the Inspector. He always consents with Mr Birling for example talking about the strike, he agrees to Mr Birling’s decision about sacking Eva by saying “you couldn’t have done anything else.” Priestley is highlighting these egotistical actions as a way of exposing to the audience that the class division was flawed with condescending, narrow-minded and ignorant people. Even with the Inspector’s emphatic lesson Mr Birling still doesn’t change illustrating him as an incredibly unrepentant person. The opposite way of being responsible is portrayed to contrast with the right or changing way.

A character who does demonstrate the true meaning of responsibility is Shelia. Initially she seems much the same as her parents with quite childish tendencies, “Oh look mummy,” but as the play develops we can see that she is starting to have her own opinions and being assertive. Sheila is the first person to defend Eva Smith thus the working class declaring, “they’re not cheap labour, they’re people.” This not only juxtaposes her father’s attitude but is the start of her accepting her responsibility as an adult. Priestley presents her as someone who is able to change and by the end she has matured a great deal. Her responsibility is also shown by her being shocked when she learns that she had a part to play in Eva’s death. “At least I’m trying to tell the truth.” This is in comparison to Gerald who is being judgmental of her even though he has not yet taken responsibility for his own actions. Admitting a mistake and learning from the past is a way Priestley presented responsibility through the younger generation because they are the future, the ones that should be greatly educated about responsibility and what makes a fair society.

The most significant character linked to the theme is the Inspector who reflects the views of Priestley. The Inspector, or Priestley's inner voice wanted the Birling family to share responsibility. This was depicted by the Inspector constantly using the pronoun "we". He turns sentences spoken by the Birling family around by changing "I" to "we" when no one else in the play uses it. This shows that the characters except the Inspector see themselves as individuals with or without responsibility. However, from the use of collective pronoun the Inspector is trying to tell the audience that the society as a whole will be a problem if people don't have social responsibility. It might not affect them in short terms but the world will crumble down if everyone thinks in that way. Priestley uses the Inspector to put pressure on the Birlings to make them realise what they've done and interrogate them to find out their shameful secrets. He cleverly gives the Inspector an impression of "massiveness, solidity, and purposefulness" which gives us an idea that he always speaks precisely, carefully, and demanding and is in control all the time. The Inspector is like a role-model showing us how we should be responsible and creates a huge difference between him and other characters such as Mr Birling who never changes in act one.

Throughout act one we see some characters accept and deny their individual responsibility. The presentation of Mr Birling and Gerald makes us dislike them due to their remorseless attitude to their mistakes. However, as the audience we do get a good impression of Sheila as she made the right choice to admit her wrong doing and change into an illuminating character. I think Priestley has effectively presented his attitude towards responsibility because the Inspector is a representation of the society and his thoughts. We unmistakably got the idea of what responsibility meant and its importance: "chain of events" was to suggest that if we do not take responsibility for each other and learn the lesson the world will become a terrible place and we will be taught in "fire and blood and anguish."