

WIDER READING: Macbeth Context

Religion

Almost everyone in England in Shakespeare's day was Christian. Everyone would go to church on a Sunday, or even more often. Most people believed in Hell as a very real place, and that the Devil was a specific person.

Queen Elizabeth I's father, Henry VIII, broke away from the Catholic Church in Rome and became head of the Church in England. Across Northern Europe at this time groups of people 'protested' against the Roman Catholic Church - they were known as 'Protestants'. They did not obey the Pope. In England people were martyred on both sides. They were often burnt at the stake.

Religion was a big political issue – being the wrong religion at home could get you imprisoned, tortured or executed. It also affected relations with other countries. Spain, a Catholic country, wanted England to return to Catholicism and the Spanish king sent an Armada – a fleet of ships - which tried to invade. Because religion was so closely associated with politics, playwrights had to be very careful. Shakespeare avoids talking directly about Christianity, but throughout his plays we see references to Heaven and Hell. Hamlet, for example, can't bring himself to kill his uncle while he is praying, because he will go straight to Heaven – the opposite of what Hamlet wants!

There were a few small Jewish communities too. King Edward I expelled the Jews in 1290, but some Jews had returned to England. Outwardly they had to pretend to be Elizabethan Christians and go to church. There was a lot of prejudice against Jews. This is reflected in *The Merchant of Venice* which features a law case between a Jew and a Christian at its centre. The case is settled with the Jew being punished by being forcibly converted to Christianity.

Did you know?

In Shakespeare's time the law said that you had to go to church every week.

One of the main translations of the Bible still used today is called the King James Bible – King James I, Elizabeth's successor, ordered a 'modern' English version in 1611.

KEY QUESTION: How does this information link to your understanding of themes and characters in the play?

WIDER READING: Macbeth Context

The Great Chain of Being

Elizabethans believed that God set out an order for everything in the universe. This was known as the Great Chain of Being. On Earth, God created a social order for everybody and chose where you belonged. In other words, the king or queen was in charge because God put them there and they were only answerable to God (the Divine Right of Kings). This meant that disobeying the monarch was a sin, which was handy for keeping people in their place! It also led to the idea that if the wrong person was monarch everything would go wrong for a country, including whether the crops would be good, or if animals behaved as they should. The Elizabethans were very superstitious.

The Great Chain of Being includes everything from God and the angels at the top, to humans, to animals, to plants, to rocks and minerals at the bottom. It moves from beings of pure spirit at the top of the Chain to things made entirely of matter at the bottom. Humans are pretty much in the middle, being mostly mortal, or made of matter, but with a soul made of spirit. The theory started with the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, but was a basic assumption of life in Elizabethan England. You were a noble, or a farmer, or a beggar, because that was the place God had ordained for you.

The Great Chain of Being is a major influence on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Macbeth disturbs the natural order of things by murdering the king and stealing the throne. This throws all of nature into uproar, including a story related by an old man that the horses in their stables went mad and ate each other, a symbol of unnatural happenings.

KEY QUESTION: How does this information link to your understanding of themes and characters in the play? How would a Shakespearian audience have responded to the Death of Duncan and Macbeth becoming King?

WIDER READING: Macbeth Context

Witches

In Shakespeare's time people believed in witches. They were people who had made a pact with the Devil in exchange for supernatural powers. If your cow was ill, it was easy to decide it had been cursed. If there was plague in your village, it was because of a witch. If the beans didn't grow, it was because of a witch. Witches might have a familiar – a pet, or a toad, or a bird – which was supposed to be a demon advisor. People accused of being witches tended to be old, poor, single women. It is at this time that the idea of witches riding around on broomsticks (a common household implement in Elizabethan England) becomes popular.

There are lots of ways to test for a witch. A common way was to use a ducking stool, or just to tie them up, and duck the accused under water in a pond or river. If she floated, she was a witch. If she didn't, she was innocent. She probably drowned. Anyone who floated was then burnt at the stake. It was legal to kill witches because of the Witchcraft Act passed in 1563, which set out steps to take against witches who used spirits to kill people.

King James I became king in 1603. He was particularly superstitious about witches and even wrote a book on the subject. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* especially to appeal to James – it has witches and is set in Scotland, where he was already king. The three witches in *Macbeth* manipulate the characters into disaster, and cast spells to destroy lives. Other magic beings, the fairies, appear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Elizabethans thought fairies played tricks on innocent people – just as they do in the play.

KEY QUESTION: How does this information link to your understanding of themes and characters in the play? How would a Shakespearian audience have responded to the Witches in the opening act?

WIDER READING: Themes in *An Inspector Calls*

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In this play, J.B. Priestley presents us with a sincerely felt and powerfully expressed social message. We are shown the comfortable home and rich way of life of the Birling family. By contrast we have the accounts of the desperate attempts of the workers to increase their poor wages and the drab and sordid life that the girl is forced to live as a result of the actions of people such as the Birlings.

The Inspector champions the cause of the poor, and tries to get the others to accept that all people share a common humanity and so are all part of an interdependent community. This message does seem to get through to Sheila and Eric. Sheila is ready to accept and demonstrate this feeling of compassion, but her father simply dismisses the idea of a community, in which responsibility and guilt are shared, as the foolish mutterings of a socialist crank.

As the play progresses, the Inspector's point is put across more and more forcefully. Each character's involvement with Eva Smith/Daisy Renton adds to the Inspector's argument, and he becomes not only a spokesman for the disadvantaged but a voice for the conscience which the Birlings and Gerald seem to lack! The characters, especially the older ones, are increasingly shown to be hiding behind an appearance of respectability which has no foundation in any true sense of morality. The Inspector points out what would happen if injustice and inequality were allowed to continue unchecked. His increasingly missionary tone reaches its peak when J.B. Priestley's political message is thundered out in the Inspector's final speech. This exaggerated oratorical style might not be acceptable if J.B. Priestley had not gradually built up the mysterious and prophetic aspects of the Inspector's character.

We are never given a clear set of political policies but J.B. Priestley does make the general point that all of us have a share in the responsibility for what happens in our society, that we have a duty of care to others. We see that the sense of respectability with which the characters surround themselves does not stand up to close examination. The way that the older characters remain unmoved and immovable, uncaring for anyone but themselves, is one of the horrors of the play. Each of the revelations has deepened the lesson they should be learning but they refuse to take any notice. We are left wondering whether our society today is any less likely to survive a similarly close examination. Are we any better in our everyday dealings with other people than the Birlings?

Most of the characters have a narrow view of what it means to be responsible, but the Inspector provides us with a much broader one. Mr Birling is a business man and as such he feels his responsibility is to make a success of his business, which means making as much profit as possible even if that means being harsh in his dealings with those who work for him. As a family man he sees that he has a responsibility to provide for the material needs of his family, yet it is clear that Eric does not see him as the kind of father to whom he could turn when in trouble. Mrs Birling accepts her responsibility as chairwoman of the Women's Charity Organisation, but only sees a responsibility to help those that she feels are deserving of help. Sheila belatedly recognises that as a powerful customer she has an obligation not to let her personal feelings and ill-temper lead to misery for people who have no power. Eric has little sense of responsibility. He drinks far more than is good for him and he forces the girl into a relationship which has disastrous consequences. He attempts to help her by stealing from his father. Gerald shows some sense of responsibility when he rescues the girl from the unwelcome attentions of another man, feeds her and finds her somewhere to live. Yet he gives in to his own desire for personal pleasure and eventually abandons the girl without knowing, or very much caring, what happens to her.

The Inspector's role is to shake these people up and to make them aware of that broader view of responsibility which J.B. Priestley felt was essential if the world was ever going to learn from its mistakes and become a place where everyone has the right to be treated fairly.

KEY QUESTION: Is the Inspector the most important character in the play? Why?

WIDER READING: Themes in *An Inspector Calls*

LOVE

The play presents a variety of thoughts about love, the nature of love and different people's interpretation of love. Sheila and Gerald appear to be in love; they have just announced their engagement and seem happy enough contemplating a future dedicated to each other. After each of them has confessed to their shameful behaviour towards Eva Smith/Daisy Renton Sheila realises that they do not really know each other well and that trust is an essential ingredient in a loving relationship.

Mr Birling's remark about the engagement of his daughter bringing the two family firms into a closer working relationship, gives us an indication of his attitude towards love and marriage. He sees marriage as a convenient way of progressing up the social and economic ladder. This makes us wonder whether love played any real part in his marriage to the socially superior Sybil Birling and whether her coldness to others, including her own children, does not have its roots in a loveless marriage.

Both Gerald and Eric have been involved with the girl, yet each of them denies that they loved her — their relationships were prompted by physical attraction. The girl had taken up with Eric out of necessity, but she does, however, seem to have felt a genuine love for Gerald. Gerald's ending of the affair may be seen as being callous in view of her love for him.

The Inspector preaches a form of love, not too dissimilar to that preached by Christ when he instructed his followers to love one another as much as they love themselves. This form of love is the true 'charity', and is something which appears quite alien to women such as Mrs Birling who bask in the glory of volunteering their time to 'charity' while being devoid of any true charity in their hearts.

TIME

J.B. Priestley wrote the play for an audience just coming out of the horrors of the Second World War, yet he set his play in 1912, two years before the start of the First World War and this brings us to a consideration of J.B. Priestley's use of time as an element of his plays. At the end of the play we are left with a sense that the events are going to start all over again. We wonder whether things will be different and how the characters will behave.

The Inspector, arriving before the suicide is a reality offers each a chance to see the consequences, to change the future, to break the circle. Eric and Sheila seem prepared to take that opportunity to face up to their past actions and to improve themselves, but the others do not. The reflections on the past, and the possibilities of the future highlight the importance of caring for others, of taking responsibility for our actions and of considering the consequences of them. The Inspector's knowledge of events, apparently before they happen, his steady revelation of the characters' pasts and their links to the dead girl over a two-year period gives him a mystical, unworldly quality. His departure leaves the characters free to decide their future, while at the end we are left to wonder how they will cope with reliving the close scrutiny of their dealings with others when the cycle starts all over again.

By setting the play in 1912 and presenting it to a later audience, J.B. Priestley has covered an era which includes both World Wars. The failure of the older characters to learn anything reflects the failure of generations to learn from the mistakes of the recent past. There is dramatic irony in that characters talk of hopes for peace and prosperity, but we know these will not happen. By 1945 J.B. Priestley was hoping that the second time around the world might learn from past mistakes and we might see such hopes realised if we, the audience, can accept the challenge to be caring and socially aware.

KEY QUESTION: Which is the most important theme in the play?

AN INSPECTOR CALLS: WIDER READING

It is **IMPORTANT** that you write about this play as a **PLAY ON A STAGE**, not a **STORY ON A PAGE**:

→ When you write about this PLAY in the exam, always discuss the EFFECTS and PURPOSES both of its language (technically called, “dialogue”), and:

- STAGE ACTION (i.e. what you see on stage)
 - STAGE PROPERTIES (i.e. the first thing you see as the curtain rises and in each scene: the set)
 - STAGE DIRECTIONS (i.e. Priestley’s guidance to the director – can be VERY important)
 - DRAMATIC DEVICES (e.g. structure of events, dialogue, dramatic irony, etc.)
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“Dramatic Irony”

This is an important dramatic device used a good deal in this play by Joseph Priestley. When you watch a play (or a TV drama), you – as a member of the audience – are in a privileged position compared to the characters.

Unlike the characters, the audience can see and hear everything that has so far gone on. This means you know more than the characters. This fact is used in important ways by the playwright who knows that it will draw you closer into the play and so engage your attention deeply. We all enjoy guessing what might happen next.

Very much like your experience of a childhood pantomime, in any play, you sometimes feel you could shout out to a character and warn them that what they are saying or doing is not for the best (“Jack! Jack! Watch out! The giant’s behind you!”). So – when some characters speak or act, you interpret what they say or do in a **double sense** (i.e. you are aware of **irony**), but – *unlike in a childhood panto* – you can do nothing about it. This doesn’t mean you feel any less involved than in that early childhood panto, though – you do. **Dramatic irony involves and engages the audience’s attention like no other dramatic device. This is why you MUST discuss it in any exam answer or essay on a play.**

J. B. Priestley makes excellent use of dramatic irony in “An Inspector Calls”, particularly through Birling’s first major speeches. Remember, the play was set in 1912 (before the First World War); but its first audiences would have viewed it following their experiences of another tragic world war: World War II.

KEY QUESTION: How many different examples of dramatic irony can you think of in the play? Are there some characters that are more involved in dramatic irony than others? Why do you think this is?

AN INSPECTOR CALLS CONTEXT: WIDER READING

Priestley's Political Views:

During the 1930's Priestley became very concerned about the consequences of social inequality in Britain, and in 1942 Priestley and others set up a new political party, the *Common Wealth Party* which argued for public ownership of land, greater democracy, and a new "morality" in politics.

The party merged with the Labour Party in 1945, but Priestley was influential in developing the idea of the Welfare State which began to be put into place at the end of the war.

He believed that further world wars could only be avoided through cooperation and mutual respect between countries, and so became active in the early movement for a United Nations.

1945 society

- World War II ended on 8 May 1945. People were recovering from nearly 6 years of warfare, danger and uncertainty.
- Class distinctions had been greatly reduced as a result of two world wars.
- As a result of the wars, women had earned a more valued place in society.
- There was a great desire for social change. Immediately after World War 2, Labour's Clement Attlee won a landslide victory over the Conservative Winston Churchill.

1912 society

- Based on a class system, distinct difference between upper and lower classes.
- 87% of the country's personal wealth was in the hands of 5% of the population.
- Women were subservient to men. A rich woman would get married, a poor woman would be seen as cheap labour.
- The rich, ruling classes so no reason to change the society.

A view of Edwardian society:

'Look at the people who swarm the streets to see the Lord Mayor's Show, and where will you see a more pitiable sight? These beef-eating, port-drinking fellows in Piccadilly, exercised, scrubbed, groomed, they are all well enough to be sure; but his other side of the shield is distressing to look at. Poor, stunted, bad complexioned, shabbily dressed, ill-featured are these pork eating, gin drinking denizens of the East End. Crowds I have seen in America, in Mexico, and in most of the great cities of Europe... nowhere is there such squalor, such pinching poverty, so many undersized, so many plainly and revolting diseased, so much human rottenness as here...'

KEY QUESTION: How is this information relevant to the play?