

Transformation Thematic Essay Paragraph Sort (Intermediate)

Directions for Teacher: Make one copy of this handout for each group of students and then cut on the dotted lines to create statement strips for the activity. Place each set of statement strips into an envelope to distribute to groups during class. Alternatively, as the essay is in a mixed order, the handout can be given directly to the students for them to cut up themselves.



Essay Question: How does Priestley explore the theme of transformation in *An Inspector Calls*?

Priestley wrote an *An Inspector Calls* in 1945, a time when society was in a period of great upheaval. The Second World War, which had changed the lives of citizens globally as well as in the UK, had just ended and there was a period of uncertainty – would life go back to how it was pre-war or would it take an altogether new direction? Priestley wanted progress and change. *An Inspector Calls* can be seen as Priestley's call for this change and his commitment to creating a fairer world. This essay will explore how Priestley's text presents the case for the transformation of society, and how the characters are tools Priestley uses to this end.

In conclusion, in *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley presents the power of transformation through the character of Sheila. By the end of the play, Sheila is far more grown-up and deserving of admiration than she was at the start. She is aware of her responsibility to others, takes ownership of her mistakes and tries to guide those around her to be more considerate and empathetic. Given that many of the theatre-going audience in 1945 would have been from a similar class to Sheila, they may have related to her character and would have thus been encouraged to draw parallels between her life and theirs, using her transformation to reflect on their own behaviour. The fact they had just experienced the Second World War would have meant they were more susceptible to questioning the social values and codes of a society that predated the war, as they, like Sheila, would be aware of the suffering of others. The character of Sheila is, therefore, not just a vehicle through which Priestley explores transformation, she is a call for transformation and a call for avoiding future 'fire and blood and anguish'.

However, Sheila is transformed by the tale of Eva Smith. She becomes more mature when she learns of her death, even before her role in the suicide is brought to light. She challenges her father, Mr Birling, when previously her behaviour had been one of obedience. When Mr Birling defends his decision to fire Eva Smith for requesting a wage increase, Sheila states: 'these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people'. Here, Sheila is beginning to show an awareness of social responsibility. Her statement that the girls are 'people' suggests that her father has been treating them as machines or as something non-human. Sheila's statement highlights a growth in her

Transformation Thematic Essay Paragraph Sort (Advanced)

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Sheila's change in character is not the only way she is linked to transformation. Having undergone her own growth, she seeks to encourage those around her to do the same and becomes increasingly frustrated with her parents and Gerald when they seem unable to learn from their behaviour. At the end of Act Three, when the Inspector is thought to be a hoax, she speaks 'tensely' and 'passionately'. These adverbs in the stage directions highlight how much Sheila is moved by what she is saying. Then, her statement to her parents – 'So there's nothing to be sorry for, nothing to learn' – highlights how she wants them to see the evening as an opportunity to develop as people. In stating the opposite of what she believes, the implication is that she wants her parents to register that their behaviour is not appropriate – they should be sorry and they should learn. Sheila, then, not only experiences her own transformation, she also seeks to encourage that of the other characters on stage.

However, *An Inspector Calls* is as much about lack of transformation as it is about transformation. The behaviour of Mr Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald, who regard the Inspector's visit as a joke once they learn there is no inspector named Goole and there is not a young girl's body in the morgue, shows a distinct lack of change. The stage directions Priestley uses to describe how Birling speaks contrast sharply to those employed for Sheila. Birling speaks 'triumphantly', 'jovially' and in an 'amused' manner, whilst Mrs Birling and Gerald are described as 'smiling'. These stage directions suggest they are enjoying the situation they are in, which in turn suggests that they don't care about immoral behaviour if people won't find out about it. Here, Priestley is clearly condemning the double standards of the higher classes – individuals who look down on others as inferior and yet are willing to behave in ways that lack morality.

The ending of the play further reinforces the risk of not learning from one's experiences. Mr Birling, Mrs Birling and Gerald will, it is suggested, be made to repeat the uncomfortable interrogation process when an inspector calls to announce he is on his way. Priestley perhaps chose to structure *An Inspector Calls* with this repetition to mirror the events in society in 1912 and onwards. The British public (and indeed that of the Western world) were hit with one world war. Rather than learning from this experience of 'fire and blood and anguish', they chose to ignore it: soon after the First World War, the unequal Golden Age occurred, which lay the conditions for the Great Depression and the Second World War. History, then, in this period repeated itself. The fate of the Birlings could be seen to mirror that of the society that did not learn from their mistakes. Priestley suggests that there is no escape: one must always behave in a socially responsible manner, for otherwise, traumatising events will continue to occur.

In conclusion, *An Inspector Calls* is a play that is as much about transformation as it is about stasis. Should the audience wish, they are able to follow Sheila's lead, transforming their behaviour and seeking to transform that of those around them, or they are able to learn from the mistakes of Mrs Birling, Mr Birling and Gerald – one may ignore one's behaviour, but there will always be consequences. Priestley's play presents situations of transformation and stasis to encourage transformation in the codes of conduct and social values of his audience, something that would have been all the more relevant to his 1945 audience who had just experienced the Second World War. The play is a call for transformation, and is as much about inaction as it is about change.

Firstly, Priestley explores transformation through the character of Sheila. Sheila begins the play referring to her parents as 'mummy' and 'daddy', and by arguing with Eric, calling him an 'ass' or using slang to refer to his 'squiffy' state. Each of these examples highlights her childish nature: the nouns she employs to refer to her parents are childish and something one would expect to be expelled from the mouth of a young child, not an adult, whilst the very nature of arguing with a sibling and the use of insults is something that would be expected from someone who lacks maturity. Priestley may have chosen to present Sheila in such a way to highlight how sheltered her life and upbringing have been – she has not been forced to grow up, unlike Eva Smith who is of a similar age. The audience, then, would begin to question why someone who is so immature and inexperienced has enough power to have someone sacked for looking at them the wrong way. Sheila's behaviour could lead the audience to identify the weakness of capitalism as a system: as a wealthy individual and consumer, it is capitalism that gives her power over Eva; power which she does not use wisely.