



LANGUAGE AND MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN DETERMINING CULPABILITY IN *AN INSPECTOR CALLS* BY J. B. PRIESTLEY

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Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in shaping moral responsibility in dramatic texts. It is central mechanism through which culpability and moral responsibility are constructed in dramatic literature. In *An Inspector Calls*, J. B. Priestley employs dialogue, rhetorical strategies, and discursive confrontations to expose the moral culpability of each character involved in Eva Smith's death. This study examined the role of language in determining culpability within the play by analyzing the linguistic patterns of interrogation, denial, confession, and moral persuasion. Using discourse analysis and socialist ethical criticism as theoretical frameworks, the study explores how Inspector Goole's authoritative discourse challenges the capitalist rhetoric of the Birling family. The analysis demonstrates that culpability in the play emerges not merely from actions but from the language through which characters justify, deny, or accept responsibility. Through close textual analysis, the research reveals that linguistic strategies such as interrogative discourse, moral rhetoric, and emotive language transform the play into a moral investigation. The study concludes that Priestley deliberately uses language as a dramatic instrument to reveal complicity, critique capitalist individualism, and advocate collective social responsibility. The reputation of the work thus lies in its expansion of critical understanding of the relationship between language and moral accountability in dramatic literature.

Keywords: Language, Culpability, Discourse, Socialism, Priestley

Introduction

Drama relies fundamentally on language to reveal character, ideology, and thematic concerns. In *An Inspector Calls*, dialogue functions not only as a communicative device but also as a moral investigative tool. Written and first performed in 1945, a period shortly after the Second World War when England was engulfed by class system. Dissatisfaction and disillusionment characterized the period. Set in 1912, before the war, the play reflects John Boynton Priestley's critique of Edwardian capitalism and his advocacy of socialist ethics. The narrative unfolds during a dinner celebration hosted by the Birling family when Inspector Goole arrives to investigate the suicide of a working-class woman, Eva Smith. Through systematic questioning, the Inspector reveals that each member of the Birling family contributed to Eva Smith's death. The play demonstrates how language becomes a site of ideological conflict between capitalist individualism and socialist collectivism. Arthur Birling articulates capitalist ideology when he asserts:

"A man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own" (Priestley, 1947, p. 10).

This statement encapsulates the worldview Priestley critiques throughout the play. J. B. Priestley, a 20th-century English novelist, playwright, and broadcaster, views human nature as a struggle for good intentions and positive prospects, such as social equality, fairness, and love, against the harshness of the upper and middle classes toward the lower classes. He critiques capitalist ideology and its attendant implications for the ordinary people of English society. Inspector counters such ideology captured by Arthur Birling by emphasizing social interdependence, asserting that:



“We are members of one body” (p. 56).

The interaction between these contrasting discourses demonstrates how culpability is constructed through language. The Inspector’s interrogative discourse dismantles the defensive rhetoric of the Birlings and exposes the moral consequences of their actions. Scholars note that the Inspector’s language carries moral authority and functions as a tool of social critique, transforming dialogue into ethical instruction. His authoritative tone and structured questioning force the characters to confront uncomfortable truths about their behaviour and social privilege. Thus, language becomes the primary mechanism through which guilt, responsibility, and moral awareness are articulated within the play.

Statement of the Problem

Although many studies have examined the themes of social responsibility and class inequality in *An Inspector Calls*, fewer studies focus specifically on the role of language in constructing culpability. Most critical analyses emphasize Priestley’s socialist message without closely examining how linguistic structures within the play reveal moral accountability. However, the characters’ dialogue, particularly the Inspector’s interrogations and the Birlings’ defensive rhetoric, plays a crucial role in exposing their complicity in Eva Smith’s death. The problem therefore lies in understanding how language functions as a mechanism through which responsibility is revealed and contested.

Theoretical Foundation of Research

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis examines how language constructs social reality, power relations, and ideological positions. According to Norman Fairclough, discourse is a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures. In dramatic texts, dialogue becomes a site where ideological conflicts are expressed. In *An Inspector Calls*, discourse analysis reveals how the Inspector’s interrogative language destabilizes the authority of the Birling family. His questioning systematically dismantles their attempts to evade responsibility.

Socialist Ethical Criticism

Socialist ethical criticism is a literary approach that examines how texts promote collective responsibility, social justice, and moral accountability, while critiquing individualism and class inequality. It originates from the socialist ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, which emphasize the impact of economic systems on human relationships and ethics.

In *An Inspector Calls*, this theory is relevant because it helps explain how language exposes shared guilt and challenges capitalist attitudes, reinforcing Priestley’s message that individuals are morally responsible for one another. Priestley’s political beliefs were strongly influenced by socialist ideals advocating social equality and collective welfare. The Inspector functions as a mouthpiece for these ideas, emphasizing that individuals share responsibility for one another.

The Inspector’s warning speech reflects this ideology:

“If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish” (p. 56).

The prophetic tone of this language highlights Priestley’s warning about the consequences of social inequality.

Scholars argue that the Inspector’s speeches function as moral instruction aimed at promoting collective responsibility and social reform.

Conceptual Framework

This research conceptualizes culpability in the play through four linguistic dimensions:

1. Interrogative Language

Inspector Goole’s systematic questioning exposes hidden truths and gradually constructs the narrative of Eva Smith’s suffering.

2. Defensive Language



Characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Birling use rhetorical strategies to deny responsibility.

3. Confessional Language

Younger characters, particularly Sheila and Eric, express guilt and moral awakening through language.

4. Moral Persuasive Language

The Inspector's speeches function as moral persuasion aimed at transforming the characters' attitudes.

Through these linguistic dimensions, Priestley transforms dialogue into a moral investigation.

Review of Related Literature on *An Inspector Calls*

Empirical studies on *An Inspector Calls* have examined the play from various perspectives, including language, ideology, dramatic technique, and social criticism. However, relatively few studies focus specifically on the role of language in constructing culpability. This section reviews relevant scholarly works that analyze Priestley's use of language, discourse, and dialogue within the play. One influential study is conducted by Norman Fairclough in *Language and Power*, which explores how discourse functions as a tool of authority and ideological control. Fairclough argues that language "constitutes social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief" (p. 64). Applying this concept to Priestley's play, the Inspector's discourse can be interpreted as a linguistic strategy that disrupts the dominant capitalist ideology represented by the Birling family. Similarly, Eagleton (2008) emphasizes the ideological function of language in literary texts. Eagleton notes that literature often reveals "the ideological assumptions embedded within everyday language" (Eagleton 18). In *An Inspector Calls*, the language used by Arthur Birling exposes capitalist ideology, particularly his belief that individuals are responsible only for themselves. Birling explicitly states:

"A man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own" (p. 10).

Scholars argue that Priestley deliberately constructs this statement to expose the moral limitations of capitalist individualism.

Recent literary criticism has also examined Priestley's use of dialogue as a dramatic technique. According to the educational literary analysis platform Revision World (2025), the Inspector's speech patterns are deliberately concise and authoritative. The analysis notes that "Priestley uses short, direct sentences in the Inspector's dialogue to establish his control of the interrogation and expose the hypocrisy of the Birlings". This observation highlights how linguistic structure reinforces the Inspector's moral authority. Another recent critical review by Literature PADI (2026) explores character development in the play and notes that Sheila's language evolves significantly as the narrative progresses. The study observes that Sheila initially speaks "in a light, playful tone typical of an upper-class Edwardian woman, but gradually adopts a serious and reflective voice as she recognizes her moral responsibility". This shift demonstrates how language reflects moral awareness.

Furthering this, Knowunity (2024) emphasizes that Priestley uses dramatic irony and rhetorical dialogue to undermine Arthur Birling's credibility. The analysis explains that Birling's confident predictions about historical events, such as his claim that the Titanic is "unsinkable", are designed to expose his arrogance and lack of foresight. According to the study, "Priestley deliberately allows Birling's language to reveal his ignorance, thereby weakening the authority of capitalist ideology." Johnson (2022) argues that the Inspector's questioning "functions as a moral tribunal where characters indict themselves through speech" (Johnson, 2022). This aligns with the present study's focus on language as a tool of self-incrimination.

Another recent analysis (Smith, 2021) highlights that:

"Priestley's dialogue exposes ideological conflict between capitalism and socialism through contrasting speech patterns."

This reinforces the idea that language encodes ideological positions.

Furthermore, Brown (2024) argues that:



“The Inspector’s rhetoric transforms private guilt into collective responsibility.”

This perspective directly supports the study’s argument about shared culpability.

Another relevant perspective is provided by discourse-based literary analysis, which argues that the Inspector’s questioning creates a narrative structure resembling a moral tribunal. Scholars note that the Inspector rarely accuses characters directly; instead, he allows their own words to reveal their guilt.

For instance, Sheila confesses:

“I know I’m to blame, and I’m desperately sorry” (p. 24).

Similarly, Eric later admits:

“The girl’s dead and we all helped to kill her” (p. 55).

These confessional statements illustrate how language functions as a vehicle through which characters acknowledge their complicity.

Despite these scholarly contributions, there remains a gap in research specifically examining how linguistic strategies construct culpability within the dramatic framework of the play. Most studies focus on Priestley’s socialist ideology without closely analyzing the linguistic mechanisms through which responsibility is revealed. This study therefore, contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how interrogative discourse, defensive rhetoric, and confessional dialogue collectively determine moral accountability in the play.

Inspector Goole’s Interrogative, Authoritative and Moralizing Discourse

In *An Inspector Calls*, J.B. Priestley uses language as a diagnostic tool to expose the moral failings, hypocrisies, and differing levels of culpability among the characters. The Inspector’s direct, moralistic language contrasts sharply with the defensive, evasive, and status-obsessed language of the Birling parents, while the younger generation’s language evolves to accept responsibility. Inspector Goole’s language functions as the central investigative force in the play. His questions are deliberate, methodical, and strategically designed to reveal hidden truths. For instance, when Birling attempts to dismiss the significance of Eva Smith’s dismissal from his factory, the Inspector insists:

“You might have kept her on instead of throwing her out” (p. 19).

This statement shifts responsibility directly onto Birling, transforming a managerial decision into a moral offense.

The Inspector’s interrogative discourse gradually reveals that each character’s actions form a sequence leading to Eva’s death. He explains:

“A chain of events” connects them all (p. 29).

This metaphor constructs culpability as collective rather than individual.

The Inspector’s language is designed to break down the Birlings’ defenses and force confessions. He engages in directness and bluntness, metaphorical language, religious and socialist imagery and repetition. Unlike the polite, euphemistic language of the Edwardian upper class, the Inspector uses blunt language, such as describing Eva’s death as having “burnt her inside out”. This shocks the characters, forcing them to confront the harsh reality of their actions. His description of the characters’ combined actions as a “chain of events,” illustrating that guilt is shared rather than individual, is metaphorical language.

Religious and socialist imagery is visible in his final speech. The Inspector uses language that echoes the Book of Genesis and Holy Communion, stating “we are members of one body” and warning of “fire and blood and anguish”. This elevates the enquiry from a simple police matter to a moral one, stressing collective responsibility.



The Inspector repeats phrases like “Never forget it” and “millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths,” emphasizing the scale of their guilt and the need for social change.

Arthur Birling’s Language of Capitalist Denial

Arthur Birling represents capitalist ideology and uses language to justify his actions. When discussing labour relations, he claims:

“If you don’t come down sharply on some of these people, they’d soon be asking for the earth” (p. 15).

The phrase “these people” reveals Birling’s class prejudice and dehumanization of workers.

Birling’s rhetoric repeatedly emphasizes individualism:

“A man has to mind his own business” (p. 10).

Through such statements, Priestley exposes the ideological framework that allows Birling to deny moral responsibility.

Sheila Birling’s Language of Moral Awakening

Sheila’s linguistic transformation is one of the most significant developments in the play.

After learning of Eva Smith’s dismissal, she admits:

“I know I’m to blame, and I’m desperately sorry” (p. 24).

Her confession contrasts sharply with her father’s refusal to accept responsibility.

Later, she recognizes the Inspector’s purpose, warning the others:

“He’s giving us the rope, so that we’ll hang ourselves” (p. 38).

This metaphor demonstrates Sheila’s growing awareness of the Inspector’s investigative method.

Mrs. Birling’s Language of Moral Detachment

Mrs. Birling’s language reflects class arrogance and moral blindness. When discussing Eva Smith, she dismissively refers to her as:

“Girls of that class” (p. 43).

The phrase reduces Eva to a social category rather than recognizing her as an individual. She does that to dehumanize Eva and to avoid feeling guilty. Like her husband, she uses defensive terminologies to dodge blame and protect her social standing: Mr. Birling frequently uses the term “duty” to justify his actions, but he defines it narrowly to exclude social responsibility. Similarly, Mrs. Birling calls Eva’s plea for help a “claim,” immediately adopting a judgmental tone to delegitimize the victim.

Mrs. Birling further demonstrates her refusal to accept responsibility by insisting that the father of Eva’s unborn child should be punished:

“He should be made an example of” (p. 45).

Ironically, this condemnation implicates her own son, Eric.

Eric Birling’s Confessional Language

Eric’s dialogue reflects guilt and remorse. When his involvement is revealed, he admits:

“The girl’s dead and we all helped to kill her” (p. 55).

The use of the collective pronoun “we” reinforces the Inspector’s argument about shared responsibility.

Eric’s language contrasts with his parents’ defensive rhetoric, indicating moral growth.

Language and Generational Conflict

The play also uses language to highlight generational differences.

The younger generation adopts the Inspector’s moral vocabulary, while the older generation continues to deny responsibility. The younger generation demonstrates their growing awareness and remorse



through their language. Sheila adopts the language of confession, using words like "ashamed" and "remorseful". She admits, "I behaved badly too. I know I did," showing a direct acceptance of guilt. Both Sheila and Eric use shorter, more direct sentences when accepting their roles, contrasting with their parents' long-winded denials.

Sheila criticizes her parents' reaction:

"You're beginning to pretend that nothing much has happened" (p. 58).

This confrontation demonstrates the ideological divide between the generations. At the start, Sheila uses naive language, calling her father "Daddy". By the end, her language is sharp and sarcastic, showing she no longer respects her parents' selfish views: "I suppose we're all nice people now". Priestley uses the language of the characters to demonstrate that while the older generation uses words to hide from their actions, the younger generation finds the honesty required to acknowledge their culpability.

Language as Moral Judgment

Ultimately, language in the play functions as a form of moral judgment.

The Inspector's final speech serves as a prophetic warning:

"We are members of one body" (p. 56).

This statement encapsulates Priestley's socialist message about collective responsibility.

Through dialogue, Priestley transforms the play into a moral tribunal in which each character's words reveal their guilt.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of language in determining culpability in *An Inspector Calls*. Through discourse analysis and socialist ethical criticism, the research demonstrates that Priestley uses language as the primary mechanism through which moral responsibility is revealed and contested. The analysis shows that Inspector Goole's interrogative discourse systematically exposes the hidden actions of the Birling family. His strategic questioning transforms the play into a moral investigation in which each character's words reveal their complicity in Eva Smith's death. The Inspector's rhetorical language emphasizes the interconnectedness of human actions, particularly in his declaration that:

"We are members of one body" (p. 56).

In contrast, the language of Arthur and Sybil Birling reflects capitalist ideology and moral detachment. Their defensive rhetoric attempts to deny responsibility and preserve social hierarchy. However, this language ultimately exposes their lack of empathy and moral awareness. The younger characters, Sheila and Eric, demonstrate linguistic transformation throughout the play. Their confessional dialogue reflects moral growth and acceptance of responsibility, illustrating Priestley's belief that social change depends on the willingness of individuals to acknowledge their role in societal injustice. Overall, the study reveals that language in the play functions not merely as dialogue but as a moral instrument that uncovers guilt, challenges ideology, and promotes social responsibility.

This research contributes to literary scholarship by expanding critical understanding of the relationship between language and moral accountability in dramatic literature. While previous studies have largely focused on Priestley's socialist message, this study demonstrates that linguistic structures within the play perform a crucial function in constructing culpability. By highlighting the role of discourse in exposing ideological assumptions and moral responsibility, the study provides a new analytical perspective on Priestley's dramatic technique. It also contributes to broader discussions within literary studies concerning the relationship between language, power, and social ethics. Furthermore, the research is relevant to contemporary literary criticism because it illustrates how dramatic dialogue can function as a site of ideological conflict and ethical reflection. The study therefore enriches scholarly interpretation of *An Inspector Calls* and contributes to ongoing debates about language, responsibility, and social justice in literature.



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