An Inspector Calls by J.B. Priestley

The generation gap

NB All quotes and page references are taken from the 1988 Heinemann edition.

How does J.B. Priestley present the different generations in An Inspector Calls?

An Inspector Calls includes the timeless, universal idea of generational conflict: young versus old. This sets up a binary opposition between Mr and Mrs Birling, and their children, Sheila and Eric.

These tasks will help you to prepare for an essay on this theme.

Youth versus old age

Work in a pair, and concentrate on either the young characters in the play (e.g. Sheila and Eric), or the old characters in the play (e.g. Mr and Mrs Birling). Your teacher may decide this for you. Answer the questions below, with only your age category in mind. Try to include quotations with your answers.

Extension: Think beyond the Birlings to include other characters from the play within the age group.

1. What are the main character traits of the characters in the age group you have been given?

2. How does the generation you have been given react to key events in the play (state what these events are)?

3. How do the characters in your age group change through the play?

4. What are J.B. Priestley’s views on this age group, and how does he demonstrate his views?

Now that you have finished, join with another pair who have been looking at the opposite age group to share, compare and contrast your ideas.

You could use the sorting circles to record your ideas.
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**Young characters**
- symbolise hope for the future
- concerned with class division
- strong and independent
- foolish or misguided

**Old characters**
- more mature
- social responsibility
- concerned with social façade
- learn nothing
- moral responsibility
- get ‘told off’ at the end

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young characters</th>
<th>Old characters</th>
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Evidence

Fill in the table below to explain how generational conflict is presented in the play.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation showing generational conflict</th>
<th>What does this reveal about the character, difference between the generations and J.B. Priestley’s views?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Now you three young people, just listen to this … by that time you’ll be living in a world that’ll have forgotten all these Capital versus Labour agitations and these silly little war scares.’ (Mr Birling, p.7)</td>
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<td>‘You’re the one I blame for this … There’ll be a public scandal … I was almost certain for a knighthood …’ (Mr Birling to Eric, p.57)</td>
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<td>Mrs B: ‘Eric, I’m absolutely ashamed of you.’ Eric: ‘Well, I don’t blame you. But don’t forget I’m ashamed of you as well - yes both of you.’ (p.57)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The generation gap</td>
<td>An Inspector Calls by J.B. Priestley</td>
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<td>‘I behaved badly too. I know I did. I’m ashamed of it. But now you’re beginning all over again to pretend that nothing much has happened —’ (Sheila, p.57)</td>
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<td>‘You began to learn something. And now you’ve stopped ... it frightens me the way you talk, and I can’t listen to any more of it.’ (Sheila, p.71)</td>
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<td>‘Now look at the pair of them - the famous younger generation who know it all. And they can’t even take a joke—’ (Mr Birling, p.72, interrupted by phone call)</td>
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</table>
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Essay planning

A student has started making notes for her essay, and has listed her ideas as bullet points below. Using these as a starting point, tick those you think you would include to develop in your essay and cross out those you wouldn’t.

Once you have done this, sort the points into a sensible order for writing, and add extra notes or quotations. You might even link some of the points together because they would work well together in a paragraph.

- Characters progress from ignorance to knowledge (well-made play)
- Eric and Sheila learn to be more socially responsible
- Seven deadly sins at start of play - E and S
- Siblings accept blame at end of play
- Eric and Sheila share some of Inspector’s view
- Priestley shows how we can all change, through E and S
- E and S = intelligent and aware / Mr and Mrs B = arrogant
- Children and parents reverse roles by end of play
- Mr B looks like a fool throughout the play

Finally

You should now feel ready to write your essay. Use your notes to help you write this essay, using short quotations in support of your argument throughout.