Task 1

J. B. Priestley uses words carefully for comic effect in Act Two of *An Inspector Calls*. Sometimes the humour is due to dramatic irony, or because the audience has a better viewpoint of all the characters at this point. It’s worth knowing the meanings of some of these words to understand the humour.

Which is the correct definition?

**Impertinent adj** means ...

a. deceiving or sly
b. intrusive or presumptuous; insolently rude
c. excitable or silly; childishness
d. limp

Working in a pair, decide which of you will be ‘A’ and which will be ‘B’. If you are an ‘A’, choose a word from the ‘A’ column and if you are a ‘B’, choose a word from the ‘B’ column. Create three extra false definitions for your chosen word. Reword the real definition too, so that it sounds more like something you’d write!

Once you have your word, with all four definitions (real and invented), swap with your partner and each of you chooses what you think is the correct definition.

**Words to choose from:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>hysterical</strong> <em>adj</em> in a state of uncontrolled excitement, anger, or panic</td>
<td><strong>vindictive</strong> <em>adj</em> maliciously seeking revenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>responsible</strong> <em>adj</em> responsible for having control or authority over</td>
<td><strong>dubious</strong> <em>adj</em> not entirely honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>impressionable</strong> <em>adj</em> easily impressed or influenced</td>
<td><strong>carcass</strong> (or carcase) <em>n</em> the dead body of an animal; a person’s body <em>(informal)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>notorious</strong> <em>adj</em> well-known for some bad reason</td>
<td><strong>sot</strong> <em>n</em> a person who is frequently drunk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>offence</strong> <em>n</em> a breaking of a law or rule; crime</td>
<td><strong>imperturbable</strong> <em>adj</em> not easily upset; calm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NB.** All definitions are taken from the Collins English Dictionary.
Task 2

Priestley uses some clever wordplay in Act Two before we hear Gerald’s confession. Read the extracts below, then answer the questions that follow.

Extract 1:

Mrs Birling: If you mean that the Inspector will take offence –

Inspector: No, no. I never take offence.

Mrs Birling: I’m glad to hear it. Though I must add that it seems to me that we have more reason for taking offence.

Inspector: Let’s leave offence out of it shall we?

Gerald: I think we’d better.

Sheila: So do I.

Mrs Birling (rebuking them): I’m talking to the Inspector now, if you don’t mind.

Questions:

1. What are the different definitions of the word ‘offence’ that seem to be in use by the various characters here? How does the wordplay work?

2. Why do Sheila and Gerald gain the upper hand over Mrs Birling (i.e. What have they understood that Mrs Birling hasn’t)?

Extract 2:

Birling (angrily): Inspector, I’ve told you before, I don’t like your tone nor the way you’re handling this inquiry. And I don’t propose to give you much more rope.

Inspector: You needn’t give me any rope.

Sheila (rather wildly, with laugh): No, he’s giving us rope – so that we’ll hang ourselves.

Birling (to Mrs Birling): What’s the matter with that child?

Questions:

1. What is the meaning of the phrase ‘to give someone some/enough rope’ in the sense that Mr Birling uses the phrase?

2. Why is the Inspector’s response funny?

3. What has Sheila understood that Mrs Birling hasn’t? How does this create humour for the audience?