



An Inspector Calls

J.B. Priestley's powerful examination of social responsibility follows the prosperous Birling family as they discover their connections to a young woman's suicide. Set in 1912 but written in 1945, this play challenges our notions of morality, class, and collective responsibility.

This dramatic play exposes the interconnectedness of society and the ripple effects of our actions.

J.B. Priestley: A Voice for Social Change

Early Life

Born in Manningham, England. Lost his mother at age two. Left school at sixteen to work as a junior clerk at a wool firm.

Political Activism

Hosted popular radio show "Postscripts" until it was cancelled due to his leftwing politics. Co-founded the Common Wealth Party in 1942.

War Experience

Served and was injured in World War I before studying at Trinity College.

Literary Career

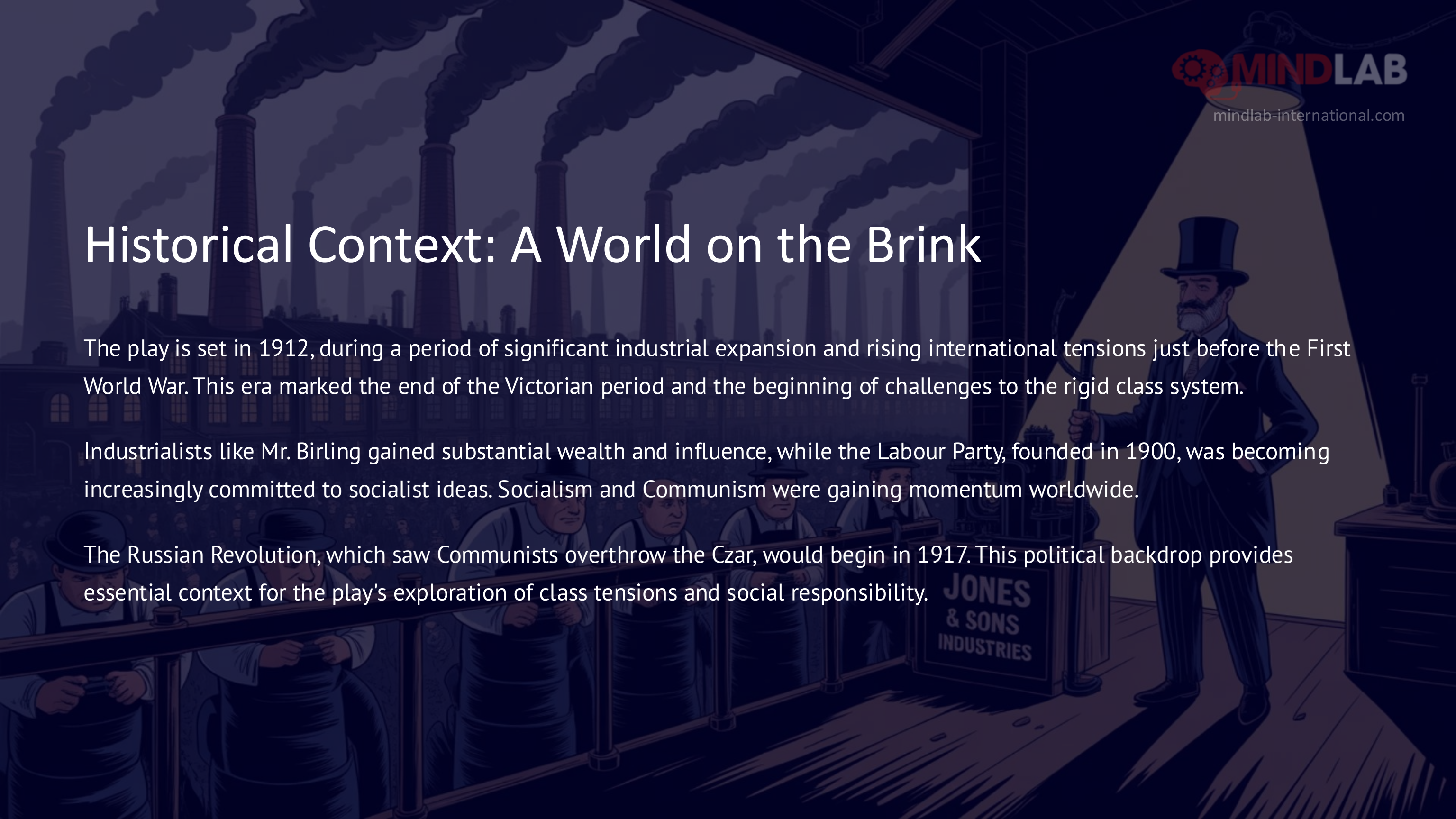
Wrote novels, plays, and newspaper articles throughout his life, including "An Inspector Calls" in 1945.

Historical Context: A World on the Brink

The play is set in 1912, during a period of significant industrial expansion and rising international tensions just before the First World War. This era marked the end of the Victorian period and the beginning of challenges to the rigid class system.

Industrialists like Mr. Birling gained substantial wealth and influence, while the Labour Party, founded in 1900, was becoming increasingly committed to socialist ideas. Socialism and Communism were gaining momentum worldwide.

The Russian Revolution, which saw Communists overthrow the Czar, would begin in 1917. This political backdrop provides essential context for the play's exploration of class tensions and social responsibility.



Plot Summary



Characters



Arthur Birling

A wealthy, self-made factory owner who believes in individual responsibility and capitalism. Refuses to accept blame for Eva's death.



Mrs. Birling

Cold, socially conscious, and her husband's "social superior." Uses her charity position to deny Eva help.



Sheila Birling

Young, initially excited about life. Shows the most remorse and growth after learning of her role in Eva's downfall.



Gerald Croft

Sheila's fiancé who had an affair with Eva/Daisy. Discovers the Inspector's fraud but seems less affected by the revelations.



Eric Birling

Heavy drinker who impregnated Eva and stole money to support her. Remains affected by his actions despite the hoax revelation.



Inspector Goole

Mysterious figure who exposes the family's connections to Eva. His ghostly name symbolizes the mystery surrounding him.



Eva Smith

Young working-class woman who encounters each Birling family member. Though never seen, her alleged suicide drives the plot and symbolizes the oppressed working class.

Themes

The play explores several interconnected thematic elements:

Social Responsibility

"We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other."

Wealth, Power and Influence

How privilege enables the wealthy to affect others' lives carelessly.



Class Politics

The conflict between Capital and Labour, wealth and poverty.

Morality vs. Legality

Actions can be legal yet immoral; consequences versus intentions.

Public vs. Private

The blurring of personal actions and their wider social impact.

Symbols and Motifs

Eva Smith

Represents the working class and all those oppressed by the wealthy. Her changing names symbolize how the poor are forced to reinvent themselves to survive.

The Inspector's Name

"Goole" suggests "ghoul" - a ghostly, supernatural presence that haunts the Birlings with their guilt and responsibility.

The Dining Room

Described as "substantial and comfortable but not cozy" - symbolizes the Birlings' wealth without warmth or humanity.

The Telephone

The final phone call represents inescapable responsibility and the cyclical nature of time and consequences.

Contemporary Relevance



Priestley's masterful examination of social inequality and moral responsibility continues to resonate powerfully in our 21st century context. The play's exploration of how privileged individuals can profoundly impact vulnerable people without facing consequences directly parallels modern debates surrounding corporate ethics, wealth inequality, and institutional accountability.

In an era of increasing political polarization and widening class divisions, the Inspector's prophetic warning that "we are members of one body" challenges our society's tendency toward individualism and self-interest. His message serves as a poignant reminder that collective responsibility for societal problems cannot be dismissed as merely individual failings.

The play's lasting relevance lies in how it forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about class structures that persist despite superficial social progress. Just as the Birlings must reckon with their complicity in Eva Smith's demise, contemporary audiences are compelled to examine how their own actions—or inactions—perpetuate systems that marginalize the vulnerable, making "An Inspector Calls" not merely a historical curiosity but an urgent moral provocation for our time.