H2: Priestley criticises the selfishness of people like the Birlings. What methods does he use to present this selfishness?

The theme of selfishness is central to An Inspector Calls. Priestley questions the morality of the Birling and Croft family and points out behaviours that are selfish. He also points to the wider selfishness of a society that is driven by profit and with no structured welfare system to support vulnerable people. This is an expose of life in Edwardian Britain that would have made a 1945 audience question what sort of society they wanted to create following the devastation of two world wars.

This selfishness is presented in a number of ways.

Firstly, Priestly draws attention to the political and economic system that first set Eva off on her downward spiral. With a lack of lawful minimum wage, Birling can set whatever wages he wants. But his selfishness in reaping the rewards for himself leads him to pursue a business policy of ‘lower costs’. This means lower wages. Priestley may be questioning what happens in a society where there are no legal requirements on pay, and the decisions are left up to the conscience of selfish men like Birling. He describes himself twice as a ‘hard-headed man of business’, but the audience is left wondering whether it is his heart that is ‘hard’. Birling’s decision not to increase the wages of his workers is made even more stark by the fact that Priestley decides to dress the men in ‘tails’ and set the play to show off the wealth of the family with ‘champagne glasses’ and a maid. Their wealth is immediately obvious to the audience and this makes is more shocking that Birling would not raise the worker’s wages.

The fact that such power rest with Birling, also enables Priestley to question the class system and whether it is fair. Eric has been born into money, without ever having to earn it, and Priestley could be saying that this idea that he has a ‘right’ to things makes him selfish. Eric seems to think he has a right to Eva’s body on the night he gets her pregnant when he says, ‘I was in a state where a chap easily turns nasty’. He implies that he had sex with Eva by force, his inability to say that he raped her perhaps suggesting his shame. The fact that he ‘easily’ turns nasty under alcohol perhaps suggests a selfish nature that has come about because he can so easily get what he wants. This is similar to Gerald’s decision to take on Daisy Renton as his mistress. Although he claims that he ‘didn’t ask her for anything’ his wealth and status meant that had influence over a vulnerable woman. By using ‘anything’ he tries to make him sound completely innocent, yet the audience knows that Gerald did get a sexual return from his mistress. And that if he really loved her, he wouldn’t have left her after six months, to selfishly pursue his own marriage which benefited his business interests. He claims that Daisy said ‘she had never been happier’, ‘happier’ suggesting that he had a good influence on her life. But the happier he made her, the further she had to fall emotionally when he left her.

This is also highlighted by the way Gerald, alongside Mr and Mrs Birling, refuse to accept any responsibility for what happened to Eva after the inspector’s visit. He seems to feel genuine emotion at the time of learning of Daisy’s death, exclaiming ‘In that case – as I’m rather more – upset – by this business...’ The use of the hyphens perhaps suggests that Gerald is struggling to contain his sadness or anger at what happened and finding it difficult to speak. However, at the end of the play, after deciding the Inspector was a hoax, he seems to have quickly gotten over his upset. He turns to Sheila and says, ‘Everything’s all right now, Sheila. Now what about this ring?’. The audience well knows that everything is not ‘all right’ for Eva. But his question to Sheila that they pick up where they left shows his selfishness, and also his own self-involvement - he obviously hasn’t noticed she doesn’t think it’s alright despite the emotive language contained in her outbursts: ‘it frightens me the way you talk’. The structure of the play also allows us to see Gerald kept up a charade of pretending everything is alright with Sheila before the Inspector arrives but after his affair with Daisy. He presents Sheila with an engagement ring (which is of his own choosing not Sheila’s: ‘is it the one you wanted me to have?’) and his own selfish conscience doesn’t seem to have been struck before the Inspector’s gruelling questioning. This is reflected by the pink lighting in the opening scene, symbolising the Birling’s contentment, before the Inspector’s arrival when a ‘harder, brighter’ light is used symbolising that their selfish behaviours are being brought ‘into the light’.

The consequences of selfishness are seen to be so dramatic and devastating, that an audience can’t help but be moved to condemn it and to consider their own actions in their own society. Gerald and the Birling’s conclude that if the Inspector isn’t real, then his message doesn’t carry any weight. Yet, here, Priestly contrastingly convinces us that despite the play not being real, its moral message is of profound importance for us all.