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LOCATIONS AND OBJECTS AS CUES IN INTERPRETATION OF DRAMATIC TEXT (BASED ON “AN INSPECTOR CALLS” BY J. B. PRIESTLEY)

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We examine locations and objects, and their role in interpretation of *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley from the perspective of Text World Theory by P. Worth and J. Gavins. The theory seeks to clarify how people create mental representations of discourse – text-worlds. Such mental representations require the presence of several elements in the text: world-builders (time, location, characters/enactors, objects), relational processes that identify world-builders and describe relations among them, function-advancing propositions which indicate events/actions/states. World-switches are caused by changes in spatiotemporal parameters; modal-worlds, by changes in protagonist perspective. Following T. Cruickshank and E. Lahey’s approach within Text World Theory’s tradition to better account for the discourse of drama, we discuss the play-text of *An Inspector Calls* from two co-dependent readerly perspectives: the fictional world, which is realized through character dialogue and stage directions; and the staged world, which arises from stage directions. Analysis of locations and objects as world-builders, appropriate relational processes, and function-advancing propositions in J. B. Priestley’s play-text brings about the following conclusions: (i) linguistic cues for identifying locations/objects in stage directions and in character dialogues complement or overlap each other; (ii) the action in the play is set in the early 20th century; therefore locations and objects are a factor in creating relevant cognitive representations of the sociocultural context in the minds of today’s readers; (iii) the world-builders analysed cause world-switches that take readers beyond the boundaries of the staged world; (iv) they have potential for advancing the action; (v) they enable readers to interpret the characters and some particular themes of *An Inspector Calls*.

ЛОКАЦІЇ ТА ОБ'ЄКТИ У ДРАМАТИЧНОМУ ТВОРІ З ТОЧКИ ЗОРУ ЧИТАЧА (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ П'ЄСИ ДЖ. Б. ПРИСТЛІ “AN INSPECTOR CALLS”)

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Ключові слова: *п'єса Дж. Б. Пристлі An Inspector Calls, теорія світу тексту, світи художньої реальності та сценічної постановки, світобудівні елементи: локації та об'єкти, справедливе ставлення до людини.*

Методологічною основою дослідження ролі локацій та об'єктів у тексті п'єси Дж. Б. Пристлі An Inspector Calls є когнітивна теорія світу тексту П. Уерта і Дж. Гевінс, яка має на меті пояснення процесу створення у свідомості читача ментальних репрезентацій прочитаного – світів тексту. Такі ментальні репрезентації базуються на наявних у тексті світобудівних елементах (час, локація, персонажі, об'єкти); елементах, що їх ідентифікують та описують відносини між ними; пропозиціях, які визначають дії/процеси/стани. Перемикання світів тексту спричиняється зміною просторово-часових параметрів; модальні світи виникають завдяки змінам ставлення (бажання, цілі, необхідність). Аналіз матеріалу у статті здійснюється згідно з підходом Т. Крукшанк і Е. Лахей: в межах теорії світу тексту для драматичного дискурсу виділяються дві взаємопов'язані перспективи – світ художньої реальності та світ сценічної постановки; перший реалізується через мовлення персонажів і функціональні авторські ремарки, другий – через функціональні авторські ремарки.

У результаті дослідження локацій та об'єктів як світобудівних елементів, відповідних ідентифікаційних елементів і пропозицій у тексті п'єси An Inspector Calls встановлено таке: (i) лінгвістичні одиниці на позначення локацій/об'єктів доповнюють або дублюють одні одних у мовленні персонажів і функціональних авторських ремарках; (ii) дія у п'єсі відбувається на початку ХХ століття; локації та об'єкти допомагають встановити соціокультурний контекст епохи і є чинником створення релевантних когнітивних репрезентацій у свідомості сучасного читача; (iii) зазначені світобудівні елементи зумовлюють перемикання світів тексту, виводячи читача за межі окресленого світу сценічної постановки; (iv) вони можуть бути рушіями сценічної дії; (v) локації та об'єкти сприяють читацькій інтерпретації персонажів і деяких ключових тем п'єси Дж. Б. Пристлі.

Introduction. Dramatic works are chiefly meant for staging. Yet with the introduction of print, there developed interest in reading plays. Play-texts typically include dramatic dialogue and stage directions, both being important for processing dramatic discourse.

One of the recent advances in understanding of how people process and conceptualize language is Text World Theory (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007, 2020; Gavins, Lahey, 2016; Cruickshank, Lahey, 2010; Lahey, 2014, 2016). Its basic premise is that readers are guided by the language of texts as well as by their general knowledge of the world, which helps them construct mental representations of discourse, or

text-worlds. Text World Theory is actively relied on in cognitive linguistic research (Nuttall, 2017; Norledge, 2020; Gibbons, Whiteley, 2021; Vermeulen, 2022; Kulchytska, Erlichman, 2024).

Readers of play-texts have to simultaneously operate two different text-world perspectives. The first one is the perspective of fictional world, comprehension of artistic material; it helps to identify parameters of fictional geographic/temporal/social contexts, in which characters live and interact. At the same time, play-texts have performative potential; readers imagine how fictional worlds can be presented on stage. This is the perspective of staged world. So, cognitive stylistic analysis has to consider

switches between the two (Cruickshank, Lahey, 2010). This study **aims to investigate** their interaction in *An Inspector Calls* by John Boynton Priestley and their effect on interpretation of the play; attention is focused on two world-building elements – locations and objects.

Material and methods. *An Inspector Calls* foregrounds, among other problems, the need for fair, just, and equitable treatment for individuals. The action is set in Brumley, in the house of Arthur Birling, a prosperous manufacturer, before the outbreak of the First World War. Brumley is a fictional industrial city in the North Midlands, England; its name “has connotations with Birmingham’s nickname ‘Brum’” (York Notes, n.d.). A man who claims to be a police inspector comes to the Birlings’ suburban house to investigate possible responsibility of the family members for the suicide of a working-class girl, Eva Smith. She was fired from Mr. Birling’s works after a pay rise strike. Later, Mr. Birling’s daughter Sheila had the girl sacked from her job at Milward’s, a prestigious fashion store, because Eva did not seem to show due respect for her as a customer. Gerald Croft, Sheila’s fiancé, had Eva as his mistress and then broke off the affair. Mr. Birling’s son Eric got the girl pregnant against her will. Mrs. Birling, a prominent member of the Brumley Women’s Charity Organization, turned down Eva’s appeal for financial help. The desperate girl drank some disinfectant and died a horrible death. Eventually, the Inspector turns out to be an impostor, and the Infirmary confirms the absence of any suicide cases. Sheila and Eric still feel depressed, but Mr. Birling, his wife, and Gerald breathe a sigh of relief, only to be informed minutes later that some girl did take her own life. She died on the way to the Infirmary, and a real Police Inspector is on his way to the Birlings to ask them some questions.

The play is set in 1912 but it was written in 1945. An explanation of this chronological gap can be as follows. The author puts his characters in a particular sociocultural context and “recreate[s] the picture of social development in a certain period” (Yatskiv, Huliak, 2024: 217) to get across his ever-relevant message: “The historical context is that class was still very rigid in Edwardian times and it was thought that the upper classes should never mix with the lower classes”, yet “we all have a duty to society and it will collapse if we don’t honour that duty”; so the play “asks questions about blame and personal responsibility” (BBC BITESIZE, 2025).

Method. *An Inspector Calls* is studied from the perspective of Text World Theory (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007; Lahey, 2014) and the Text World Theory account of dramatic play-texts (Cruickshank, Lahey, 2010). We process the discourse of the play taking into account two distinct but co-dependent levels – fictional and staged worlds.

The focal point of the analysis is two world-builders – locations and objects – in the stage directions and character dialogues. Attributes of the said world-builders (relational processes) and related function-advancing propositions (function-advancers) are considered too.

According to Text World Theory, “discourse has the potential to produce a multitude of worlds” (Gavins, Lahey, 2016: 4) known as world-switches (Gavins, 2007: 48; 2020: 15). They are usually, but not exclusively, caused by changes in spatiotemporal parameters. According to the stage directions in *An Inspector Calls*, there are no world-switches on the staged world level. This study discusses world-switches on the fictional world level of the play-text: character-accessible text-worlds – deictic world-switches (flashbacks), epistemic world-switches, and modal-worlds.

Results and discussion. For the purpose of this study, we will start with the **staged world**, its world-builders being theatrical signals, henceforth called stage directions. In *An Inspector Calls*¹, the location and objects are the same for all the three acts: “Dining-room of a fairly large suburban house, belonging to a prosperous manufacturer. It is a solidly built room, with good solid furniture of the period” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 5). The room is furnished in accordance with the period’s idea of prosperity: it contains “an aclave with a heavy sideboard”, “a fireplace [...] with a curtained window on either side”, “two leather chairs; an ornate floor lamp”, “a small table with telephone”, “a solid but not too large dining room table with solid set of dining room chairs around it”, “A few imposing but tasteless pictures and engravings” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 5). The attributes (intensive relational processes) “solid”, “solidly built”, “heavy”, “curtained”, “ornate”, “imposing” are more or less neutral if taken separately; it is their accumulation that creates a claustrophobic feeling in a reader. The effect is intensified by another intensive relational process – “imposing but tasteless”, which overtly indicates the author’s attitude towards the Birlings. The last sentence in the stage directions takes a reader even further: “The general effect is a substantial and comfortable and old-fashioned but not cosy and homelike” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 5). The author uses the device of juxtaposing seemingly neutral intensive relational processes “substantial”/“comfortable”/“old-fashioned” and negatively judgemental ones “not cosy and homelike”.

¹ For printing considerations, all the examples in the article are enclosed in inverted commas, while there are no such punctuation marks in the original. Stage directions are in italics in the original, but in upright font in this article. Round brackets for stage directions are used as in the original. Both in the original and the article, character names are followed by a full stop in character dialogues.

An important object for stage-world construction is a door. Two doors are repeatedly mentioned in the stage directions. One is given an attribute which emphasises the impression of solidity and stability: “Upstage left is a large double door used almost exclusively” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 5). However, not the relational processes but function-advancing propositions are main factors in foregrounding the role of this object in the discourse of the play. Events are gradually taking a dangerous turn for the family members: it is getting clear that their actions have driven Eva Smith to commit suicide. Some of them try to avoid accusations by leaving the room, sometimes signalling their anger: “[...] BIRLING looks as if about to make some retort, then thinks better of it, and goes out, closing door sharply behind him [...]”; “ERIC. (Uneasily) [...] – and I’ve got a headache – and as I’m only in the way here – I think I’d better turn in. (Starts to door.)” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 23). The verb “start” in the latter example is not a troponym of “walk” (Гончаренко, 2024: 149), but in the context of the play-text it acquires the meaning of furtive locomotion in the direction of the door. Thus, the function advancer brings the object – the door – to the foreground: for Eric the door is a means of escape. At the end of ACT I, Sheila shrewdly states that the Inspector knows the whole truth; after that “[...] Door slowly opens and INSPECTOR appears, looking steadily and searchingly at them. Door closes, signal for curtain.” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 27). Here the function-advancers indicate menace and the feeling of being trapped. At the beginning of ACT II, the Inspector “comes forward, leaving door open behind him” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 28). This combination of the function-advancer and the relational process “open” carries an opposite implication: admittance of wrongdoing can ease a guilty conscience.

The other door in the play is “the front door”; it is not to be seen on the stage, but according to the stage directions, it can be heard when a distressed character leaves the house. For example, Sheila returns an engagement ring to Gerald when she finds out that he and Eva Smith were lovers: “[...] They watch him go in silence. We hear the front door slam.” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 40). The verb “slam” (function-advancer, an event process) is more emotionally charged than “close” and conveys the atmosphere of great tension. Besides, the use of the first-person pronoun “we” in combination with the verb of sense perception “hear” can be considered as an invitation for a reader to participate in creating the staged world.

Fictional world is the other level of play-texts. In *An Inspector Calls*, there are objects/locations that appear both in the stage directions and character dialogues linking the staged and fictional worlds of the play-text. They help readers “see” the stage in their minds and they are a factor in propelling the action.

Obviously, an engagement ring has a symbolic meaning: at first Gerald gives it to Sheila, then she returns it; when the family find out that the Inspector is an impostor and no girl has died in the Infirmary, Mr. Birling suggests they should forget everything: “BIRLING. [...] Look, you’d better ask Gerald for that ring you gave back to him, hadn’t you? Then you’ll feel better” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 66). The danger of a public scandal is removed; why bother about moral issues?

The photograph of Eva Smith is another object which drives the action. The Inspector shows a photograph – maybe several different photographs – to each member of the family and Gerald in turn. The object is mentioned 26 times in the stage directions and character dialogues, but it has much less attributes. Most of them are technical, which implies a matter-of-fact attitude: “INSPECTOR. [...] I found a photograph of her in her lodging. ([...] INSPECTOR takes a photograph, about postcard size, out of his pocket [...])” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 14); “SHEILA. But, Mother, don’t forget that he showed you a photograph of the girl before that, and you obviously recognized her. / GERALD. Did anybody else see that photograph?” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 63). An important semantic and syntactic change in the use of attributes comes with the realization that the investigation might be a bluff; more diverse relational processes are used to show greater personal involvement and a desire to sort out the predicament: “GERALD. We’ve no proof it was the same photograph and therefore no proof it was the same girl. [...]”; “GERALD. [...] He might have shown you the photograph of any girl who applied to the Committee [of the Brumley Women’s Charity Organization]. [...]” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 63).

Other objects, which reappear throughout the play, are cigars and various alcoholic drinks – from champagne to celebrate Sheila and Gerald’s engagement to whisky, with which the male characters try to steady their nerves when in trouble. Expensive drinks is a sign of wealth and high social status, of which the characters are vainly proud: “BIRLING. [...] You ought to like this port, Gerald. As a matter of fact, Finchley told me it’s exactly the same port your father gets from him. / GERALD. Then it’ll be all right. The governor prides himself on being a good judge of port. [...]” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 6). At the same time, alcohol is a cause of moral degradation: “(ERIC goes for a whisky. His whole manner of handling the decanter and then the drink shows his familiarity with quick heavy drinking. [...])” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 49). Eric admits that, being drunk, he made Eva Smith have sex with him: “ERIC. Yes, I insisted – it seems. I’m not very clear about it, but afterwards she told me she didn’t want me to go in – but that, well, I was in that state when one easily turns

nasty – and I threatened to make a row” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 49).

Dialogues in *An Inspector Calls* often take readers beyond the confined space of the staged world. At the beginning of the play, Mr. Birling talks about world affairs: “BIRLING. [...] The Germans don’t want war. Nobody wants war, except some half-civilized folks in the Balkans. [...]”; “BIRLING. [...] Why, a friend of mine went over this new liner last week – forty-six thousand eight hundred tons – forty-six thousand eight hundred tons – New York in five days – and every luxury – and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable. [...]” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 10 for both examples). Again, locations and objects (the European continent, New York, the “forty-six thousand eight hundred tons” and “absolutely unsinkable” ocean liner – obviously, RMS Titanic) are important elements in J. B. Priestley’s discourse. We can suggest that the failure of Mr. Birling’s judgements implies a likelihood of the family’s downfall at the end of the play.

The characters speak about local affairs too, which gives readers an idea of the city they live in. Mr. Birling’s works, Milward’s, the Palace Music Hall, the Infirmary, Eva Smith’s lodgings are mentioned more than once.

Milward’s is given some attributes, direct intensive relational processes and indirect circumstantial relational process: “INSPECTOR. [...] She was taken on in a shop – and a good shop too – Milward’s”; “INSPECTOR. [...] It seems she liked working there. It was a nice change from a factory. She enjoyed being among pretty clothes [...]” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 21–22). By contrast, Gerald describes Eva’s lodgings as a “miserable back room”, using a noun phrase with a negatively charged intensive relational process (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 36). A location-related euphemism with a function-advancer is used to indicate hard circumstances in which working-class girls sometimes find themselves: “BIRLING. [...] Have you any idea what happened to her after that? Get into trouble? Go on the streets?” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 18). Technically, it is an action that falls under the category of intention processes, though such a step can hardly be the girl’s “intention”.

A highly expressive excerpt is the discussion concerning the music hall in Brumley and the city itself: “GERALD. [...] I met her first some time in March last year, in the bar at the Palace. I mean the Palace Music Hall here in Brumley – / SHEILA. Well, we didn’t think you meant Buckingham Palace. / [...] / GERALD. [...] It’s a favourite haunt of women of the town – / MRS. BIRLING. Women of the town? / INSPECTOR. Prostitutes. / MRS. BIRLING. Yes – but here – in Brumley – / INSPECTOR. One of the worst cities in the country for prostitution” (Priestley, 1972 [1945]: 34). This extract is interesting in

several ways. First, the locatives, intensive relational processes, and the euphemism “women of the town” show readers a dark side of the city. Second, “Buckingham Palace”, a detour far beyond Brumley in both geographical and social sense, is a precedent-related phenomenon (Doichyk, Yurchyshyn, Velykoroda, 2024); obvious difference between the two spaces – those of the Palace Music Hall in Brumley and Buckingham Palace – suggests sarcasm. Third, sarcasm involves “inferences about the facts of the situation and the mental state of the speaker (e.g. attitudes, knowledge, and intentions)” (McDonald, 1999: 486; emphasis in the original). Fourth, Sheila’s sarcastic remark is an expression of her feeling of hurt. It is an attempt to hurt Gerald back, hence it is intentionally offensive and impolite (Culpeper, 2010: 3233; Haugh, 2015; Shevchenko et al., 2024; Mintsys, 2023).

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Thus, locations and objects in *An Inspector Calls* offer particularly rich area for interpretation of both linguistic and conceptual aspects of J. B. Priestley’s play.

Conclusions. In the article, the play-text of *An Inspector Calls* is regarded as a unity of two worlds, staged and fictional ones, whose pools of linguistic cues complement and sometimes overlap each other. This approach allows us to argue that the locations and objects chosen by the author as setting (stage directions) and mentioned/discussed in character dialogues have a significant role in the discourse of *An Inspector Calls*. In addition to being world-builders that help readers create appropriate cognitive constructs in their minds and interact with the text, locations and objects set a particular sociocultural and historical environment, expand geographical and social boundaries of the action, give insights into inner worlds of the characters, and are a factor in the dynamics of the play. Some of them help develop the theme of inequity and moral responsibility for one’s actions.

Comparing two or more dramatic works of different periods (for example, *Medea* by Euripides, *Richard III* by William Shakespeare, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, *Fleabag* by Phoebe Waller-Bridge) from the perspective of staged/fiction worlds can be a promising direction for future research.

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