

In act 1, how does
priestly create our
initial impression of
mr birling and his r...

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J. B. Priestley wrote 'An Inspector Calls' in 1945 with the play being set in the spring of 1912. Our initial impression of Mr Birling is that he is proud, optimistic but selfish. However his optimism could also be interpreted as foolishness. The sense of pride is shown firstly when he says "We hard-headed practical business men" and also by the numerous times that he mentions himself being a former Mayor. Priestley never makes it completely obvious that Mr Birling is a very proud man but he does hint at it quite a lot. Priestley shows Birling is selfish as he says that the community is "nonsense" and that "a man has to make his own way". Finally, Mr Birling shows that he is an optimist when he says "I say there isn't a chance of war". This may, however, be Priestley suggesting Birling is foolish at times, because we now know there was a war. This view of him being foolish and optimistic is also reinforced when he talks about the Titanic saying it's "...unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable". This device, by Priestley, is called dramatic irony.

Mr Birling shows an affection that could be mistaken for being over protective to his daughter, Sheila. Priestley demonstrates this over protection when Birling interrupts Sheila from asking questions about Eva Smith on page 18 by saying "that's enough of that". This shows he does not want her to hear horrid things. Even though she is in her early twenties, it is as if Birling still treats her like a child, as he does on page 21 where he says "Why the devil did you go upsetting the child (Sheila) like that?" It may be that Sheila acts like a child by using words like "mummy" and "squiffy".

Although this could be interpreted as Sheila trying to act more upper class than she really is. Mrs Birling is treated more like an object than a person, by Mr Birling. He speaks down to her and treats her as his property. This is shown when Birling forces her to have some port by saying " Now then, Sybil, you must take a little tonight". This is a very subtle hint by Priestley but it is an important sign of their relationship. Another subtle hint about this is on page 7 where near the end of a long speech by Birling, Mrs Birling tries to interrupt but he just acknowledges her then carries on.

Mr Birling's relationships with Gerald and Eric are the hardest to interpret as Priestley is very indirect about it. Eric has a very uneasy relationship with his father as he serves mainly as an irritant to his father, asking awkward questions. Birling does not appreciate this but it seems like he is used to it. For example, on page 13 Eric asks " Is that why she committed suicide? When was this, father? " To which he replies " Just keep quiet, Eric, and don't get excited..." and on page 15, Eric says " It isn't if you can't go and work somewhere else. " And again Birling replies, saying "(to Eric) Look - just you keep out of this..."

Finally, Birling's relationship with Gerald is more like that of business partners rather than son/father-in-law. For example, Gerald always calls Birling ' Sir' rather than his first name ' Arthur' showing they have not yet developed a ' friendly relationship'. Also Birling seems like he is always trying to show-off to Gerald, as if to say his family is of a high enough class for Gerald to mix with. However, Priestley is very subtle about this, making

their relationship, like the relationship with Eric, hard to interpret and therefore adding intrigue to the story.