

The portrayal of eric birling in an inspector calls by j. b. priestley



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In the play *An Inspector Calls* Priestley presents Mr Birling as a businessman who has had several successes over the years and who has been active in local politics as Lord Mayor of Brumley, although it becomes evident as the play progresses that Mr Birling has very little regard for the local community, preferring to adhere to capitalist philosophies. Mr Birling is used as a symbol of a typical capitalist, being head of the household, married to a woman of higher social class and the director of a business calling himself a “hard-headed man of business”.

Birling views himself as a pinnacle of power, attempting to impose his power gained through status on the Inspector, stating pompously he was “an alderman for years”, and “Lord Mayor for two years”. In addition, he tries to intimidate the Inspector telling him that the Chief Constable is an “old friend” of his. In addition, he considers himself to be permitted to do whatever he sees fit, whether it is fair or not. For instance, when the Inspector questions why he refused to consent to give the girls more money, he responds in a “surprised” manor, asking “Did you say why?”, suggesting that Mr Birling usually exerts his authority mercilessly and has become accustomed to being obeyed without question. Like most capitalists, Birling continues to try and climb the social ladder, making himself richer and more influential, whilst lower classes remain poor and powerless. This can be seen with the marriage of Sheila and Gerald, who comes from a family of higher social status.

Birling continuously tries to impress Gerald as well as his family, buying “exactly the same port” as his father. In addition, he is “Sure Sheila will make (Gerald) happy as he’ll make her happy”. It is interesting to note that Birling

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places Gerald's happiness before Sheila's, implying he places Gerald over his Daughter. Birling also points out that there is a fair chance of him receiving a knighthood - something he knows will impress Lady Croft, confirmed by Gerald, who says she will be "delighted". The marriage itself is an attempt to climb the social ladder, as the connections with the Croft family would lead to more opportunities for Birling, particularly when it comes to business expansion. Despite this, Birling is a believer in the philosophy of "every man for himself", resulting in his being "unable to take any responsibility", highlighting his selfish outlook and lack of concern for others. This introduces the theme of responsibility to the play, particularly social responsibility. Unlike Priestley, Mr Birling does not agree with the concept. Priestley tried to use the play to show the extent of corruption in Capitalist society and tried to encourage the audience to support the poor rather than push them aside like Mr Birling does.

Mr Birling also represented as an ignorant upperclassman and a representative of the older generation which is out of touch with the younger generation. Birling jokes that he doesn't "know what some young boys get up to", referring to the behaviour of young men in the society, and this obliviousness seems to extend to his son, as he is unaware of Eric's heavy drinking problem, his stealing money and having affairs, one resulting in an unwanted pregnancy. Birling's ignorance is emphasised when talking to Eric, saying 'so many of you don't seem to understand today', the use of the general term 'you' suggesting that Birling does not consider these young men as individuals. There is a clear lack of understanding between the older and younger generations, aggravated by the fact that the older generation

does not take them seriously, still considering them as 'boys'. Furthermore, Birling is out of touch with what is going on around the world, or rather, is too confident in the current status quo, therefore making him ignorant. For instance, he calls the Titanic 'unsinkable', even though it would go on to sink a few weeks later. He claims that 'nobody wants war', and that Russia would 'always be behindhand', and yet, in a few years' time, Russia would undergo a revolution and England would join the First World War.

Mr Birling, though a successful businessman, is presented as intellectually weak, making the audience have a little respect for him. Throughout the play, Birling has interrupted diction, characterised by dashes and pauses, for instance when he says 'Sir Croft and - er - Lady Croft', the dashes suggesting intellectual uncertainty; Birling's speech lacks intelligence a more precise diction would display. Even when talking about the Titanic being 'unsinkable', Birling's speech is broken up, suggesting a lack of logic and reason behind it. Therefore, although Mr Birling is socially powerful, being the head of a prominent business, head of a household and married to a woman of higher social status, intellectually, he is weak- his claims are mainly blustered and brags or ignorant comments.

Priestly characterises Birling as arrogant and inept, suggesting Capitalism lacks futility and sustenance, as Birling is a symbol of a Capitalist society. Birling's bumbling speech is juxtaposed with the Inspector's confident fluency, making him seem more trustworthy than Birling. Priestly was concerned about the consequences of social inequality in Britain, and the disparity caused by wealth and the class divides. He believed that what

resulted from this are the characteristics displayed by Mr Birling - exploitive
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tendencies, selfishness, not taking responsibility for his actions. Priestley presents Mr Birling as a fool and encourages the audience to reject the attitudes held by Birling. By doing so, it is implied that the audience could lead better lives.