

How does JB Priestley ensure that the audience has formed an opinion of Mr Birling...



An Inspector Calls is a play set in spring 1912. The writer, J. B. Priestly, tries to build up a view of Mr Birling through the set, stage directions and in his speeches. The production starts with the four Birlings and Gerald sitting around a table.

The table is laid out with fine china and champagne. This shows that Mr Birling is trying very hard to impress Gerald and that they are having a celebration of some kind. The table has no cloth because the Birlings are trying to show off their fine furniture. Their maid, Edna, is replacing these items with cigars, cigarettes and a decanter of Port. This shows that Mr Birling is wealthy and can afford luxuries and does not hesitate to show off. In the stage directions we are told that their room 'has good solid furniture... but is not cosy and homelike.' It has no antique furniture that shows that Mr Birling has only recently acquired his money and has not inherited any family heirlooms.

Mr Birling sees himself as a 'hard-headed businessman' and 'I speak as a hard-headed practical man of business' whose opinion is important and that he is always right. Arthur Birling is very self-centred man and only thinks of what he will get out of events. When his daughter, Sheila, is getting married the only thing he can think of is how 'when Crofts and Birlings are no longer competing but working together for lower costs and higher prices.'

The only reason he lets Gerald marry Sheila is that he hopes that their companies may unite and he may be able to get more money. He also thinks that he is always right and that he can predict the future. He says that 'the Titanic...and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable' this is ironic as the audience

knows that the Titanic sank on its maiden voyage. Also 'there's not a chance of war... Silly little war scares' again we know that there was a World War in 1914-1918 and another one in 1939-1945 so again we know that he is totally wrong.

We know a lot about Mr Birling's social class from the set and his actions. His home is richly decorated but not homelike and contains no antiques, this shows that he has only recently made his money. Also he still contains some of his actions make this obvious. 'Tell Cook from me' he still contains some of the actions learnt from his middle class and these are corrected by his wife Sybil, as she is embarrassed by him.

Mr Birling is trying to climb the social ladder and get into people's 'good books' he keeps boasting about how rich he is and what a great business man he is. Just before the Inspector is about to enter he goes on about how he may get a knighthood to Gerald as he is trying to impress him. When the Inspector calls he boasts to Gerald about how he thinks he knows what it's about, but when the Inspector comes in he gets agitated as the Inspector is in control of the situation and knows what the real reason is that he needs to see Mr Birling. You can see this in the stage directions 'after a pause with a touch of impatience'

Mr Birling sees himself as a figurehead for society as he was Lord Mayor for two years, 'Lord Mayor for 2 years' he thinks the whole world is at his command and that he knows everything. However he does not know everything about his family. His son, daughter and wife all have secrets. As we learn later on in the play every single member of the Birling family has a

secret that connects them to Eva Smith and her death. But Mr Birling has absolutely that they were.

The audience gets a good image of Mr Birling through the way that J. B. Priestly makes him act and the things he says. This is good as the audience can relate all of his actions back to the way that he is presented and understand why he does the things he does.