

A study in contrasts:  
the inspector and mr.  
birling as complete  
opposites



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In *An Inspector Calls*, Mr. Birling and the Inspector are complete opposites of each other and are used to support different ideas of the themes in the play. Their importance in terms of awareness of society, consideration for the community, and philosophies about political ideas are completely different. Priestley has mainly done this in order to make the audience see the right path to a better society while seeing what the other wrong path looks like in the form of Mr. Birling's character.

Priestley has characterized Mr Birling and the Inspector very differently. Physically they are similar; the Inspector has an "impression of massiveness" and Mr Birling is a "heavy-looking" man. Mr. Birling is however called "heavy-looking" almost like a burden to society as he is described as "heavy". Playwrights like Priestley were often known to craft the characters audiences were meant to dislike as grotesque; Mr. Birling's description as "heavy-looking" does just that by making Mr. Birling seem like a burden. Moreover, Mr. Birling is a "portentous" man which is in contrast to the inspector's "impression of massiveness". Due to Mrs. Birling being the "social superior" of Mr. Birling, he feels "portentous" and constantly wants to impress. Mr. Birling's constant need to impress is undermined by the Inspector's attitude of "looking hard" at and holding power through dialogue like "there might be". His simple short sentences show the Inspector's control of the situation and Mr. Birling's lack of it. The ambiguity of 'might' shows that he can control the amount of information, without feeling the need to please the Birlings. Additionally, "looking hard at the person" suggests he will look closely at things and we learn through the play that he sees through the images of being a "hard-headed practical man

of business” that Mr. Birling tries to put on. He refers to himself in this way twice which shows how strongly he believes it. This shows how he believes it’s a good thing, but ‘hard’ also makes us think he’s hard-hearted. He is also not a ‘practical’ man in the real world in terms of social morals, and his pretence of being “practical” is disproved when he is talking about “lower costs” on the evening of his daughter’s engagement, using her as an asset or bargaining chip that can be bartered through marriage. Priestley highlights this difference through timing in this play, as seen when Mr. Birling’s capitalist speech is interrupted by a “sharp ring” of the doorbell due to the entry of the Inspector. This makes the audience question why the Inspector’s entrance is so “sharp” and the audience is made to understand that the Inspector will be exposing Mr. Birling’s false pretences of being a “practical” man.

The Inspector is Priestley’s mouthpiece in terms of political views; Mr. Birling is the antithesis of Priestley’s philosophy. Mr. Birling has capitalist beliefs and says “a man has to make his own way”. Mr. Birling is individualistic and thinks of himself as a self-made man who has “made his own way” into the socially superior class by simply marrying Sybil. This actually makes his struggle to “make his own way” seem like no struggle at all and the audience does not sympathise with his attempt to evoke respect for him making “his own way”. Moreover, he refers to a singular ‘man’, not ‘men’ which highlights that it’s down to the individual to take care of themselves. Priestley goes against this views by making a fool out of Mr. Birling through dramatic techniques like dramatic irony. When he calls the Titanic “absolutely unsinkable”, the audience of 1942 already know about how the

Titanic sunk, making them unsympathetic and against Mr. Birling's views. He is made to seem even more foolish by his confidence when he calls it "absolutely" unsinkable and is so sure of his predictions. On the other hand, the Inspector's beliefs are a reflection of Priestley's socialist views of society. The Inspector says "we'll have to share our guilt", emphasizing the need to "share" in society. This links to Priestley's socialist ideas, further highlighting the Inspector's use as a mouthpiece for Priestley's philosophies. There is an emphasis on "we" in the Inspector's speech and last few lines, which portrays the importance of togetherness and socialism. Additionally, in the final speech, the Inspector states "they will be taught in fire, blood and anguish". The "they" here are people like Mr. Birling with capitalist views. 'Fire and blood and anguish' brings up images of the two wars fought just before the play was written. Many of Priestley's initial audiences would have been directly affected by this, so the images created are emotional as well as violent. This could also be related to the Russian revolution, in which poor workers in "anguish" took over the state and exacted a "bloody" revenge against the capitalist society who had treated them so badly. "Fire" also draws up images of hell, showing the enormity of the consequences of capitalist actions. Priestley highlights differences between the characters' views by changing lighting. On the entry of the Inspector, the lights are changed to "harder" and "brighter" white lights. These lights are normally used in theater by practitioners as "anti-illusionary" devices to prevent the audience from being carried away by the play and instead question the main message of it. In this case, the Inspector's actions are making the audience think, and thus more importance is placed on his character through lights.

Mr. Birling and the Inspector have contrasting views on responsibility. Mr. Birling thinks it is his “duty to keep labour costs down” and “cannot accept any responsibility” for problems to do with anyone outside his family. However this “duty” is not the kind of responsibility Priestley wants the audience to take. This “duty” is one that is towards himself and other businessmen who make money. He is not doing his “duty” to workers like Eva who need a living wage. Moreover Mr. Birling cannot “accept any responsibility” when it comes to helping others in the community despite their class. The fact that he cannot accept “any” responsibility shows he is not willing to take up even a little bit of responsibility, highlighting his stubborn costs. His bias towards fulfilling his “duty’ to keep “labour costs down” properly showcases how the capitalists like Mr. Birling would choose what they favoured as their responsibility and “duty”. The Inspector on the other hand considers everyone as “members of one body”. While Mr. Birling considers responsibility as something he can “accept” or decline, the inspector has a more serious and compulsory view on taking responsibility as he calls everyone a “member” using a more formal tone. The formal terms “member” and “body” are used to refer to simple people in society, which highlights the compulsion and seriousness of taking up responsibility as opposed to simply treating it as a choice which Mr. Birling thought he could prevent and not “accept”.

The two characters are, in the final analysis, portrayed as complete opposites. This is due to Mr. Birling’s foolish over-confident attitude contrasting with the Inspector’s “massiveness” and strong impressions left on the audience of 1942 through use of lighting, characterisation and

structure of dialogue. Additionally, both characters have different views on socio-political aspects; Mr. Birling is a capitalist with views contrasting with the Inspector's socialist views. Moreover, since the Inspector is used as a mouthpiece for Priestley's socialist views on society, his character is presented as more respected and given more importance than Mr. Birling.