

AN INSPECTOR CALLS by JB PRIESTLEY

MR. BIRLING

notes taken from ENOTES.COM

MR. BIRLING'S vs SCROOGE

Like scrooge, Mr Birling is an arrogant capitalist who hates social equality and loves money.

- Both characters see everything through the prism of money and financial value, including their relationships
 - For example, Mr. Birling says his daughter's engagement to Gerald 'means a tremendous lot' to him
 - Here we can see how business language pervades even his most intimate words and the noun 'lot' suggests that he sees Sheila as a valuable financial asset, to be sold to the highest bidder, - Gerald
 - He sacks Eva from his factory when she asks for a fairer wage and threatens a strike.

MR. BIRLING'S ARROGANCE

he comes across as a man who is pompous and arrogant

- He is impressed by his status and the fact that he is on the cusp of furthering his prestige since he is due to be awarded a knighthood
- He is opinionated and clearly believes that he is worldly-wise, as he freely dispenses advice to his son, Eric, and their guest, Gerald Croft, who has just announced his engagement to Sheila Birling.
 - The family and Gerald have been celebrating the occasion when Inspector Goole arrives.

MR. BIRLING and RESPONSIBILITY

Mr Birling recalls that he had fired Eva about eighteen months ago but refuses to accept any responsibility for her death

- He is fairly rude when the inspector becomes more particular and wishes to know why he had refused Eva and his other employees' requests for a raise, stating that it was none of his business.
 - When Mr Birling realises that neither his intimidating stance, nor his status, mean anything to the inspector, he presents him with a subtle threat:
 - How do you get on with our chief constable, colonel Roberts? Perhaps I ought to warn you that he's an old friend of mine, and that I see him fairly frequently. We play golf together sometimes up at the west Brumley.
 - He is suggesting here that he could get the inspector into a spot of bother if he should continue his harassment. The inspector, however, keeps a cool head and is completely unperturbed.
 - This scene suggests that rather than Mr. Birling actually taking any responsibility for his actions, he would just use his power and status to turn the tables in his favour
 - Priestley appears to be launching a scathing critique on the upper classes of Edwardian Britain whom he saw as arrogant, selfish and dangerously irresponsible

BIRLING'S SLY AND UNDERHANDED WAYS

When Sheila prepares to return to the drawing-room, the inspector calls her back

- This angers Mr Birling, who instructs the inspector that he should not draw her into the mess he has been talking about. He says:
 - Look here, inspector, I consider this uncalled-for and officious. I've half a mind to report you. I've told you all I know—and it doesn't seem to me very important—and now there isn't the slightest reason why my daughter should be dragged into this unpleasant business.
 - Mr Birling's later tone changes somewhat when he learns that inspector Goole has not come to see him alone and that it is his intention to speak to everyone
 - He asks whether the inspector is sure of all his facts,
 - Goole assures him that he is with some of them
 - When the inspector emphasizes that Eva Smith is dead and Sheila infers that he is implying that they are responsible, Mr Birling asks if he and the inspector cannot discuss the matter alone in some corner
 - The suggestion sounds sly and underhanded.

MR BIRLING'S LACK OF CHANGE

Throughout the play, Mr Birling does not change his adversarial role much

- and, as such, becomes Inspector Goole's chief antagonist, representing the conflict between Priestley's socialist views and the Conservatives' capitalist views
 - At one point later in the play, he declares:
 - Inspector, I've told you before, I don't like the tone nor the way you're handling this inquiry. And I don't propose to give you much rope.
 - Sheila notes, insightfully, that the inspector has been giving them a rope with which to hang themselves.

MR BIRLING'S LACK OF CHANGE

In the latter parts of the play, whilst the inspector is still present, Mr Birling plays a somewhat secondary role, intermittently coming to the defence of his family

- It is only when he discovers Eric's complicity in the whole affair that he is once stirred. He expresses his disgust at his son's actions
 - He eventually realizes that his family's good name has been tarnished and that he will never get his knighthood. In desperation, he unhappily tells Inspector Goole:

Look, Inspector—I'd give thousands—yes, thousands—

The inspector then tells him that he is offering the money at the wrong time. In summing up, the inspector tells them that they cannot even apologize to Eva for what they have done to her. Before he leaves he reminds the Birlings:

...We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night.

PRIESTLEY'S SOCIALISM vs BIRLING'S CAPITALISM

Priestley, a convinced socialist, uses the character of Mr. Birling to express his own political views in an interesting way:

- Mr Birling is anything but a socialist
 - He is a successful, middle-class ‘hard-headed business man’ as he says himself
 - He is chiefly interested in making money,
 - looking out for himself,
 - he also lectures his family on the importance of looking after themselves
 - not the wider community
 - in fact, it is his speech to Gerald and
 - he is also interested in furthering his own social and political standing,
 - and caring not a jot for anyone outside of his own family and friends
 - His ethics are diametrically opposed to those of socialism
 - Which are espoused by Priestley himself, it stresses the concept of social responsibility
 - the importance of looking out for others
 - and of working together for the common good with the stronger helping the weak and needy.

HOW PRIESTLEY DISCREDITS BIRLING

Priestley lets Birling damn himself out of his own mouth at the very beginning of the play

- he makes a solemn speech on the occasion of his daughter Sheila’s engagement to a business acquaintance, Gerald Croft, at a family dinner
 - This speech reveals how utterly complacent and clueless Birling really is
 - as he confidently holds forth on the prosperous state of the nation
 - he turns a blind eye to:
 - the importance of labor unrest
 - class conflict
 - and the possibility of war (the play is set in 1912, barely two years before the First World War)
 - He simply does not care about things that he feels do not personally affect him and his business
 - and social problems concern him not at all.

HOW BIRLING CALLS THE INSPECTOR

Priestley uses Birling as a device to call the Inspector

- Birling: (solemnly) But this is the point. I don't want to lecture you two young fellows again. But what so many of you don't seem to understand now, when things are so much easier, is that a man has to make his own way – has to look after himself – and his family too, of course, when he has one – and so long as he does that he won't come to much harm. But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense. But take my word for it, you youngsters – and I've learnt in the good hard school of experience – that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own – and -

// we hear the sharp ring of a door bell. Birling stops to listen.//

- Amongst other utterances, he repeats the lines ‘a man has to make his own way – has to look after himself – and his family too’ and ‘a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own – and -’

- Before he can finish repeating himself a second time, ‘// *we hear the sharp ring of a door bell. Birling stops to listen.*’
 - his quote reflects Margaret Thatcher’s ‘there is no society, only individual men and women’
 - but the fact that the ‘doorbell’ interrupts him before he can finish indicates that Priestley wants to change the narrative and move away from the laissez-faire mindset to one to more caring one
 - the fact that ‘*Birling stops to listen*’ illustrates what Priestley wants from the upper-classes; to stop and listen to the message of the play

BIRLING IS OUT OF TOUCH WITH REALITY

Birling's smugness and righteous self-belief is neatly conveyed in the metaphor of the Titanic which he refers to in his speech

- the supposedly unsinkable ship which headed blindly into disaster
 - Birling is similarly shown to have an entirely misguided self-belief and sense of security.
 - At this point he is quite unaware that he himself is on the brink of exposure, and very possibly social ruin as the mysterious Inspector Goole arrives and starts questioning the whole family mercilessly on the parts they have each played in the appalling suicide of a young working-class woman who was left friendless, penniless, without any kind of moral support
 - The metaphor of the Titanic embodies the idea that the Edwardian upper classes, as symbolized by the Birlings, were themselves misguided by self-belief and a false sense of security to not one, but two world wars.
 - Just as the inspector arrives to question the family on the parts they played in Eva's death, Priestley wants to know what part each member of the ruling classes had in taking Europe to two world wars.

THE OLDER GENERATION vs THE YOUNGER GENERATION

The younger Birlings, Sheila and Eric, become genuinely remorseful

- they realize the terrible consequences of their actions
 - but their mother and father and Gerald do not
 - The older and younger generations are opposing reflections of each other
 - Eric is an opposing reflection of Birling and Sheila an opposing reflection of Sybil
 - The play thus reveals the destructive effects of selfishness and lack of compassion for others as embodied in men like Birling – a man who stands for everything that his creator opposed.