

KEY WORDS

Portentous, Capitalist, Selfish, Superficial, Insecure

Mr Birling Act 1

THE PERSONIFICATION OF CAPITALISM

- We can describe Mr Birling as **capitalism personified**, he stands to represent the British social elite.
- Within the stage directions Birling is depicted as **"a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties"** which allows him to be **a microcosmic representation of the older generation**.
- The phrase **"heavy-looking"** held weight for **Priestley's contemporary audience** as a generation emerging from a period of rationing and war; a plumper frame was synonymous with affluence and indulgence. His heaviness is **deeply metaphorical both physically and theoretically**, it is a physical assertion of the solidity of his status whilst also standing to represent his **hedonistic and undisciplined tendencies**.
- The adjective **"portentous"** is used to expose the **superficiality of capitalism**, it highlights how desperate Birling is to assert and justify his status showing he can only see value in wealth and status. **Priestley advertises capitalism as an ostentatious affair in order to satirise it**.
- Physically too, **Birling operates within a realm of this ostentatious capitalism**, his household is **"substantial and heavily comfortable but not cosy or homelike"** which leads the reader to pity the **cosmetic nature of Birling's wealth**.
- The unorthodox phrase **"heavily comfortable"** is almost an **oxymoron to present the pseudo-luxury** (it seems luxurious but is it really?) of the social elite as a façade.
- **"heavy"** brings **connotations of exhaustion** and intensity which juxtaposes the comfort we'd expect from a home. Perhaps this is a metaphor to capture the misery in the act of **relentlessly upholding an overt radiation of wealth**.
- As a **"hard-headed practical man of business"** Mr Birling is used as a **construct to discredit capitalism through political allusions his contemporary audience would understand**. Sir Stanley Baldwin, a Prime minister between the two world wars accused "hard-faced men" of **profiting out of the war**. Mr Birling **stands to represent these affluent businessmen who callously took advantage of the suffering of war** for financial gain.

DENYING RESPONSIBILITY

- **"That fellow obviously didn't like us. He was prejudiced from the start. Probably a socialist or some sort of crank - he talked like one"**.
- The complex sentence is used as **an act of deceit** to make himself come across as more informed than reliable than he truly is, the preface of his argument doesn't hold much logic.
- The adverb **"obviously"** shows his arrogance and ignorance, he turns rather defensive and aggressive at the prospect of someone threatening his respectability, which may again **stem from a place of insecurity**.
- His inability to display any kind of remorse is reflective of the **stubbornness** of the older generations, he doesn't allow there to be any question of him being responsible.

COMPARISON

As the text develops, we see the inspector is the antithesis of Mr Birling in every sense, even his appearance is used to construct the inspector as a foil to Mr Birling. The inspector radiates "an impression of massiveness" to portray the gravitas of the concept of socialism, it also parallels the "heavy-looking" Mr Birling to contest them against each other as the embodiments of socialism and capitalism.

INSECURE AND UNACQUAINTED WITH ARISTOCRATIC LIFE

- Priestley is sure to highlight how Mr Birling is ***“rather provincial in his speech”*** meaning his voice is **tainted by a regional accent**. This is yet again a **superficial trope** of how status was established and evaluated in 1912 Britain.
- He is portrayed as unrefined as he carries this emblem of his lower-class social roots; his voice stands as a barrier between him a member of the **Nouveau riche** (people who made their own money rather than being born into riches), and the likes of Gerald an aristocrat.
- This reinforces why his desire to uphold the appearance of wealth is so relentless as it is constantly subject to the **threat of classism**. Priestley ridicules Mr Birling’s attempts at this to highlight how foolish **capitalist ideology** really is.
- “Port” is used as a **metonym** for wealth, Mr Birling reveals he has embarked on a rather **sycophantic** (using flattery to win favour from individuals wielding influence) **investigation** to copy Gerald’s father’s taste in port: ***“Finchley told me it’s exactly the same port your father gets from him”***.
- As affluence is only navigated through these meaningless symbols and objects, Priestley exposes how **hollow it is**. He also presents Mr Birling as **obsessive in his attempts to assert his status, which likely comes from a place of insecurity**.
- Birling is also guilty of **social indiscretions**; he wants to compliment the chef on the food yet is scolded by his wife who reminds him ***“you’re not supposed to say such things”***.
- This **social faux pas** reveals that despite his attempts, this status does not come naturally and is ultimately a façade, due to the barriers to social mobility in 1912 Britain.

COMPARISON

Birling, similarly to Gerald, uses **sophistry** to attempt to rid himself of any responsibility. He tells the inspector ***“as it happened more than eighteen months ago-nearly two years ago-obviously it has nothing to do with the wretched girl’s suicide”*** in reference to him firing Eva.

TOPIC SENTENCES

Within Priestley’s allegorical play, Mr Birling is the personification of capitalist ideology. The pursuit of establishing a high status seemingly encompasses every sense of his being, this is ridiculed throughout the text to critique the hollowness of capitalism.

As a member of the Nouveau riche, Mr Birling is unacquainted with aristocratic life. Priestley constructs him as perpetually insecure in his social position to depict how exhausting the social conventions of 1912 were to uphold, he disbands the notion of capitalism as a wholly negative force.

