

HOW DOES PRIESTLEY USE MR BIRLING TO PRESENT HIS CONCERNS IN SOCIETY?

Priestley personifies capitalist ideologies through Mr Birling, allowing him to become an archetype for the pernicious older generation of 1912. The stage directions introduce him as “a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties” constructing him as the ostentatious embodiment of wealth. The descriptor “heavy-looking” could be a metaphor for his perceived self-importance, using his physicality to assert power and status. However, for Priestley’s contemporaries, a generation emerging from a period of rationing and war; a plumper frame was synonymous with affluence and indulgence. This immediately gives an insight into his hedonistic and undisciplined tendencies which are strengthened throughout the play. Priestley uses the Inspector as a foil to Mr Birling, as a mouthpiece for socialism, the inspector gives off “an impression of massiveness” to compete with the “heavy-looking” Mr Birling. By drawing these parallels Priestley teaches by example, compensating for Mr Birlings immorality through the Inspector’s morality; the inspector holds up a mirror to the societal flaws at the time. Moreover, the adjective “portentous” exposes the superficiality of capitalism, Mr Birling is desperate to assert and justify his status showing he can only see value in wealth and affluence. Priestley advertises capitalism as an ostentatious affair in order to satirise it. Extending this notion of superficiality, physically too, Mr Birling operates within a realm of frivolous capitalism; his household is “substantial and heavily comfortable but not cosy or homelike”. This prompts the audience to pity how one-dimensional and cosmetic Birling’s wealth truly was; the unorthodox phrase “heavily comfortable” is almost an oxymoron to present the pseudo luxury of the social elite as a façade. This notion of heaviness brings connotations of exhaustion or overwhelmingness, juxtaposing the comfort we’d expect from a home. Perhaps this is constructed as a metaphor to capture the misery in the act of relentlessly upholding an overt presentation of wealth. Priestley thus explores through Mr Birling his concerns at how superficial the concept of wealth is, and how it has become performative over functional with money being used for ostentatious and hedonistic purposes.

Unequivocally, Birling is used to epitomise the ignorance of capitalist businessmen prior to the wars. The play is laced with dramatic irony used to ridicule Mr Birling and highlight his arrogant mindlessness; he refers to the “Titanic” as “unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable” which Priestley’s audience know to be far from the truth. The repetition of the adjective “unsinkable” serves to reiterate his unjustified confidence in his false beliefs, exposing his hubris. Beyond this, the “unsinkable” “Titanic” is a metaphor for the seemingly untouchable upper classes and their political views, they are blind to the truth that they too are destined to sink; the inspector’s interrogation is merely the beginning of an unforeseen fragmentation of capitalist ideology. This historical allusion would resonate particularly strongly with Priestley’s contemporaries as the sinking of the Titanic would likely be within their living memory, it is a deliberate and hard-hitting allusion. Throughout the play, his ignorance metamorphoses into insolence as he arrogantly ridicules those that do not adhere to his own beliefs. He shockingly mocks his own children as members of “the famous younger generation who know it all. And they can’t even take a joke”. Not only is his callousness apparent through his acerbic tone, but his apathy also resonates through his belief that the notion of suicide, and the revelation of all the ways they have exploited the working class, could be considered a “joke”. He is dispassionate even to his own children; Priestley encourages his audience who comprise this “younger generation” to reject the capitalist attitudes of their parents, proving that even if they appear to “know it all” this likely is not the case. Thus, Mr Birling is used to evoke anger within the audience in response to the arrogant ignorance pertinent within society, this anger can then serve as a springboard for the “younger generation” to mobilise social and political change.

Lastly, Priestley uses Mr Birling as a warning of society's tendency towards stagnancy. Mr Birling's actions endow the play with a cyclical structure which serves to present his unchanging views. The play ends in the same manner it begins, with Birling offering Gerald a drink. Here alcohol is used as a motif of superficial wealth and materialism, but also irresponsibility- it serves as a reminder of the hedonistic lifestyle that capitalists indulged in. Priestley is concerned by the hollowness of a society which allows a trivial object such as alcohol to be endowed with such meaning. Mr Birling and Gerald immediately retreat to the celebratory tone of the opening to the play, speaking "eagerly", "jovially" and "triumphantly". These stage directions craft a semantic field of victory which seems unjustified and absurd to close a play with the subject matter of suicide, it appears they are completely unaffected and dispassionate to the matters that happen in the world around them. The adverb "triumphantly" in particular connotes to the notion of winning a battle, suggesting that these capitalist ideologies are synonymous with an inclination toward warfare, something that would be greatly condemned by Priestley's contemporaries. By presenting Mr Birling as static, Priestley critiques the selfishness of society, exploring how individualism can in fact be a driver of apathy.

In conclusion, Mr Birling is the archetype of an ignorant businessman in 1912 Britain. It is apparent that he cares more about his own reputation and status than the wellbeing of others and beyond that, his own family. Perhaps Priestley warns that deeply ingrained societal beliefs can divert people away from compassion as they are too preoccupied with their own trivial concerns. In essence, through the character of Mr Birling Priestley both trivialises wealth and explores how it causes people to act selfishly, even if it is at the expense of others.