In the opening of An Inspector Calls, Priestley presents Birling as a foolish individual who is out of touch with society. In response to Eric’s question about war, Birling describes the idea that war is going to break out as ‘fiddlesticks’. The audience knows that the First World War occurred just after the play was set, and that less than thirty years later, the Second World War broke out, so this use of dramatic irony highlights how out of the loop Birling is. Moreover, his use of the word ‘fiddlesticks’ suggests that Mr Birling does not have much respect for the view that war might break out. He is so certain in his beliefs that he dismisses the idea without real consideration, saying it is nonsense. This makes his character seem even more foolish. Priestley’s presentation of Birling encourages the audience to question the behaviour and views of his character from that point onwards. Indeed, it could even lead them to question the capitalist system which Birling represents.
In the opening of An Inspector Calls, Priestley presents Birling as selfish and inconsiderate in his discussions about his role as a factory owner, businessman and proponent of capitalism. The character of Birling seems to prize business and financial gain over family relationships. Birling interrupts his speech celebrating the engagement of Sheila, his daughter, and Gerald to discuss the business benefits such a union would bring, stating that he ‘look[s] forward to the time when Crofts and Birlings … are working together – for lower costs and higher prices’. His view here is clear – he sees not love and happiness as the most important elements of this marriage, but profit and personal gain. The audience realise that Birling, in a manner akin to Priestley’s view of the other capitalists he represents, prizes financial connections over human ones. A critical view of him, and others like him, is formed – how can one who is so selfish when it comes to family be expected to behave considerately towards those they have no tie to? Birling’s selfish nature is reinforced by his wish to see ‘lower costs’ and ‘higher prices’. He wants to maximise his profit, whilst keeping those in the ‘workforce’ in their submissive position, further entrenching the class and wealth divide, and enabling the capitalists to profit at the expense of the majority. Through the character of Birling, we see Priestley’s aversion to rampant capitalism and, by proxy, engage with his socialist views that demand a more equal society.