

## Mr Birling Essay Models

### Essay 1: Mr Birling Essay (Intermediate)

#### How does Priestley present the character of Mr Birling in *An Inspector Calls*?

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In *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley presents Birling as an arrogant and greedy capitalist, who is driven by the desire to make money (prizing profit over people). This essay will explore how Priestley uses the character of Birling to criticise a society that he believed was too focused on profit in 1912 (before the great loss of human life incurred by the First and Second World Wars) to teach his audience about social responsibility.

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 those who believe war might break out. He is so certain in his beliefs that he dismisses the views of others without real consideration. This makes his character seem even more untrustworthy. 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.

Priestley further develops his portrayal of Birling as selfish and inconsiderate in his discussions about his role as a factory owner, businessman and supporter of capitalism. In his speech celebrating the engagement of Sheila, his daughter, and Gerald, he discusses the business benefits their marriage would bring, stating that he 'look[s] forward to a time when Crofts and Birlings . . . are working together – for lower costs and higher prices'. It makes Birling seem as if he prizes financial connections over human ones. Mr 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 poor position – he gains at the expense of others. Through the character of Birling, Priestley expresses his aversion to capitalism.

Birling's selfish and inconsiderate nature is further shown by the fact that he does not take responsibility for his own actions and role in Eva Smith's death. Rather than accepting how his dismissal of her began a chain of events, and that he had the power to behave differently given his position and standing as the owner of the factory, he states: 'it's my duty to keep labour costs down'. He views his 'duty' as making money rather than as caring about his workers. Priestley uses Birling's dismissal of Eva Smith as the first event that led to Eva Smith's death to warn against putting profit before people. The audience are able to see how Birling failed in his role as a powerful member of the community and learn from his mistakes.

In conclusion, Priestley presents Mr Birling as a selfish and arrogant businessman who does not take responsibility for his actions and who puts profit before people. He contributes to the death of Eva Smith, just as people like him contributed to the breakdown of society that led to two world wars. The audience must learn from his example and not follow the same selfish path.

## Mr Birling Essay Models

### Essay 1: Mr Birling Essay (Advanced)

#### How does Priestley present the character of Mr Birling in *An Inspector Calls*?

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In *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley presents Birling as a greedy capitalist, who is driven by the desire to make money (prizing profit over people), is obsessed with class identity and is, in all, a rather ignorant being. This essay will explore how Priestley uses the character of Birling to criticise the class- and profit-oriented society that was in existence in 1912 (before the great loss of human life incurred by the First and Second World Wars) to teach his audience about social responsibility.

In the opening of Act One, Priestley presents Birling as an arrogant and ignorant individual. The description of Mr Birling as a 'heavy-looking, rather portentous man' indicates that the character is a large presence and conducts himself with a pompous air. This description also hints at the great importance of Birling as a character and foreshadows his role as a key player in the death of Eva Smith (portentous also means of menacing or momentous significance). Priestley further stresses the misguided and arrogant side of Birling through his use of dramatic irony, which is a tool to highlight the foolishness of his character and his belief system. Birling describes the notion that war is going to break out as 'fiddlesticks'. The use of such a dismissive noun, which lacks discursive weight, highlights how out of the loop Birling is. He is so certain in his beliefs, which the audience know to be completely wrong, that he dismisses the views of others without real consideration. Birling's confidence is misplaced to the point of absurdity – not only were there two wars post-1912, there were two world wars. His self-involved belief that the market rules, and dismissal of war on account of its unprofitability, prevents him from understanding the undercurrents in society. Priestley's presentation of Birling as such an arrogant, foolish man encourages the audience to question the behaviour and views of his character from that point onwards and, by proxy, to question the capitalist system which Birling represents. How can somebody who has such a warped understanding of society ever know what is best for the common good?

Priestley further develops his portrayal of 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 a 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 realises that Birling 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? Mr 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.

Birling's selfish and inconsiderate nature is further exemplified by his inability to take responsibility for his own actions and role in Eva Smith's death. Rather than accepting how his dismissal of her began a chain of events, and that he had the power to behave differently given his position and standing as the owner of the means of production, he states: 'it's my duty to keep labour costs down'. This phrase is

particularly telling: his character, and all those he represents, view themselves as upholding a certain role that is defined not by them, but by the market – they are accountable to profit. The use of the noun ‘duty’ suggests Mr Birling absolves himself of responsibility – when one has a duty, they have a role that is decided by something beyond themselves. The audience, however, understand that this is Birling’s way of shirking responsibility for the death of Eva Smith and the treatment of his workers – as the owner of the factory, he was able to decide how he behaved as he was at the top of the hierarchy. In his role, he neglected to see the human cost of his decisions, focusing instead on the financial cost. Priestley uses Birling’s dismissal as the first point of failure in Eva Smith’s death to warn against valuing the monetary over the human – the audience are able to see how Birling failed in his role as a powerful member of the community and learn from his mistakes.

In Act One of *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley also presents a side to Birling which contrasts with his pompous nature. Priestley presents Birling as insecure. This side of his character is still very much in tune with his self-involved personality, but acts, conversely, as a critique of the society Birling finds himself in, rather than as a critique of him. Birling, with his ‘provincial’ manners, which lack the decorum of his wife’s, and his desperation to please Gerald, who is of a higher social class, highlights how critical the class-based structures in society were. Mrs Birling rebukes her husband for complimenting their meal – behaviour which was regarded as impolite as it lacked the modesty expected of the upper class. She ‘reproachfully’ states: ‘Arthur, you’re not supposed to say such things’. Her criticism of his behaviour as his wife is conspicuous as, in Edwardian England, wives were regarded as inferior to and under the rule of their husbands, which highlights how important class convention and social mores were. Indeed, the adverb ‘reproachfully’ suggests a level of disappointment in his behaviour on the part of his wife. Birling, despite his role as wealthy patriarch, is still at the mercy of society and is judged just as he judges others. His insecurity is brought to the fore in his attempts to impress Gerald by boasting of his potential knighthood and his purchase of ‘the same port [Gerald’s] father gets’. Through his words and actions, it is clear he is attempting to gain a higher social status than the one he currently has. Priestley thus exposes the hypocrisy of Birling, and class identity, and highlights how, no matter who you are, class affects you.

In his portrayal of Birling, Priestley encourages his audience to critique and question codes of behaviour – ones that are linked to capitalism and the maximisation of profit, and ones that are linked to class and social hierarchies. Mr Birling, in his status as a wealthy capitalist on the peripheries of the upper middle class, is the perfect example of how there is always a human cost, no matter where you fall in society – at some point, people will always be regarded as inferior. Mr Birling is also made an example of by the Inspector: his individualistic nature contributes to the breakdown of social bonds and leads to irresponsible behaviour that has destructive consequences. The audience must learn from his example and not follow the same selfish path.