***An Inspector Calls* (1945) by J B Priestley (1894-1984)**

**How does Priestley use the character of Mr Birling to present ideas about capitalism?**

**Exemplar Essay**

**Author: Dr Anthony Radice**

[**https://thetraditionalteacher.wordpress.com/**](https://thetraditionalteacher.wordpress.com/)

**Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***An Inspector Calls* (1945) by J B Priestley (1894-1984)**

**How does Priestley use the character of Mr Birling to present ideas about capitalism?**

**Essay Framework**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Introduction**: Priestley, a convinced socialist, makes an emotive case against capitalism through the character of Birling. |  | personal, misery, despair, suicide, technical, economic, selfishness, arrogance, humility, generosity, 1946, Labour government, 1945, Communist Russia, represents |
| **Notes:** |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph One:** Priestley uses Birling’s after-dinner lecturing to show that the confidence of capitalists is misplaced, creating powerful dramatic irony. | Birling: ‘wild talk about possible labour trouble’‘cranks’‘we’re in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity’ | dominating, complacency, crazy, limited circle, doorbell, juxtaposition, Inspector Goole, righteous anger, social responsibility |
| **Notes:** |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Two:** Priestley also leads the audience to dismiss Birling’s capitalist views, as they are so obviously incorrect. | Birling: ‘unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable’ | rosy vision, ridiculous, political, economic, military, turmoil, Titanic, doomed, misplaced confidence, arrogance, dramatic irony, representative |
| **Notes:** |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Three:** Priestley shows how Birling does not accept that he was wrong in firing Eva Smith, suggesting that capitalists refuse to sympathise with workers. | Birling: ‘it’s my duty to keep labour costs down’Sheila: ‘I think it was a mean thing to do.’Eric: ‘Why shouldn't they try for higher wages? We try for the highest possible prices.’ | strike, class warfare,higher wages, lower costs, profits, personal focus, Sheila, sympathetic,practical reality,inconvenient fact |
| **Notes:** |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Four:** Priestley shows that Birling soon loses any sense of remorse when he believes that there will be no public scandal, emphasising the idea of capitalism as purely based on self-interest. | Sheila: ‘You began to learn something. And now you've stopped.’Inspector: ‘if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.’Stage direction: *‘As they stare guiltily and dumbfounded, the curtain falls*’ | selfish, reputation, knighthood, sympathy, contrast, children, suffer, change, revolution |
| **Notes:** |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Conclusion:** Priestley uses Birling to represent capitalism as completely evil and in need of wholesale reform. |  | self-interest, callous, sufferings, repulsive,less appealing,class warfare,emotional contrast, revolution, only hope, forced, Labour government, 1946 |
| **Notes:** |

**How does Priestley use the character of Mr Birling to present ideas about capitalism?**

J B Priestley was a convinced socialist, and his most famous work, *An Inspector Calls*, uses highly emotive methods to present the socialist case. Priestley does not enter into the technical, economic details of what socialism means in practice, choosing instead to make his case in a personal way through the encounters of the wealthy Birling family with a working class young woman, Eva Smith, whose misery eventually leads her to despair and suicide. Priestley’s goal is to convince his audience that capitalism means selfishness and arrogance, while those who embrace humility and generosity must, by necessity, be socialists. This message was timely in 1946, when the play was first performed in Britain, as a Labour government had recently been elected and was carrying out a programme of socialist reforms. It would also have been a welcome message for the play’s very first audience in Communist Russia in 1945. Mr Birling, the head of the Birling family and a successful manufacturer in the fictional town of Brumley, is Priestley’s key tool for attacking capitalism. If Priestley can convince his audience that Birling represents capitalism, then he will have made a successful case for socialism, not by presenting socialist economic arguments, but simply by vilifying those who represent its opponents.

At the start of the play, Priestley depicts Birling as dominating the after-dinner conversation. His speech is full of complacency. He believes that capitalism is triumphantly spreading across the world, despite ‘wild talk about possible labour trouble’ and the crazy ideas of the socialists, whom he calls ‘cranks’. He confidently asserts that ‘we’re in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity’, but the ‘we’ in this statement refers to those whom he cares about - the limited circle of himself and his immediate family, who are the only ones for whom he believes that he is responsible. He is pontificating on this point just at the moment when the doorbell rings to announce the arrival of the Inspector. Thus Priestley creates a strong juxtaposition between the self-congratulatory complacency of the capitalist Birling and the righteous anger of the socialist Inspector, who has come to teach Birling and his family a lesson about social responsibility.

Priestley also leads the audience to dismiss Birling’s capitalist views, as they are so obviously incorrect. The decades between 1912, when the play is set, and 1945, when it was first performed, were full of political, economic and military turmoil, so Birling’s rosy vision of the future is patently ridiculous, and his speeches are dripping with dramatic irony. The most vivid example of this is Birling’s reference to the Titanic as being ‘unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable’. Through this image of a proud ship sailing towards her doom, Priestley depicts capitalism as being likewise doomed to destruction, despite the confidence and the wealth of those who sail upon her. He also depicts Birling himself, the representative of the capitalist class, as having a misplaced confidence - indeed a repulsive arrogance - about his continued dominance of society.

Once the Inspector arrives, it is to Birling that he first turns his attention. He draws from him the admission that he fired Eva Smith after she took a leading role in a strike for higher wages. Birling does not admit that he did anything wrong. In fact, he considers it his duty to ‘keep labour costs down’. Underlying this episode is a fundamental socialist idea: class warfare. The interests of the working classes and their capitalist employers were considered by Karl Marx to be inherently in conflict, as the workers would always want higher wages, while the capitalists would always want costs to be as low as possible in order to keep profits high. But Priestley does not delve into economics; he prefers to maintain a personal focus, and to show the different reactions of the Birling family. Sheila, who is sympathetic to the Inspector’s socialist ideas, comments that she thinks that Birling’s actions were ‘mean’, while Eric says that he sees nothing wrong with the workers trying for the highest wages possible. Birling’s angry reaction to Eric’s comments shows that he has no intention of altering his ideas, which are based upon practical reality for him as a businessman, for if wage costs rise too high, then his business will collapse and his workers will have no wages at all, an inconvenient fact which Priestley does not, of course, choose to mention.

Priestley’s representation of Birling, and therefore of capitalism, as being entirely selfish and unconcerned for the living conditions of the working classes, reaches its height when he allows the Birlings and Gerald to think that they will not be made publicly responsible for their actions. After the Inspector leaves, they discover that he is not in fact a real police inspector, and that there have been no cases of suicide reported at Brumley Infirmary. At this point, Birling loses any sense of remorse for his actions, which proves that he only felt bad about them because they endangered his reputation and his chance of a knighthood. His remorse was never based upon sympathy for the plight of Eva Smith. Here, Priestley once again creates a contrast between Birling and his children, both of whom continue to insist that they must learn lessons from their past conduct and resolve to act differently. Sheila angrily tells her father that ‘You began to learn something. And now you've stopped.’ Priestley implies that those who have benefited from capitalism and built their lives upon its profits will not be able to change unless they experience suffering themselves: the ‘fire and blood and anguish’ which the Inspector mentions in his concluding speech. Birling, and the whole capitalist class, must suffer before they are prepared to change, and just before the curtain falls, the audience is satisfied to see that the pompous and self-interested Birling is indeed going to suffer - he stares ‘guiltily and dumbfounded’ having taken the call that reveals that a real police inspector is on the way.

In conclusion, Priestley’s depiction of Birling is a highly successful method for depicting capitalism as entirely evil. Birling’s total devotion to self-interest and his callous attitude towards the sufferings of the poor are repulsive to the audience. Priestley avoids mentioning any of the less appealing aspects of socialism, such as class warfare or the abolition of private property, focusing instead on creating a simple, emotional contrast between avarice and generosity, much like that created by Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*. But while Dickens shows his sinner repenting and thus offers hope of social change coming through personal moral improvement, the only hope which Priestley offers is that of a social revolution, like that which was being enacted by the Labour government of 1946.