

“Nobody wants war, except some half-civilized folks in the Balkans”

How does Priestley present Mr. Birling and how are audiences likely to respond to him?

Priestley wrote the play in 1945. It is set in 1912, the Edwardian period, just before the outbreak of world war one. This was the time of capitalist prosperity, and it was the capitalist mind-set that Priestley wanted to criticize. Priestley presents Mr Arthur Birling as an ignorant and foolish character with the use of Dramatic Irony.

J.B Priestley uses Mr. Birling's talk of war to convey his socialists' views to the audience, and oppress Arthur's capitalist views. Mr. Birling portrays his narrow minded views on war when he says "you'll hear some people say that wars inevitable." The play was written around the time when the second world war was coming to an end, so the audience are aware that Mr. Birling's optimistic views again, incorrect. Priestley was aiming to use the post world war vulnerability of the audience to oppress capitalist views and project his socialist views. The play was set in 1912, 2 years before the world war; Priestley uses this small time frame to display Arthur as injudicious character. Priestley can easily make Birling look stupid by having him say things that the audience know to be false, about the "unsinkable absolutely unsinkable" Titanic, "silly little war scares," war is "impossible", "nonsense".

Priestly also conveys Mr. Birling as an impulsive character who only cares about his social status. His behavior remains the same throughout the play. When the inspector arrived, Arthur had to make it known that his poor son in law was aristocrat, the "son of Sir George Croft". Birling did not even introduce his own son, but rather dismissed him whenever he spoke. This suggests that because of social status, Mr. Birling treats Gerald more like a son to gain some sort of social respect. Even when the inspector left, Arthur did not show any sign of sorrow for Eva Smith, but he was rather more worried about it ruining his reputation. He did not want it to become a "public scandal". Arthur was not willing to take responsibility for his actions, but he in fact only cared about how he would look to society. He does not care for people, or in this case, his employees. Priestley used Mr. Birling to represent capitalists. He is presenting the message that like Mr. Birling, they are not willing to change, and only care for themselves, not their supporters. As Mr. Birling says "a man has to look after himself".

Priestley's message is to encourage the people of 1945 to seize the opportunity the war had given them to build a better, more caring society. As Inspector Goole says, "we are all members of one body," don't you agree?

Personally, I believe that Priestley could have been using his play in order to prevent any further world wars, as he could be suggesting that the cause of these wars was the actions of the upper classes, as they were too caught up by their wealth which made them very self absorbed and snobby and made them think only about themselves.