

Mr Bruff

ONLINE REVISION

MR Bruff's Guide To

J.B. PRIESTLEY'S 'AN INSPECTOR CALLS'



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SAMPLE

Mr Birling

Mr. Birling is first described as a, "heavy-looking, rather portentuous man in his middle fifties with fairly easy manners but rather provincial in his speech." He seems very proud of his standing in society and frequently reminds everyone of his achievements, "I was Lord Mayor here two years ago... there's a very good chance of a knighthood."

Mr. Birling is happy about the engagement of his daughter Sheila to Gerald Croft, not because he believes they love each other and will make each other happy, more because by marrying Gerald, Sheila will maintain or increase her social status. Gerald is a man whose parents own an even more successful company than Birling and Co., "Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company... perhaps we may look forward to the time when Crofts and Birlings are no longer competing but are working together - for lower costs and higher prices." Birling presents the union almost as a business deal and he makes it clear that, "a man has to mind his own business and look after himself." Mr. Birling seems concerned that he does not have the same kind of family connections that Gerald has, he therefore has to rely on money which he has made rather than that which has been passed on to him. His mention of the knighthood is significant as this is an award given by others in the community but J.B. Priestley again seems to be criticising Mr. Birling and his actions as we later find that he does not support the notion of community at all.

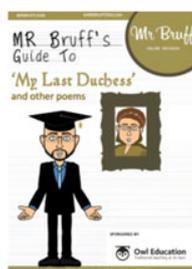
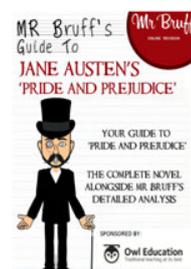
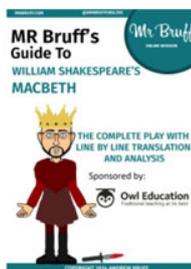
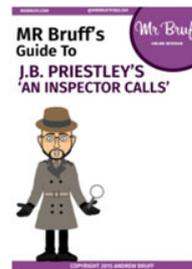
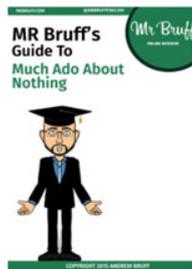
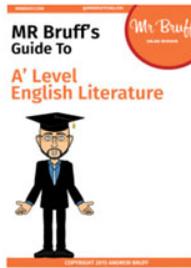
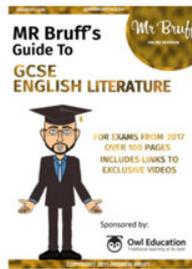
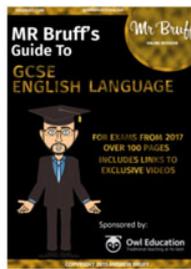
At the start of the play Mr. Birling makes his views on social responsibility perfectly clear. Interestingly, his opinions of "community and all that nonsense" are comments which are perfectly timed. Just before this statement he makes other rash claims such as "The Germans don't want war," and "the Titanic... absolutely unsinkable." An audience, even at the first performance, know that not only did the Germans play a key part in World War II but the Titanic also sank. Priestley's effective use of dramatic irony here means Mr. Birling's opinions are instantly devalued. Priestley's clever structure means that when Birling follows these incorrect claims up with "community and all that nonsense" we, the audience, may believe that he is continuing to talk rubbish. Priestley effectively gets the audience to agree with his own socialist views that community is, in fact, far from "nonsense"!

Mr. Birling sacked Eva Smith because she demanded a higher (but probably fair) wage and went on strike, "She'd had a lot to say - far too much - so she had to go." He saw her as one of the leaders of the strike action and rather than consider her personal circumstances or what she was contributing to the

business, it would seem from his use of language that Birling sacked her with little thought. This was despite him admitting that she was a hard worker. Mr. Birling's lack of regret means that it is hard to sympathise with him. He frequently tries to exert his authority over the Inspector by reminding him of the positions he has held in society but it never has an effect. Eventually the Inspector makes it clear that, "Public men... have responsibilities as well as privileges." This could well be Priestley's viewpoint as a socialist.

Mr. Birling does not admit that he was in any way to blame for Eva Smith's death and even after other characters such as Sheila and Eric have broken down and clearly been sorry for their actions Mr. Birling insists, "I can't accept any responsibility." He fails to learn the Inspector (and Priestley's) lesson of social responsibility. This supports Priestley (and the Inspector's) beliefs that it is the younger members of the community who need to be educated and encouraged to look out for one another if society is to become a better place.

Overall Mr. Birling could be seen as somewhat of a caricature of a typical capitalist businessman of the time: heartless and ruthless, concerned only with himself and his wealth. We, the audience, are likely to find it hard to sympathise with his opinions so when he makes comments at the end of the play about the Inspector being "a Socialist or some sort of crank," we are again likely to think that he is talking nonsense. Priestley suggests we should feel that Socialists (such as himself) are to be respected and valued; they are certainly not to be seen as cranks!



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