

The Character of Mr. Birling - Transcript

Mr. Birling: 'the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else... as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense.

A man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own - and-'

Presenter: At the beginning of *An Inspector Calls*, author J. B. Priestley has Mr. Arthur Birling deliver this speech in which he uses dismissive language - referring to community as 'nonsense' and being 'like bees in a hive' - to express his capitalist views, which revolve around his business and individual interests.

Until, he is interrupted by the inspector - who calls into question those beliefs.

Mr. Birling, a wealthy, self-described 'hard-headed businessman' is shown as arrogant from the start of the play.

He claims that...

Mr. Birling: 'there isn't a chance of war. The world's developing so fast that it'll make war impossible.'

The author uses dramatic irony here - which is when the audience knows something that a character doesn't - to discredit Mr. Birling.

The play is set in 1912 - two years before the outbreak of World War One.

But despite all the flaws and scandals that the Inspector uncovers about the Birling family, Arthur's outlook doesn't change.

When Goole reports that one of Mr. Birling's workers, Eva, has taken her own life, it's revealed that Birling had fired her after she led a strike, asking for higher pay.

A clash that represents an overall theme in the text: Capitalism vs Socialism.

Mr. Birling is unremorseful, believing that it was...

Mr. Birling: 'my duty to keep labour costs down'

Presenter: ...and claiming that he 'can't accept any responsibility' over her death.

He's more concerned for his own reputation, repeating four times his fear of a 'public scandal,' a scandal that becomes a reality at the end of the play, when the real inspector calls.

The play was first performed in 1945 - the same year that the Labour Party won a landslide victory in the general election that would lead to the formation of the National Health Service.

The country was on the brink of historical and social change.

In this context, what comment do you think the author might have been making through Mr. Birling - a character who boldly claims that 'A man has to mind his own business and look after himself'?