

## **How does J. B Priestley present the character of Mr Birling as foolish in the play? (30 marks)**

In J. B Priestley's post-war, enigmatic morality play, Mr Birling is crucial; he is a hateful emblem of a self-seeking, capitalist state which, Priestley believes, requires urgent dismantling. The characterisation of Birling as fool-hardy, ignorant and dispassionate enables the writer to condemn Birling's ideas, and, by extension, the ideas enshrined by capitalism; he provides a vehicle through which Priestley can expound his own socialist ideals in post-war Britain.

In the exposition of the play, we are given insight into the characters before we meet them: "a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties with fairly easy manners but rather provincial in his speech". Here, the pre-modifying adjective "provincial" implies that Birling's speech and character are simplistic and perhaps rather unrefined – that he does not hail from an enlightened metropolis, but instead from a small, enclosed, rural community, completely lacking in sophistication; this term could also suggest that Birling has not had the benefit of an education, therefore, his views, might be somewhat ignorant and uninformed. Finally, Birling's "provincial" speech hints at his ignoble birth – unlike the Crofts – Birling does not come from an aristocratic family; he is a beneficiary of the Industrial Revolution and a proponent of capitalism.

This notion is confirmed in the rising action of the play, in the writer's use of dramatic irony ("The Titanic... Absolutely unsinkable!") and following the Inspector's unceremonious arrival (a moment of carefully crafted staging in which the Inspector curtails Birling's speech). "I'm a hard-headed business man". The compound adjective phrase "hard-headed" is effective at conveying Birling's capitalist beliefs and, more notably, stupidity in a number of ways. Firstly, we can infer that Birling means that, in having a "hard" head, he is a practical and resilient business man who believes that diligent work pays dividends. However, if you have a "hard-head" you might also be said to be stupid; it expresses the idea that Birling's head is comprised more of bone than brain and, if read this way, allows the writer a wink in the direction of his audience: Birling is not only a fool, but is too foolish to recognise this.