Mr Birling

Mr Birling’s personality

- Priestley describes him as a - "heavy-looking man" in his mid-fifties, with easy manners but rather provincial in his speech."

- He is a rich successful businessman – he is used to everybody obeying and respecting him. He has managed to acquire his wealth through being a business man “we hard-headed practical business men must say something sometime. And we don’t guess – we’ve had experience – and we know”

- Mr Birling is a self-made upper class business man and he is always looking for opportunities to climb the social ladder. For example Shelia’s marriage to Gerald, marrying Mrs Birling and getting a knighthood – “your engagement to Sheila means a tremendous lot to me”

- He is obsessed with how things appear to people and he makes sure that they are aware of his wealth and importance – “It’s exactly the same port your father gets from him”

- He does not consider those who are less fortunate than him – “Community and all that nonsense”. He is very traditional in his views – “a man has to make his own business and look after himself”

- He always thinks he is right and is very sure of himself: “Unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable”, “there isn’t a chance of war” – The use of dramatic irony here encourages the audience to perceive Mr Birling as foolish. His views can’t be trusted.

Who does Mr Birling represent in society?

- He represents the wealthier, mainly older generation.

- He holds all the traditional, selfish attitudes an upper class businessman would be likely to have - ‘Hard-headed practical businessman’.

- He is stubborn and unwilling to change -‘But the whole thing’s different now’

-Priestley uses him to show his concerns over the consequences of social inequality in Britain.

How he reacts to the suicide and interrogation

Mr Birling doesn’t react at all to the suicide and just dismisses it. He isn’t fazed; instead he is impatient as it is interrupting his pleasant evening – “Yes, yes. Horrid business. But I don’t understand why you should come here, Inspector -”

* While being interrogated Mr Birling tries to intimidate the inspector by name–dropping and using his power as a well known man with connections – “How do you get on with our Chief Constable Colonel Roberts …. Perhaps I ought to warn you that he’s an old friend of mine”.
* He wants to avoid scandal at any cost in order to protect his reputation - “I’ve got to cover this up as soon as I can.”

- He ironically offers money too late to save Eva, but to avoid a scandal – ‘Look Inspector – I’d give thousands – yes, thousands –‘

How does he respond to other peoples interrogations?

- He doesn’t want Sheila to be involved and wants to shield her from reality - ‘there isn’t the slightest reason why my daughter should be dragged into this unpleasant business.’

- Mr Birling is concerned only about Mrs Birling’s involvement in the suicide being made public and affecting his chance of a knighthood -‘I must say, Sybil, that when this comes out at the inquest, it isn’t going to do us much good. The Press might easily take it up-’

- When it came to Eric’s interrogation and there was there was the prospect shaming the family, Mr Birling was - ‘(terrified)’. He starts to become more aware of reality – (Bitterly) I understand a lot of things now I didn’t understand before.’

His main concern is the money that Eric stole not the fact that he got a girl pregnant. He takes on role of inspector and interrogates Eric himself: - ‘My office?’ ‘ I’ve got to cover this up as soon as I can.’

After they find out about the hoax

- At the end, he is just the same; he wants things to return to the way they were. He cannot understand Sheila’s and Eric’s insistence that there is something to be learnt. He is relieved, thinking he has escaped a “public scandal”

What does the future hold for this ‘type’ of character? What is Priestley saying about people like this?

- Mr Birling’s views are constant on his part in Eva’s death throughout the play: - ‘I can’t accept any responsibility’; ‘obviously it has nothing to do with the wretched girl’s suicide.’

- He refuses to take on the board the inspector’s lesson. - ‘He had the laugh of us all right’

- If men like Birling stay in charge, they have the power and will ruin the world. They go on to the make the mistakes that lead to two wars. A third could be on its way unless people change –‘if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.’

- When they discover that Eva is actually dead, this is reinforcing Priestley’s message that if people do not learn the lesson that they need to look out each other they will suffer the consequences.