

Essay on Eric Birling:

An Inspector Calls:

Eric Birling And His Change Throughout the Play:

Within An Inspector Calls, Priestley uses the character of Eric Birling as a dramatic tool to present his socialist message. Although Eric's change is not as prominent as Sheila's, he is shown to mature across the course of the play and reprimands his family for their actions in the closing Act.

Primarily, at the play's outset, Eric is shown to be a slight outcast within the Birling family as he is 'half shy, half assertive'. Priestley's repetition of the adjective 'half' suggests that Eric struggles to know how to present himself within the family. We are encouraged to believe that this may be due to the pretentious nature of the family and their 'not cosy and homelike' house and their Capitalist ideologies. Unlike the others, Eric does not seem to place so much importance on appearance and status, suggesting from the start that he has the potential to change across the course of the play. Unlike the other members of the family, it may be that Eric welcomes the 'brighter and harder' lighting the Inspector brings, as it enables the family to see themselves for what they really are.

Due to Eric's discomfort in his own family, Priestley presents him as a character who turns to alcohol. Sheila rebukes him for being 'squiffy' and calls him an 'ass' within Act One. Not only does this highlight Eric's role as the family outcast, it also foreshadows the later revelations about his character. It is, after all, his drinking that leads him to force himself on to Eva Smith after meeting her at the 'Palace Bar' and begins their relationship. However, Eric can also be seen to be perceptive about the behaviour of his family from the start. He recognises that Sheila has an 'awful temper' but is not 'bad really', with the adjective 'awful' exemplifying the short-tempered side of her character which leads to the sacking of Eva Smith from 'Milwards'. By continuing to admit that she's 'not bad really', however, Priestley hints to his audience that she does have more of a conscience than her actions imply, allowing her to develop this side of her across the course of the play. This also indicates that Eric knows his sister well, and allows Priestley to build upon this bond across the play until they unite against their parents and present Priestley's socialist message at the end.

Despite Eric's role in the death of Eva Smith, Priestley encourages his audience to warm to his character and, to an extent, respect his actions. Eric is shown to steal from his father's company in order to support Eva Smith after he learns that she is pregnant with his child. As the audience has already been led to perceive Birling as a greedy, 'hard headed man of businesses, we perhaps welcome the fact that his money is now being used for good. In 1945, this may be a sign to the audience that the rich should support the poor in this Socialist setting. Furthermore, when Eric states that his father is 'not the sort of father a chap can go to when he's in trouble', Priestley encourages his audience to feel some sympathy for the young man who felt he had no one to turn to, echoing his discomfort in the family from the start. The use of the informal noun 'chap' presents Eric as representative as a lot of men his age who may want to distance themselves from their family values.

Within Act Three, Priestley shows a clear divide between the older and younger generation as Eric now sides with his sister in holding the family to account for their actions. Juxtaposing Mrs Birling who 'did nothing [she's] ashamed of', Eric now acknowledges that 'the girl's dead and we all helped to kill her'. The inclusive pronoun 'we' shows that Eric has accepted his own responsibility in her death, and now wishes the family to join together to make a change for the future. This is reflective of the 1945 society who would have joined together after the end of World War Two and would be seeking to make the country a better place – Priestley suggests that the only way forward is for people to adapt from their Capitalist views (Mr and Mrs Birling) and adopt a Socialist outlook (Sheila and Eric). Priestley's use of tension at the end of Act Three is not only in keeping with his cliffhangers in Acts One and Two, but also ridicules those in the family who would not accept social responsibility.