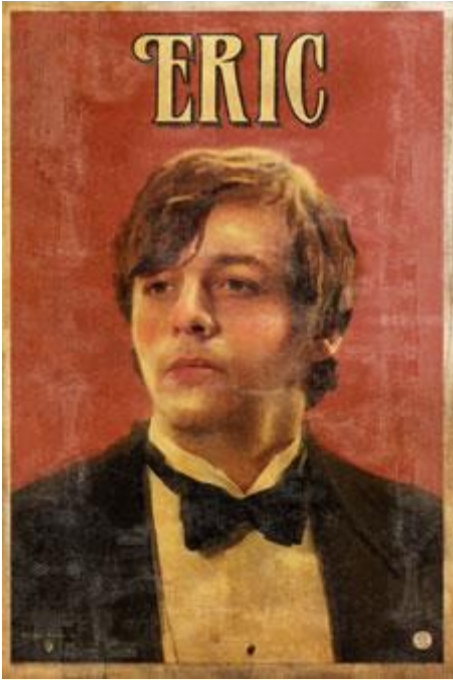


Eric Birling



- He is described at the start as *"in his early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive."*
- Eric seems **embarrassed and awkward** right from the start. His first action in the script is *"Eric suddenly guffaws,"* and then he is unable to explain his laughter, as if he is nervous about something. (It is not until the final act that we realise this must be because of his relationship with Eva and having stolen some money.) Priestley suggests there is tension between Gerald and his father.
- It soon becomes clear to the audience (although it takes his parents longer) that he is a **hardened drinker**. Gerald admits, *"I have gathered that he does drink pretty hard."*
- When he hears how his father sacked Eva Smith, he supports the workers' cause, like Sheila. *"Why shouldn't they try for higher wages?"*
- He feels **guilt and frustration** with himself over his relationship with the girl. He cries, *"Oh - my God! - how stupid it all is!"* as he tells his story. He is horrified that his thoughtless actions had such consequences.
- He had some innate **sense of responsibility**, though, because although he got a woman pregnant, he was concerned enough to give her money. He was obviously less worried about stealing (or 'borrowing' from his father's office) than he was about the girl's future. So, was Eric, initially, the most socially aware member of the Birling family?
- He is **appalled by his parents' inability to admit their own responsibility**. He tells them forcefully, *"I'm ashamed of you."* When Birling tries to threaten him in Act III, Eric is aggressive in return: *"I don't give a damn now."* Eric has clearly never stood up to his father in this way before (note his use of the word "now".)
- At the end of the play, like Sheila, he is fully aware of his social responsibility. At the beginning of the play he bickers and argues with Sheila but at the end he supports her views. He is not interested in his parents' efforts to cover everything up: as far as he is concerned, the important thing is that a girl is dead. *"We did her in all right."*

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/dramainspectorcalls/2drama_inspector_charrev4.shtml

Eric Birling

Eric's position is similar to his sister's, in that he, too, is wracked by guilt after learning of the Eva/Daisy's suicide. But Eric's addiction to alcohol and his moodier, wilder temperament keep him from reasoning as clearly as Sheila does at the play's end. So Eric agrees with Sheila and supports her views (rather than speaking his own opinions.) Eric believes that he behaved justifiably in stealing from the family business to help Eva/Daisy. And, when he learns that his mother refused Eva/Daisy from her charity despite being pregnant, he is shocked and angry at his family's lack of sympathy or sense of responsibility.

Different characters interpret Eric's alcoholism in different ways. Arthur Birling sees it as a sign of weakness, an indication that Eric is lazy and was spoiled as a child. Sybil refuses to acknowledge that Eric has a drinking problem, despite Sheila's protestations. And Gerald, though he wants to believe that Eric's drinking is "normal" for a young man, admits that very few young men drink the way Eric does.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/drama/an-inspector-calls/character/eric-birling/>

Eric Birling is of roughly the same age and of the same spirit as his sister. He is a bit like an awkward teenager ("*half shy, half assertive*") and drinks too much, perhaps because he has not yet found a meaningful role in life. Priestley suggests that social inequality is damaging the lives of the younger Birlings: Sheila seems spoilt and selfish and Eric doesn't know what to do with his money and his education. After the inspector leaves they have become better people with a sense of purpose.

Eric shows the same level of regret and sympathy towards Eva Smith as Sheila does, though what he did to her was much worse and of much greater consequence. Having committed a sexual assault, (nowadays we would not hesitate to call it rape, but in Priestley's time the laws and attitudes were different) Eric takes a huge risk in stealing money from his father's company to try to make amends (which shows he felt guilty at the time: he felt more responsible to Daisy than he did to his father's business.) When he discovers that his mother turned Eva away and drove her to suicide, he becomes almost mad with rage, saying, "*you killed her - and the child she'd have had too - my child - your own grandchild*". This shows that, despite his initial brutishness towards Eva, he does have a tender and paternal side.

Eric sides with the Inspector and against his father in the question of Eva Smith's sacking from Mr Birling's factory. By the end of the play, he stands firmly on the side of socialism and the workers in the "Capital versus Labour" debate.

<https://www.educationumbrella.com/curriculum-vital/an-inspector-calls-characters>

Eric Birling's Character

Eric Birling works at Birling and Co., his father is presumably his boss. Eric is the son of Arthur and Sybil Birling and brother of Sheila Birling. We discover early on in the play that Eric has a drinking problem and that he has been drinking steadily for almost two

years. J. B. Priestly describes Eric as in his *"early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive"*. Eric is quite naive, and is in no way as cunning or as worldly as Gerald Croft. By the end of the play, like his sister Sheila, he becomes aware of own responsibilities, realising that he has played a part in Eva Smith's death. Eric the last of the characters to be questioned by Inspector Goole, although his relationship to her came before his mother met her.

Priestley's Message (intended effect on the audience)

- Eric's rape of Daisy conveys how the upper class abused their power over the working class (The Inspector says Eric treated Eva Smith *'as if she were an animal, a thing, not a person.'*)
- He represents (with Sheila) the younger generation – Priestley saw them as *'more impressionable'* – after all, they were the future, representing hope and changed values.

Eric's Character Development/changes

- He was part of the 'chain of events', having a fling with Eva Smith and getting her pregnant. He treated her *'as if she were an animal, a thing, not a person.'* At the start of the play, he was just like the others – abusing his power over a working class girl – but he changes during the play.
- However, he accepts responsibility, and like Sheila, feels very guilty about what he did. He is ashamed of his behaviour and shows that he is capable of changing for the better. *'The fact remains that I did what I did.'* Therefore, the audience is more likely to forgive him.

Eric Birling's Key points

- We realise that there is something not quite right with Eric when he is first introduced in the opening stage directions: *'not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive'*. He is clearly uncomfortable in some way.
- He could be drunk at the beginning when he *'suddenly guffaws'* for no reason. He drinks *'pretty hard'*.
- Another clue that makes the audience suspicious of him is when Gerald jokes to Mr Birling that the arrival of the Inspector could be something to do with Eric: *'Unless Eric's been up to something.'* Eric answers, *'(still uneasy) Well I don't think it's very funny.'* Of course Eric has been up to something (stealing from his father) but then we find out that they should **all** be feeling guilty.
- He played a significant part in Eva Smith's death – he met her at the Palace Bar, forced his way into her home and got her pregnant. *'I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty.'* He then stole money from his father's business in order to support her. If this became public, the family's reputation would have been ruined.
- He had a privileged education, unlike his father.