**Q) How does Priestley present Eric Birling and Gerald Croft in the play, ‘An Inspector Calls’?**

In ‘An Inspector Calls’, Eric is clearly presented as a character with many secrets. Through Priestley's characterisation of Eric we see him to be a young man uncomfortable in the environment he resides in. He is not present for a long duration of the play but enters at his scene. This is a dramatic device. Gerald is presented as an ambiguous character. Compared to Eric, he shows more of his substantial power he holds due to his class and like Mr Birling, we see him exploit this. Similarities are that they both come from particularly wealthy backgrounds however it is mostly the way they use their power that defines their morality and their social responsibility, which is a key theme in the play.

Priestley uses Gerald to represent a character of an upper class upbringing. Gerald is portrayed as a future Mr Birling and is seen as his perfect son. Another demonstration of favouritism is where Mr Birling interrupts Eric mid sentence. Eric’s segregation demonstrates that the family is not internally a perfect one as we are all assured. In the play, Gerald demonstrates similar characteristics that Mr Birling has, that “they’d all be broke - if I know them”. His capitalist views are highlighted here where he refers to the lower working class as inferior. This could further illustrate that he too believes that “the wars will not happen” and that there will be “peace and prosperity”. This is an example of dramatic irony which is key aspect of the play. Gerald also speaks about how the upper class are “respectable citizens and not criminals”. Priestley proves him wrong and as the audience learn that the Birlings and Gerald Croft indirectly killed Eva Smith, by abusing their respectability in society. Priestley also uses this line to foreshadow events in the future. Priestley uses Gerald because he is present for majority of the play and he learns about the other character’s flaws as well as his own. Gerald then learns a lesson from The Inspector that status, class, wealth and hiding behind facades is not acceptable and not an excuse for your own personal and financial gains.

Furthermore, he is consistently in agreement with Mr Birling whereas Eric is the opposite and opposes him where he says that the working class “are people”. Gerald Croft had an affair with Daisy Renton. This illustrates his lack of morality. Moreover, he is shown to be a natural liar throughout the play; he initially denies the affair with Daisy and says “Where did you get the idea that I know her?” to The Inspector. This is a deliberate dramatic delay. He also suggests to Sheila that they “keep it from him” whereas Eric comes out clean throughout. Gerald is also a “man about town” which refers to his frequent visits to the Palace Bar. This is where other people of that class, such as Alderman Meggarty, go to for pleasure. It further links to the use of women, such as Eva, at that time where their voice were silenced. At the end of the play, Gerald reverts back to his moral-less ways, being the first to question The Inspector’s existence and we are again led to believe he will not understand his responsibilities as Eric had done in the end. He, furthermore, offers the ring back to Sheila, saying, “things have changed now”. This shows his failure to understand what The Inspector taught him and so he will be punished for it.

Although Gerald did not understand the consequences of his actions, for a short amount of time he “expected” Sheila to return the engagement ring to him. This shows that he understood that his engagement was in peril if the news spread, but he decided to continue his relationship with Eva regardless. The audience now understand that Priestley is silencing Gerald’s voice, as he is constantly deceiving the Birlings and the audience with his lies and Priestley silences those who are wrong “as they stare guiltily and dumbfounded” upon hearing about Eva Smith’s death at the end of the play.

However, when Gerald has been exposed, he comes out well. He also defends Eva, saying that “It wasn’t disgusting” to Mrs Birling. It is particularly surprising as he says this to a person whom he respects, showing genuine compassion and that the relationship wasn’t purely for pleasure. He knew Eva’s name unlike Eric who did not. He also provided care, comfort, and shelter. He also gave his own money to Eva to assist her in the future unlike Eric who gave stolen money. Priestley also shows Gerald to be of a character who challenges the class boundaries and also comes to accept his role as upper class. When The Inspector was interrogating him, he shows how he met Eva when she was a "woman of the town". The euphemism here shows how Gerald is almost ashamed of his attitude towards Eva. Here, Priestley can be thought to, using Gerald, display the message of equality and display that to the audience.

Eric Birling also shows his lack of morality in ‘An Inspector Calls’. He “used Eva for the end of a stupid drunken evening”. He also referred to her as a “good sport”. This shows how Eric constantly acts ‘childish’ and doesn’t understand how his actions cause consequences and what the dangers of those are. This leads to him being taught a lesson by the Inspector, as the Inspector says complacency will lead to “fire, blood and anguish.” This could be a religious reference of Hell however also could be a referring to the World Wars. Eric has some innate sense of responsibility as although had gotten Eva pregnant, he demonstrated some empathy and was set to steal his father’s money which he was not particularly concerned about as you could argue that he was more worried about Eva’s future. However, on the other hand, it also demonstrates irresponsibility at the same time. This is the fact that he should not have stolen the money, or as he put it “borrowed” it in the first place without permission and shows he lacks morality.

Eric showed morality at the beginning of the play. Eric argued for the workers when the Inspector had questioned Mr. Birling’s decision to not increase his employees’ wages. Eric had even questioned his own father in front of a figure of responsibility and morality, the Inspector. “Why shouldn’t they try for higher wages?”. This scene shows that the Inspector agrees with the younger generation and Eric to show the audience the danger of the complacency of the older generation and their flaws. However, during this scene, Gerald sides with Mr. Birling and acts as if he is a member of the older generation. Evidence that shows Eric gains responsibility during the play is when he is “ashamed” of his parents’ inability to confess to the Inspector. He contrasts the behaviour of the older generation, from his ability to adapt to changing circumstances and accept change. The older generation will do anything to protect themselves, especially when Mr Birling was only concerned with covering up “a scandal” whereas the younger generation are more honest and admit their faults. Eric refuses to cover up his involvement saying “the fact remains that I did what I did”. The older generation can be also seen as wrongly confident, wrongly optimistic and see the younger generation as foolish which is very ironic. His guilt and acceptance to his role in Eva’s death is evident where he cries “Oh - my God - How stupid it all is”. The use of dashes illustrates the restlessness in his voice and how truly horrified he is at his actions.

From being “childish” at the beginning of the play to understanding towards the end, the audience sides with him and Sheila, as the younger generation are the hope for the future.

Gerald Croft is given more responsibility than Eric. An example is where Gerald is given the responsibility, by his parents to run their business however has not been put into Eric’s hands as he demonstrates childish attributes, where he is “half shy, half assertive”.

Gerald and Eric both understood how powerful they were and how Eva had very little power to stop them. The audience feel anger towards Eric and Gerald, as the audience has heard the terrible situations Eva has encountered and neither of them understand the consequences of their actions.

Priestley presents the strained relations within the Birling family. This is seen several times throughout the play. One example of this is that Mr. and Mrs. Birling did not know that Eric drinks and he frequently got drunk. Another is that Mr. Birling did not realise that Eric was stealing money from him. Eric views Mr Birling as the “kind of father a chap can’t go to when he’s in trouble”. If Mr Birling was a more caring father to Eric, then he might have told him his troubles, such as needing money. It is evident that his voice has been quieted down as the stage direction “checks himself” illustrates he isn’t used to speaking openly. The audience now understand the atmosphere Eric has been living in and they understand that he has been silenced by the complacent older generation.

Eric and Gerald are two different characters; their opinions on the matter of Eva Smith’s death could be no different. Gerald does not change his ways and continues to protect and defend himself due to his public image, whereas, Eric eventually understands the consequences of his actions and has learnt his lesson. Priestley uses Eric to show a clear contrast between his parents’ capitalistic views and his empathetic qualities, as Priestley is trying to enforce social reform. He stands taller, socially, in the Birling family at the end of the play, compared to being silenced at the beginning. Eric has matured throughout the play from his “middle school” life, by learning his responsibilities. On the other hand, Gerald has been silenced and disproved when "a sharp ring" is given at the end of the play in a second attempt to wake him from his complacency.