

KEY WORDS

Uneasy, "squiffy", questioning, naive, privileged, silenced, defiant, bewildering, oppressed (to the audience Eric is often confusing, appearing defiant at times and awkward and silenced at others)

SOCIALLY AWKWARD TO SOCIALLY DEFIANT

- Eric is often shown as **"not quite at ease"** which may also be Priestley **illustrating** how he views the younger generation; Eric is a far cry from the **self-indulgent** character of Mr Birling and so finds it hard to **assimilate** into the house, often coming off as awkward however he is also far from the perfect Socialist, leaving him trapped between the two ideologies.
- Eric's personality however, changes through the play, going from **uneasy to more compelling** towards the end as he accepts his wrongdoings and embraces the socialist ideology put forward by the inspector.

- Priestley **juxtaposes** this willingness to change with the **obstinate** nature of the older Birlings, perhaps presenting this contrast to show there is hope for change for the youth.
- Eric serves as a **foil** to his **bigot** (extreme ignorance) father as he becomes socially defiant.

COMPARISON

Eric's demeanour and mannerisms change as the play progresses, going from more submissive and uneasy **"half shy, half assertive"** to more self assured and defiant **"I'm ashamed of you as well"** showing a more unafraid and strong side of him and mirroring how Priestley presents the hope for change present in the younger generation.

Eric Act 1

A SILENCED SUPPORTER OF THE CLASS SYSTEM

- Eric is shown from the beginning to be **"half shy, half assertive"**, often unable to accept his father's behaviour and yet not at ease with his own either.
- This often means that Eric notices his father's **unscrupulous** and **inhuman** treatment of those perceived to be "lower" than him in society and yet lacks the moral fibre and **conviction** to act on these feelings.
- This is conveyed through the talk of Sheila's wedding; Eric tells Mr Birling: **"(not too rudely) Well. Don't do any (speech-giving) We'll drink to their health and have done with it"**.
- This abrupt statement **elucidates** (explains) Eric's thoughts on the marriage; he recognises the **absurdity** of their marriage and sees that Sheila is being treated as little more than a **bartering token** for the powerful male businessmen to achieve **"lower costs and higher prices"**, dehumanising and disenfranchising her in the process.
- However he does so **"not too rudely,"** showing how he still lacks any real power to do anything but is still **disillusioned with the capitalistic intent** behind Sheila's marriage.
- When referring to Mr Birling's ironic speech that highlights his **stupidity** and **myopia** (short-sightedness), Eric is shown to be questioning of his staunch and misguided world view, asking **"what about war"** before quickly being drowned out, with his attempts at speaking up cut off **"Yes, I know - but still -"** showing how Eric is **cowed** (forced) into agreeing with the patriarchal and classist worldview posited by Mr Birling whilst being unable to speak out.
- These all go to show Eric's **dilemma** within the Birling family; he has an **innate sense** of morality showing him that Mr Birling's actions and words are immoral however he is silenced into supporting them regardless.

TOP TIP



By comparing Eric to his father, Mr Birling, you will be hitting A01 (maintaining a critical style) and gathering implicit information from the texts. In your topic sentences to make them more in detail, use another character as a point of comparison to further demonstrate your point.

TOPIC SENTENCES

- Priestley portrays the character of Eric more sympathetically in order to highlight the moral flaws of Mr and Mrs Birling: Eric's growth as a character over the play is juxtaposed by the obstinacy and reluctance of the older Birlings in the face of change
- Priestley uses the gradually more outspoken Eric as a counterbalance to the capitalistic vitriol put forward by Mr Birling; the archaic ideas of Mr Birling crumble under his scrutiny along with the Inspector and Sheila
- Priestley highlights Eric's flaws in order to exhibit how despite Mr and Mrs Birling's best efforts, problems like alcoholism and irresponsible sexual conduct plague all levels of society

MR BIRLING THE FATHER

- Eric can also be shown as a **mirror for the failures** of the Birlings as parents; we are told at the start that Eric is **"squiffy"**, meaning drunk. This may be communicating to the audience that in their pursuit of money and power, the Birlings have neglected their child and as a result have raised an alcoholic son.
- Perhaps Eric uses alcohol as a form of **escapism** for his **oppressing environment** and by extension showing how problems such as alcoholism that plague society may stem from the **evils of capitalism** in the same way as Eric's problem of alcoholism stems from Mr Birling.
- This **shatters** the **"pink and intimate"** mood at the beginning of the play that the Birlings are a joyful and functional family- the idea of **"pink"** also being a **subtle criticism** that they have a **deluded rose-tinted view** on the world. This sentiment is further reiterated later on in the play when we are told of Eric's **illicit sexual relations** with Eva.
- These moral failures from Eric may show how despite the Birlings' attempts at being **sophisticated and polished members of affluent society**, the problems that plague society are on their doorstep, with a son who is an alcoholic and has had sexual relations with a woman **"lower than him"** societally.
- We see the effect of this **overbearing** nature further on in Act 1 too with Eric telling his father **"yes, you've piled it on a bit tonight, father"** when referring to Mr Birling's advice. The **irony** here is that the advice is rarely, if ever, right and that Eric, the recipient of this advice for years has turned out far from perfect.
- This may be Priestley highlighting to the audience how the ideology of Mr Birling, and by extension capitalism, are **virulent and pervasive to society** (harmful) and have **detrimental effects** on everyone.
- However Priestley combats by showing the contrasts between Mr Birling and Eric.
- The audience see Eric become a **foil** to his ignorant capitalist father. Mr Birling's **obliviousness to the plight of others** is clear when he says **"they could go and work somewhere else"** if they didn't like his meagre **"usual rates"**.
- This not only highlights the **injustice** of **"the usual"** that workers are paid, it shows how Mr Birling lives in a world of **self imposed myopia**, willfully blind to the struggles of the common person.
- This is the antithesis to Eric who shows socialist ideologies when he says **"Why shouldn't they try for higher wages? We try for the highest possible prices."**
- The **rhetorical question** highlights how Eric is developing his **"half assertive"** side as he is directly questioning his father and not seeking to hear his ignorant point of view as a response. The alliteration on **"possible prices"** compounding how Eric has realised the **exploitation** that individuals like his father perpetuate in order to acquire more wealth