

HOW FAR IS ERIC PRESENTED AS A CHARACTER WHO CHANGES?

An Inspector Calls is a play of extremes, contrasting the rich with the poor, the young with the old and the aristocracy with the so called "lower class". Within these parameters few characters change as much as Eric, becoming a more outspoken and defiant member of society- showing hope for change in a play plagued with stagnancy and regression.

One way Eric is presented as changing is by his transition from socially awkward to socially defiant, Priestley uses his growth to counterbalance the capitalistic vitriol spewed by the older Birlings and highlighting the issues with the archaic ideas that plague society. We first see in Act 1 that Eric is shown to be "not quite at ease", which may be Priestley showcasing how he views the younger generation; not quite as self-indulgent as their older counterparts but far from perfect Socialists, leaving them in a difficult position, unable to assimilate into the house. This sentiment is reinforced with the stage direction of "half shy- half assertive" Priestley uses the adjectives of shy and assertive to highlight the internal conflict within Eric, unable to reconcile his innate sense of morality with the atrocities of his father. The juxtaposition of "shy" and "assertive" showing the polarity of Eric's personality and the overall imbalance of it. This is contrasted later on in the play however, with Eric going from socially awkward to more compelling and defiant, as shown by his "shouting" at Mrs Birling in Act 3 as opposed to speaking "not too rudely" in Act 1. This willingness to change is brought about largely by the Inspector who serves as a Socialist mouthpiece and didactic character throughout the play. By presenting the Inspector as being a driving force in Eric's change, Priestley may be exploring ideas of how Socialism has the power and the ability to change an intrinsically unjust society. Writing in the 1940's Priestley may have recognised the need to look after those on the lower rungs of society and therefore may have used An Inspector Calls to educate people as such. With the welfare state being introduced in 1945, this need for community spirit was shown to be sympathised with by the government. Priestley also juxtaposes Eric's willingness to change with Mr Birling's obstinacy, highlighting how the older generation are not as supple and understanding in their ideals as the youth. Therefore, through his transition from timidity to defiance, Eric serves as a foil to his bigot father, highlighting his flaws. Therefore, Priestley presents Eric as a character who changes by developing a social conscience: he transcends from oppressed to defiant.

However, a notable feature relating to Eric in the play is his absence in Act 2, contrasted with the heavy presence of Mrs Birling and Gerald. This could be Priestley sending a message of guilt; by excluding Eric from an Act where others are interrogated and condemned so harshly, Priestley may be conveying to the viewers that he views Eric as less culpable than those around him. In Act 2 Priestley presents Sheila as saying "[rather wildly, with a laugh] No, he's giving us the rope- so that we'll hang ourselves." The metaphor of a rope here alludes to how the virulent (harmful) actions of the Birlings were akin to executing Eva Smith, giving her no other options and forcing her into a corner where suicide was the only escape. The use of irony here presents a twisted form of justice and karmic retribution, showing how the Machiavellian actions of the capitalists would come back to bite them. The individuals who forced Eva into suicide were being "given rope" which may be Priestley presenting hope for the future and reassuring the audience that justice will always be served. Eric's absence from this Act may therefore show how he is not as largely affected by this karmic retribution. Eric's absence from this Act is juxtaposed with Sheila's ubiquitousness, perhaps showing how he views Sheila as the more guilty party.

Another way Priestley presents Eric as a character that changes is via his attitude to responsibility, showing how he is embracing his role in the death of Eva Smith and vowing to do better, unlike his parents who are more concerned with reputation. We hear of Eric's actions in the past being supremely parsimonious, treating those around him with wanton disbanding, as exemplified by his stealing money from the office or using Eva for sexual gratification. These actions show a clear disregard for the people around him and their emotions. This is contrasted with the Eric we see in the play, who says in Act 3 "Well, I don't blame you. But don't forget I'm ashamed of you as well - yes both of you" This shows a more understanding Eric, one that is able to reconcile with his past mistakes. This is juxtaposed with Mrs Birling who had done "nothing she's ashamed of" .This willingness to embrace wrongs highlights a stark change in Eric's demeanour, moving from thievery to acceptance of wrongs. Eric's acceptance here is also juxtaposed with Mrs Birling's pathetic attempts to blame anyone but herself for the events that occurred. Priestley does however qualify this change, as seen by Eric's impassioned speech saying "you killed her". Eric's repetition of the pronoun "you", directly addressing his ignorant mother, does highlight that on some level Eric is trying to shirk the responsibility despite his solicitude for the victim. Both Eric and Mrs Birling are juxtaposed with Eva, who went to Mrs Birling to protect Eric. This altruistic act serves as a benchmark for both Birlings, although Eric seems to be closer to meeting it. The hagiographic deification of Eva serves to show the levels of compassion possible within people and highlights the shortcomings of all the Birlings. However with Eric's tilt towards this world-view Priestley does present hope for the future, by showing Eric taking greater responsibility. Eric's change here mimics the political changes in the United Kingdom in 1945, with the Labour Government winning a landslide victory and Clement Atlee becoming Prime Minister. Eric's change therefore comes in a cyclical structure, with his change in demeanour juxtaposed with his parent's obstinacy and refusal to change, This juxtaposition shows that redemption is available to those who are willing to embrace it.

Eric's change as a character is by no means complete, however by showing his gradual steps. Priestley emphasises that no one is beyond retribution and that change is crucial for advancements as a society. Eric's change is used by Priestley to present a message of hope and revolution, to show that no matter how dark your past, your future is spotless. Eric's change highlights the hope for the younger generation and for the future.