

## 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.



## 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