

# ASM Tuition Academy

## CHARACTER DESCRIPTION OF ERIC:

### Character Overview

Eric Birling is the son of Arthur and Sybil Birling and the younger brother of Sheila Birling. He is depicted as a young man in his early twenties, described as "not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive." This duality in his character is evident from the beginning and hints at his underlying internal conflicts. Unlike his sister Sheila, who starts to change and recognize the family's flaws early in the play, Eric's transformation is more gradual and painful, revealing his struggle with guilt and responsibility.

### Relationship with Other Characters

#### Arthur Birling (Father):

Eric's relationship with his father is strained and distant. Arthur Birling, a staunch capitalist, represents the older generation's rigid views on social responsibility. Eric, on the other hand, is depicted as more impressionable and morally conflicted. The tension between Eric and his father becomes more apparent as the play progresses, particularly when Eric's heavy drinking and theft of money are revealed. Arthur's reaction to Eric's behaviour is more concerned with the potential scandal than the moral implications, which highlights the lack of genuine paternal care.

- **Quote:** "You're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble."

This quote encapsulates the dysfunctional relationship between Eric and Arthur, emphasizing the lack of emotional support and understanding within the family.

#### Sybil Birling (Mother):

Eric's relationship with his mother, Sybil, is similarly strained. Sybil Birling is depicted as a cold and detached figure, representing the arrogance and hypocrisy of the upper class. Her refusal to acknowledge Eric's problems or the family's responsibility in Eva Smith's death shows her moral blindness. This lack of maternal empathy contributes to Eric's feelings of isolation and his subsequent reckless behaviour.

- **Quote:** "You killed her... and the child she'd have had too... my child... your own grandchild... you killed them both - damn you, damn you."

Eric's outburst against his mother is a powerful moment in the play, revealing the depth of his emotional turmoil and highlighting Sybil's failure as a mother.

#### Sheila Birling (Sister):

Eric's relationship with Sheila is more complex. While they both belong to the younger generation, Sheila's awakening to social responsibility occurs earlier in the play, and she becomes more vocal in challenging the family's complacency. Eric's development is slower, but Sheila's influence is evident in his eventual acceptance of responsibility. Despite their

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differences, there is a sense of mutual understanding between them by the end of the play, as they both reject their parents' attempts to dismiss the Inspector's message.

- **Quote:** "We all helped to kill her."

Eric Birling's relationship with Eva Smith is central to both his character development and the overall narrative of *An Inspector Calls*. This relationship reveals key aspects of Eric's personality, the themes of social responsibility and class division, and the moral decay that Priestley critiques in the play.

## Overview of Eric and Eva's Relationship

Eric's relationship with Eva Smith (also known as Daisy Renton) is deeply flawed and represents a significant moral failing on his part. Their interaction is emblematic of the exploitation of the working class by the upper classes, a key theme in the play. Unlike the other characters, who interact with Eva through their business decisions or social actions, Eric's involvement with her is more personal and intimate, yet it is also the most damaging.

### Initial Encounter

Eric first meets Eva Smith at the Palace Bar, a place that suggests a casual and possibly predatory environment where upper-class men exploit vulnerable women. He admits to being drunk when he meets her, and this drunkenness plays a crucial role in the way their relationship unfolds.

- **Quote:** "I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty – and I threatened to make a row."

Eric's admission reveals his aggressive and irresponsible behaviour. The fact that he threatened Eva highlights the power imbalance in their relationship. Eric uses his social and physical power to coerce Eva into a relationship she likely did not want, reflecting the theme of exploitation.

### The Affair

Eric's relationship with Eva is characterized by irresponsibility and a lack of genuine care. He admits that he forced his way into her apartment and slept with her, which led to Eva becoming pregnant. This act of coercion further underscores the exploitative nature of their relationship and Eric's moral failings.

- **Quote:** "I wasn't in love with her or anything – but I liked her – she was pretty and a good sport."

This quote reflects Eric's shallow and selfish view of the relationship. He acknowledges that he was not in love with her, indicating that his interest in Eva was purely physical and driven by his own desires rather than any real affection or concern for her well-being.

### The Pregnancy and Consequences

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When Eva becomes pregnant, Eric's lack of responsibility becomes even more apparent. Although he attempts to help by giving her money, he steals this money from his father's company, showing his desperation but also his inability to handle the situation maturely or ethically. Eva, realizing the money was stolen, refuses to accept any further help from Eric, highlighting her integrity in contrast to his recklessness.

- **Quote:** “She told me she didn't want me to go in but... I threatened to make a row.”

This admission shows how Eric uses threats to manipulate Eva, reinforcing the idea that their relationship is based on power and coercion rather than mutual respect or affection.

## **Eric's Guilt and Responsibility**

Eric's involvement with Eva culminates in profound guilt when he realizes the full impact of his actions. Eva's subsequent refusal to accept stolen money and her ultimate suicide illustrates the tragic consequences of Eric's irresponsible behaviour. Eric is devastated by the realization that his actions contributed to Eva's death and the death of his own unborn child. This guilt becomes a turning point for Eric, leading to his acknowledgement of personal and collective responsibility.

- **Quote:** “The fact remains that I did what I did. And mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her.”

Eric's acknowledgement of responsibility is a crucial moment in the play. Unlike his parents, who seek to dismiss the Inspector's message, Eric (along with Sheila) recognizes the importance of learning from their actions and the need for moral accountability.

## **Themes Highlighted through Eric and Eva's Relationship**

1. **Exploitation and Power Dynamics:** Eric's relationship with Eva underscores the theme of exploitation, where a young, privileged man uses his power and status to take advantage of a vulnerable working-class woman. This reflects the broader societal issues that Priestley is critiquing, particularly the way the upper class exploits the lower class.
2. **Social Responsibility:** Eric's eventual recognition of his role in Eva's demise is central to the theme of social responsibility. Priestley uses Eric's character to illustrate that the younger generation has the capacity to learn from their mistakes and embrace a sense of duty towards others, contrasting with the older generation's stubbornness.
3. **Guilt and Redemption:** The intense guilt Eric feels after learning about Eva's fate highlights the theme of redemption. Priestley suggests that while Eric's actions were reprehensible, his willingness to accept responsibility and change offers a glimmer of hope for societal progress.

## **Conclusion**

Eric Birling's relationship with Eva Smith is a crucial aspect of his character and serves as a vehicle for Priestley's exploration of social and moral issues. Through this relationship, Priestley critiques the exploitation inherent in class divisions, the need for personal responsibility, and the potential for redemption even in the face of grave moral failings. Eric's journey from recklessness to guilt and eventual recognition of his responsibilities

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offers a powerful commentary on the potential for change and the importance of social conscience.

## THEMES

Eric Birling's character in *An Inspector Calls* is intricately linked with several key themes that J.B. Priestley explores throughout the play. These themes include social responsibility, guilt and conscience, class and power, and the generational divide. Eric's journey from a reckless young man to someone who acknowledges his moral failures reflects the broader social and ethical critiques that Priestley is making.

### 1. Social Responsibility

The theme of social responsibility is central to *An Inspector Calls*, and Eric's character plays a significant role in illustrating this theme. Throughout the play, Priestley emphasizes that everyone, regardless of their social status, must act responsibly towards others, particularly those who are less fortunate.

- **Eric's Journey:** At the start of the play, Eric is depicted as someone who shirks responsibility, engaging in heavy drinking and casual relationships without considering the consequences. His actions toward Eva Smith, including coercion and his failure to support her properly after making her pregnant, demonstrate a lack of responsibility. However, as the play progresses, Eric becomes increasingly aware of the impact of his actions on Eva and ultimately accepts responsibility for his role in her tragic fate.
- **Key Quote:** "The fact remains that I did what I did. And mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her."

This quote underscores Eric's recognition of collective responsibility, a key message Priestley conveys. Unlike his parents, Eric acknowledges that their actions had real, devastating consequences, illustrating his development towards understanding social responsibility.

### 2. Guilt and Conscience

Eric's character is deeply tied to the themes of guilt and conscience, which are explored throughout the play as the characters are forced to confront their roles in Eva Smith's death.

- **Eric's Guilt:** Eric's realization of the part he played in Eva's demise leads to a profound sense of guilt. His guilt is not just personal but also symbolic of the moral failings of the upper class as a whole. Eric's guilt contrasts sharply with the denial and defensiveness of his parents, highlighting the difference in moral consciousness between the generations.
- **Key Quote:** "You're beginning to pretend now