

An inspector's call: a look at the theme of surprising sympathy as shown by eric ...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout the opening scenes of Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, Eric is portrayed as little more than a drunken child ('only a boy', as his Mother would have put it). If the work is considered to be a morality play, then Eric is perhaps guilty of the sins of lust, gluttony and sloth. Later in the play, however, despite the revelations of his poor treatment of Eva Smith, the audience does gain some sympathy for him as we realise he is a sensitive and rather 'lost' character, who perhaps longs for a more supportive and fulfilling relationship with his family.

Even at the opening of the play, Eric appears to be an outsider. The opening stage directions describe him as being 'not quite at ease' and Priestley emphasises that he is 'half-shy, half-assertive' and therefore at odds with the other characters, i. e. the 'easy well-bred Gerald' and the 'heavy-looking, rather portentous' Arthur Birling. Eric says very little in Act One - speaking only to congratulate and tease his sister on her engagement ('she's got a nasty temper sometimes - but she's not bad really'.) and to laugh at their solemnity ('Eric suddenly guffaws'). Indeed, throughout Act One there are a number of hints that Eric has had rather too much to drink ('You're squiffy') and it is implied that this is a coping strategy he employs to avoid confrontation or criticism ('Could I have a drink first?'). At this point, he seems rather a weak and self-indulgent character with whom the audience would not sympathise.

It is, however, clear that Eric commands very little respect in the family and, when he tries to challenge his father's rather old-fashioned and short-sighted views about the likelihood of war, he is met with short shrift.

The fact that Priestley employs dramatic irony here (an audience in 1945 would have been all too aware that war did, in fact, break out in 1914) may improve the audience's opinion of Eric. He has, at least, more insight than his seemingly stubborn and ignorant father.

To both of his parents, Eric is little more than a 'boy' who has 'a lot to learn', rather than a young man who can face up to consequences. His opinions are not sought in the Birling household and he is frequently treated like a child. When he challenges his father about the unfairness of his actions in punishing the workers from his factory who went out on strike, Birling tells his son that his views are 'rubbish' and advises him to 'keep out of this'. In this way, then, the audience does have some sympathy for him, as it is clear he is desperately unhappy in his job and in his role in the Birling family.

On the other hand, Eric is later revealed to be involved with both the suicide of Eva Smith and, in addition, stealing money from his father's firm. He openly admits to treating Eva 'like an animal, a thing, not a person', which revokes most feelings of sympathy towards Eric- the audience sympathised with him up until this point as he wasn't valued by his family, however he has revealed he had no respect or value for this young woman either. He was no better than the other members of his family; he was simply abusing his status to take power over a young woman. Eric tries to justify his use of Eva as well as the stolen money by saying he would provide Eva with the care she needed. All in all, he played a significant part in Eva Smith's death - he met her at the Palace Bar, forced his way into her home and got her pregnant because he 'was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty.' He

then stole money from his father's business in order to support her. If this became public, the family's reputation would have been ruined.

Regardless, Eric regains sympathy in the final act of the play. He does genuinely seem apologetic and, to an extent, traumatised by the consequences of his actions. He understands his role and outcome in the 'chain of events' leading to Eva's suicide ('The fact remains that I did what I did'), and he and Sheila - the 'impressionable youth' - are the only ones who show remorse, but continue to express it when the Inspector was shown to be a hoax. These solemn acts of sorrow and acceptance of guilt make the audience have an increased level of sympathy towards Eric. It isn't Eric's actions that make him a sympathetic character, but the emotions he displayed. He is, throughout the play, a deeply emotional character, and this helps guide the audience to not only ultimately sympathise with him, but have a very small feeling of respect towards him.