

Sheila Birling

Sheila is described as 'rather excited' and 'pleased with life.' This suggests that she is childish and not really aware of how the world works. This changes throughout the play, as Sheila's character develops into one of the wisest and most selfless characters. Though at the beginning she is very much the stereotypical, materialistic young female character of the time, over the course of the play she undergoes a major character development. One of the first things that Sheila is described as is 'pretty.' This is typical of the time, as the vast majority of young women were considered nothing more than good for their looks, especially those of middle-class. Once again, this changes in the eyes of the audience as the play progresses, but most of the other characters remain blinded by the fact that she is a woman and pretty, and therefore shouldn't have opinions on subjects such as the suicide of a girl and capitalism. The fact that she is described as 'pretty' also emphasises her delicateness, which plays a huge part through the play. For example, she is not allowed to listen to the details of the suicide because she is a girl and still considered a child, even though she is twenty.

Sheila's relationships with other characters change dramatically throughout the play. At the beginning of the play, she has a very close relationship with both her mother and her father, acting like a very small child whilst they both treated her as such. However, as the play progresses, their relationships deteriorate. Mr Birling begins the investigation being very protective of Sheila, and ends it being very much of the opinion that Sheila is young and therefore has no valid opinions. This angers Sheila, as she feels that he is being incredibly selfish and uncooperative towards the inspector, who she sides with. Sybil carries on treating Sheila like a naïve child all the way through the investigations, but Sheila starts to resent her mother because of this. Sheila's relationship with Eric changes, too. At the beginning of the play there is a lot of sibling rivalry evident, but during the investigation, Eric is the only person that wholly supports and stands by Sheila. This strengthens their relationship, as it is suddenly the children against the adults rather than all of the adults against Eric. Sheila's relationship with Gerald changes dramatically. At the beginning of the play, Sheila and Gerald were set to be married and were in love, with Sheila following Gerald blindly in everything he would do. However, as Sheila gets more confident in her independence and opinions, she realises that Gerald is everything that she dislikes in her father: greedy, self-orientated and with no respect for women. This makes her give him the engagement ring back and ask for some time to think, which shows that Sheila is now tired of being pushed around and used.

Themes explored through Sheila

- Responsibility- 'I know I'm to blame – and I'm desperately sorry'
- Truth- 'Why – you fool – he knows. Of course he knows.'
- Women- 'What was she like? Quite young?' 'Pretty?'
- Social class- 'But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people.'