

Explore the ways in which J.B Priestley presents the change and development of the character of Sheila during Act One of *An Inspector Calls*

Priestley uses Sheila as a device in his play to convey a message about society, class, relationships and the changes of roles of women at the time. The play was set in 1912 but was actually written in 1945. Priestley intentionally set the play in 1912 because the date represented an era when all had been very different to the time he was writing. During this era there had been rigid class and gender divisions which seemed to ensure that nothing would change. However by 1945 most of those class and gender boundaries had been breached. In Act 1 Priestley uses dramatic irony for instance the audience knows Mr Birling's optimistic views on war are wrong. This puts the audience at an advantage over the character's and makes us involved. Through this play, Priestley encourages people to grab hold of the opportunity the end of the war had given them to build a better, more caring society.

Sheila is presented as a typical wealthy woman of the 1912 era. At first she is shown to be playful and self-centred, enjoying the attention her engagement brings. The audience discover her jealous nature as the stage directions indicate her to be "half serious, half playful". These contrasting personality traits shows she is not confident enough to question Gerald when conversing with him about what happened last summer. The first part of the stage directions "half serious" could signify her lack of confidence while the second part "half playful" could suggest that she is childish and immature. Yet she is not afraid of expressing her opinions which explicitly highlights her confidence and self-esteem.

We start to see a change in her character when she shows her compassion immediately after she hears of her father's treatment of Eva Smith: "but these girls aren't cheap labour - they're people." Here we start to see her character changing. We as the audience start to perceive her sensitive side which is contrary to how she was presented in the beginning of the play to be confident and self-centred. Sheila's changing attitude in Act one could mirror the changing attitude in society. Priestley is trying conveying his message through Sheila's readily changing attitude. By setting his characters in a time of innocence and hope, he can convey his message even more strongly to his audience who have lived through a time of despair. Priestley uses Sheila to represent social conscience, she has developed this through the millward's incident.

When the inspector shows Sheila the photograph of Eva Smith, she realises she sacked the woman from her job as shop assistant. By using her power and status of a spoilt wealthy girl, she blackmails the shop into sacking Eva Smith merely out of jealousy. We see this when the inspector mentions Sheila had "been jealous of her". This is an example of social injustice. We start to notice that Sheila feels genuinely remorseful due to the fact that she is potentially involved in Eva's death. Sheila faces up to her guilt unlike Birling, when she says "so I'm really responsible?". This is further emphasised through the stage directions "(miserably)". This shows Sheila is accepting responsibility for her actions. Subsequently she gives the audience hope that their society can improve if people make adjustments and take responsibility. Furthermore, Priestley portrays Sheila's character to be optimistic in changing her behaviour for the future. This is evident when she says "I'll never, never do it again"; the repetition in the word "never" emphasises her personal conviction.