**Explore how Sheila Birling is presented across the play.**

  As a prominent member of the The Common Wealth Party and later a member of the Labour party, Priestley did not look favourably on the privileged upper classes – something that is extremely clear in his presentation of the Birling and Croft families in ‘An Inspector Calls’ However, his presentation of Sheila Birling goes beyond the stereotype of a spoilt little rich girl as she actually becomes the play’s unlikely heroine.

  In the play’s exposition our first glimpse of Sheila is of a spoilt little rich girl who is immensely privileged. She has recently been engaged to Gerald Croft – heir to the Croft family fortune.  Upon receiving the engagement ring from Gerald she comments on its “beauty” and then utters the phrase “Now I really feel engaged” which allows Priestley to suggest that she is a materialistic character who needs ostentatious symbols of wealth in order to validate her existence. Here, Priestley is criticising the way that wealth was passed around rich families in Edwardian England, through carefully designed marriages which would create allegiances between families. He makes the rich seem calculated. They were willing to share their wealth and privilege with each other but with no one else. The way she is keen to take part in these exchanges make her appear to be a vain and vacuous.

  However, our initial impression of Sheila is soon changed due to the immense transformation that she goes through during  the Inspector's visit. After she has learnt about Gerald’s part in Eva Smith’s death, Sheila returns her engagement ring to Gerald saying "Don't interfere please father" Handing back  a ring that was once so important to her is symbolic of Sheila regaining control of her life. It also suggests that the material possessions she once valued so much are now unimportant to her. The imperative nature of her words shows that she is no longer a little girl willing to be dominated and controlled by her father and fiancé and that, for her, morals are more important than material possessions and status. This shows what a profound impact the Inspector has had on Sheila and completely changes the way we see her as a character.

  As well as rejecting Gerald, Sheila also rejects some of her father’s ideas, which is a fundamental part of her development from a spoilt little girl into a strong minded woman. At the start of the play,  Sheila refers to her mother as father as “mummy” and “daddy” which implies she is childlike and feeble minded . However, when she learns of her father’s treatment of Eva she declares “But these girl’s aren’t cheap labour – they’re people”. This is an explicitly socialist point of view and not something you would not expect to come out of the mouth of a pampered member of the middle classes.   She is just as eager to stand up to her mother: “you mustn’t try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl”. This warning can be read in two ways: the first is as a warning to her mother (who is trying to fool the Inspector). However, the second is as a metaphor for the “wall” that upper class families tried to build between themselves and the lower classes. Indeed, Edwardian society was very divided. Upper middle class families like Sheila’s lived very separately from their lower class counterparts, far away from the inner city terraces occupied by the working class. Sheila’s statement, here, suggests that Sheila thinks society should change – which is something we know that Priestley wanted.

  Toward the end of the play, Sheila is almost unrecognisable. She argues with her family that they must listen to the Inspector’s warning and she repeats his message of “fire and blood and anguish”. By repeating his words like this Sheila makes sure the inspector’s presence is still felt by the Birling family long after the Inspector himself has left the stage. It is for this reason that some people see Sheila as a proxy for the Inspector in the final scene. She is one of the only members of the Birling family to see that the Inspector was “anything but a joke” and ends the play feeling incredibly solemn as a result of what she has learnt about the role she and her family played in the death of Eva Smith.

  Sheila’s solidarity with Eva Smith and the end of the play is the most impressive thing about her character – and it is a far cry from the spoilt little rich girl who was responsible for getting Eva sacked at the beginning of the play. She sides with this poor woman from the working classes over her own family. Perhaps Priestley had been influenced by the solidarity and sisterhood that was shown by members of the Suffragette movement in his presentation of Sheila. Someone who, like Priestley, thought that society should work as “one body”.

***30. This is a full mark response because it presents a critical, exploratory and well-structured argument. It takes a conceptualised approach to the full task supported by a range of judicious references. There is evidence of fine-grained and insightful of methods supported by judicious use of subject terminology. There is also convincing exploration of one contextual factors.***