**How far does Priestley present Gerald Croft as a sympathetic character?**

**Exemplar Essay**

**Author: Dr Anthony Radice**

[**https://thetraditionalteacher.wordpress.com/**](https://thetraditionalteacher.wordpress.com/)

**Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***An Inspector Calls* (1945) by J B Priestley (1894-1984)**

**How far does Priestley present Gerald Croft as a sympathetic character?**

**Essay Framework**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Introduction**: Gerald Croft stands apart from the Birling family: there is serious ambiguity about the attitude which Priestley intends for the audience to have towards him. |  | Priestley himself, philanderer, excuse, regulation, economic, individualistic,  sexual relationships |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph One:** Priestley presents Gerald as a charming, well-bred man, but his alliance with Birling reduces the audience’s sympathy for him. | Birling: ‘we’re in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity’  Gerald: ‘I believe you’re right’ | engagement ring, spontaneity, planned, valuable, involved, business, capitalist |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Two:** Gerald’s alliance with Birling becomes much clearer after the arrival of the Inspector, when the topic of the strike and Eva Smith’s dismissal is discussed. | Birling: ‘The girl had been causing trouble in the works. I was quite justified.’  Gerald: ‘Yes, I think you were. I know we'd have done the same thing. Don't look like that Sheila.’ | first person plural, class interests, generational divide, sympathy, uncomfortable, practical business reality |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Three:** Gerald’s affair with Eva Smith is likely to provoke mixed reactions in the audience. | Sheila: ‘You were the wonderful fairy prince’  Gerald: ‘I made her go to Morgan Terrace because I was sorry for her [. . .] I didn't ask for anything in return’  Sheila: ‘I believe what you told us about the way you helped her at first. Just out of pity’ | anger, betrayal, sympathy, rescue, honesty, moral voice of the play |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Paragraph Four:** The audience’s attitude towards Gerald will depend largely on whether they agree with Mrs Birling that the affair was ‘disgusting’. | Mrs Birling: ‘I don't think we want any further details of this disgusting affair-’  Gerald: ‘You know, it wasn't disgusting.’  Mrs Birling: ‘It's disgusting to me.’  Gerald: ‘She told me she'd been happier than she'd ever been before – but that she knew it couldn't last – hadn't expected it to last. She didn't blame me at all.’ | extramarital, attacks traditional morality, defence of property, defence of marriage, cold, unsympathetic |
| **Notes:** | | |
| **Starting Sentence** | **Quotations** | **Vocabulary** |
| **Conclusion:** In conclusion, the audience’s attitude towards Gerald is likely to be mixed, just as the attitudes of the Inspector and Sheila towards him are mixed. | Inspector Goole: ‘he at least had some affection for her and made her happy for a time.’ | absent, positive comment, capitalist,  ally of Birling, villain, socialist play |
| **Notes:** | | |

**How far does Priestley present Gerald Croft as a sympathetic character?**

Priestley’s 1945 play *An Inspector Calls* is a socialist fable that presents most of its characters in very unambiguous terms. It is clear that the audience are supposed to love to hate Mr and Mrs Birling, support the Inspector and find encouragement in the conversion of Eric and Sheila to the Inspector’s socialist ideas. But Gerald Croft stands apart, as the only example of a character where there is serious ambiguity about the attitude which Priestley intends for the audience to have towards him. This may be because Priestley himself indulged in the sort of philandering behaviour of which Gerald is guilty, and is therefore more apt to excuse his misdemeanours. Ironically, while socialists campaign for strict regulation and centralised management of economic affairs, they frequently support an individualistic, free-market attitude towards sexual relationships.

In the play’s opening scenes, Priestley presents Gerald as a charming and ‘well-bred’ young man who comes from a well-established upper-class family, the social superiors to the Birlings, and therefore a very good catch for their daughter Sheila. He shows his charm when he times the giving of the engagement ring very cleverly, making it appear spontaneous, but it is evidently well-planned, and the ring itself is a very valuable one which Sheila is delighted to receive. At the same time, he is already being positioned by Priestley as an ally of Birling’s. When Birling asserts that ‘we’re in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity’, Gerald replies with ‘I believe you’re right’. This alliance with Birling stems from the fact that Gerald is already involved in the running of the family business, Crofts Limited, which is ‘both older and bigger than Birling and Company’, and therefore sees political and economic matters from a thoroughly capitalist point of view. Given that Priestley has already presented Birling as a foolish, pompous and misguided man, linking Gerald with him is likely to influence the audience against him.

Gerald’s alliance with Birling becomes much clearer after the arrival of the Inspector, when the topic of the strike and Eva Smith’s dismissal is discussed. Gerald fully supports Birling’s decision to fire Eva for her leading role in the strike, firmly stating that ‘we’d have done the same thing’. The use of the first person plural, ‘we’, is significant here. It places Gerald firmly within the capitalist class, as someone who is looking to see that what Birling calls the ‘interests of capital’ are ‘protected’. At this point in the play, there is a clear divide between the generations in the Birling family, with the older generation firmly standing up for their class interests and against anything that will damage them, and showing no sympathy for the plight of the working class girl who has just suffered a terrible death, while the children, Eric and Sheila, show great sympathy for Eva, with Sheila asserting that her father’s actions were ‘mean’, while Eric says that he would have ‘kept her on’, which provokes an angry rebuttal from his father. This places Gerald in an awkward position, which Priestley dramatises by a look which Sheila gives him when he is defending her father’s actions. After Birling has insisted that he was ‘quite justified’ in firing Eva, Gerald replies, ‘Yes, I think you were’, but then he is clearly uncomfortable, as he says, ‘Don't look like that Sheila.’ He is evidently aware that Sheila’s reaction is rather different from his own, as she focuses on sympathy, while he thinks about practical business reality, in which strikes could ruin a business and must be prevented. At this point, Priestley intends the audience’s sympathy to be with Eva, and therefore to align with Sheila’s attitude rather than that of Gerald, so he is likely to go down in their estimation.

When Gerald’s affair with Eva Smith initially comes to light at the end of Act One, at first, the audience’s sympathy is likely to be with Sheila, who naturally feels anger at being betrayed, and is even more angry when Gerald tries to hide the facts from the Inspector, calling him a ‘fool’ for trying to do so. But as this part of the plot develops in Act Two, Gerald regains some audience sympathy, as well as some respect from Sheila. Sheila commends his honesty in admitting that he enjoyed his position as the ‘fairy prince’ in Eva’s life. Gerald also gains audience sympathy from the fact that he is the first character which Priestley depicts as having pity for Eva. He rescues her from a dreadful situation in which she is virtually being assaulted by a drunken old man, and at first, he only wants to help her: ‘I made her go to Morgan Terrace because I was sorry for her [. . .] I didn't ask for anything in return’. Sheila later says, ‘I believe what you told us about the way you helped her at first. Just out of pity’, and as Sheila has been established by Priestley as the moral voice in the play, the audience is likely to align their view with hers, thus making Gerald more sympathetic in their eyes.

Nevertheless, Gerald does eventually make Eva his mistress, and it is of course a very unequal relationship, which he brings to an end when it suits him. There is no suggestion that he would marry her, presumably because this would be unthinkable in 1912 for someone of his high social status. How severely they judge him for his extramarital affair will depend very much upon the audience’s attitudes towards sexual morality. Priestley puts into the mouth of the haughty Mrs Birling the word ‘disgusting’ to describe what Gerald did, but given that Mrs Birling has been presented so negatively, the audience is more likely to side with Gerald, and agree that ‘it wasn’t disgusting’. This is one of many examples in the play where Priestley attacks traditional moral views by having them expressed by a character who has been depicted as cold and unsympathetic. Just as the audience is not supposed to agree with Birling’s defence of private property (‘the interests of capital’), one suspects here that they are not supposed to agree with Mrs Birling’s defence of traditional sexual morality. The audience’s dismissal of Mrs Birling’s views is likely to be completed by her readiness to drop them later in the play once the initial shock of the revelation has passed, and she is grateful to Gerald for arguing so ‘cleverly’ in order to remove the risk of any public scandal.

In conclusion, the audience’s attitude towards Gerald is likely to be mixed, just as the attitudes of the Inspector and Sheila towards him are mixed. His relationship with Eva is presented more sympathetically than that of any of the Birlings. When the Inspector is summing up the misdeeds of the Birlings just prior to his exit, Gerald is absent, and so is spared the full force of his wrath. In fact the Inspector actually makes a positive comment about Gerald’s role, something which he never does for any of the Birlings: ‘he at least had some affection for her and made her happy for a time.’ On the other hand, there is no doubt that Gerald is aligned with Birling, and is a convinced capitalist, and given that Birling is presented as the main villain of this socialist play, this is likely to sway the audience against him.