**How does Priestley use the character of Sheila to convince the audience of the need for social change?**

**Exemplar Essay**

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

**How does Priestley use the character of Sheila to convince the audience of the need for social change?**

**Essay Framework**

**Introduction**: Although Inspector Goole is Priestley’s mouthpiece, expressing most directly his socialist views, Sheila is also vital to his effort to convince the audience of the need for social change. (‘millions and millions and millions of John Smiths and Eva Smiths’)

**My Notes:**

**Paragraph One:** Priestley creates a clear contrast between Sheila and her father through their reactions to Eva Smith’s suicide. (‘agony’ / ‘unpleasant business’ / ‘I can't help thinking about this girl – destroying herself so horribly – and I’ve been so happy tonight.’

**My Notes:**

**Paragraph Two:** Priestley continues to build this strong contrast by placing Sheila’s interrogation immediately after her father’s. (‘I can’t accept any responsibility’ ‘I was quite justified’ / ‘*gives a half-stifled sob, and then runs out*’ / ‘jealous’ / ‘furious temper’ / ‘I’ll never, never do it again to anybody’

**My Notes:**

**Paragraph Three:** Sheila is central to the contrast which Priestley creates between different generations. (‘you seem to have made a great impression on this child’ / ‘I’m not a child’ / ‘You began to learn something. And now you've stopped. You're ready to go on in the same old way’ /

**My Notes:**

**Paragraph Four:** It is important that Priestley’s most firm and enthusiastic advocate for social change is a young woman in 1912. (Suffragettes / women’s suffrage 1928 / 1945 Labour victory)

**My Notes:**

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, Sheila is an essential part of Priestley’s case for social change.(‘But it's you – and not the Inspector here – who's doing it’)

**My Notes:**

**How does Priestley use the character of Sheila to convince the audience of the need for social change?**

Although Inspector Goole is Priestley’s mouthpiece, expressing most directly his socialist views, Sheila is also vital to his effort to convince the audience of the need for social change. Sheila’s emotional reactions redouble the force of the Inspector’s arguments. She is the character who most firmly and strongly adopts the Inspector’s point of view about Eva Smith, and her warm-hearted and sympathetic character is essential to convincing the audience that society needs to change. Because Eva Smith is representative of the working classes in general, of the ‘millions and millions and millions of John Smiths and Eva Smiths’, the ways in which Sheila reacts to her sufferings and her role in them is always strongly connected to larger points about social change.

At the start of the play, Priestley presents Sheila as sharing in the happiness and optimism of the Birling family, but she plays no part in the political or economic discussions. Her only contribution to them is to agree with her mother that it is ‘all wrong’ for her father to bring up business matters when he is making a speech about her engagement to Gerald. It is important that she is not implicated in Birling’s self-interested and complacent attitude, because Priestley wants her to be a sympathetic character, while he makes every effort to depict her father in a way which only inspires repulsion in the audience. The contrast can clearly be seen in their initial reactions to the news of Eva Smith’s death. The Inspector emphasises her intense physical suffering, using the word ‘agony’. Birling refers to the suicide coldly as a ‘business’, as if it were just another item for him to deal with as a ‘hard-headed practical businessman’ and tells Eric not to get ‘excited’ about it. In contrast, Sheila’s reaction is sympathetic and warm-hearted - ‘how horrible!’ - and she immediately begins to empathise ‘I can't help thinking about this girl – destroying herself so horribly’. She also begins to ponder on the contrast between Eva Smith’s lot and her own: ‘and I’ve been so happy tonight’. In setting Sheila apart from Birling’s self-interested attitudes, and in showing the audience clearly her different reactions to Eva’s death, Priestley is establishing her as the moral compass of the play. The audience warm to her, and are therefore ready to accept her views of social change as correct.

Priestley places Sheila’s interrogation early in the play, in Act One, so that he can continue to build the contrast between those who resist change and those who accept the need for it. Sheila is the second character to be interrogated by the Inspector, and her reaction to his questions is shown by Priestley to be a strong contrast to her father’s. While Birling insists that ‘I can’t accept any responsibility’, Sheila is so disturbed by the realisation that she contributed to Eva Smith’s sufferings, that at first she leaves the stage, visibly upset, as Priestley’s stage directions make clear: she ‘*gives a half-stifled sob, and then runs out*’. Before she even begins to respond with words, Priestley is showing the audience that Sheila’s reaction will be heartfelt and sympathetic. When she is actually undergoing questioning, she accepts all of the Inspector’s accusations, admitting that she only had Eva fired because she felt ‘jealous’ and she was in a ‘furious temper’. She is determined to repent - she not only admits that she has done wrong, but also makes a resolution that she will ‘never, never do it again to anybody’. This is in stark contrast to her father, who insists all the way through the play that his actions were ‘quite justified’, and therefore sees no need to act differently in the future. Priestley’s case for social change is based more upon emotion than reason, and Sheila is a key element of this. He wants the audience to conclude that it is only cold-hearted and selfish people like Birling who will refuse to adopt socialist views, while those who care about others, as Sheila evidently does, will be eagerly ready to accept them.

Sheila is central to the contrast which Priestley creates between different generations. Both Mr and Mrs Birling continue to justify their actions and refuse to accept responsibility, while Sheila and Eric feel deeply guilty and are determined to change. But of the two, it is Sheila who is the firmest and strongest advocate for responsibility and repentance. Mrs Birling notices this when she first meets the Inspector in Act Two, commenting that ‘you seem to have made a great impression on this child’. Mr and Mrs Birling repeatedly refer to Sheila as a ‘child’, which helps them to discount her views. But Sheila insists that ‘I’m not a child’, and becomes increasingly vocal as the play goes on. Her role becomes most prominent in Act Three, when it is discovered that Goole is not a real police inspector. The likeable but rather naive girl of Act One has transformed, and she has become a vocal advocate for change. In Act One, it was Birling who did the lecturing, but by Act Three, Sheila is lecturing her parents: ‘You began to learn something. And now you've stopped. You're ready to go on in the same old way’. Sheila vigorously insists that her parents, regardless of whether Goole is a police inspector, need to recognise that they have done wrong, and they need to change. When Birling angrily reminds her that Goole was not an inspector, she retorts: ‘he inspected us all right. And don't let's start dodging and pretending now’.

It is important that Priestley’s most firm and enthusiastic advocate for social change is a young woman. Although she belongs to the wealthy upper middle class, and benefits from the profits made by her father, Sheila’s status as a woman in 1912 means that she too can be seen as a victim of oppression; it also creates a link between her and Eva. Whether working class or upper class, no women had the vote in 1912, and they did not gain electoral equality with men until 1928. Many of Priestley’s 1946 London audience would have been women who had helped to usher in social revolution by voting Labour in 1945, and they may have seen in Sheila the seeds of the social change that was approaching. Sheila’s willingness to stand up and confront her parents and insist upon the need for change could be connected to the campaign which was going on in 1912 to demand votes for women, which included the violent actions of the Suffragettes. Many of the women watching the play in 1946 in London would have seen Sheila’s readiness to sympathise with another woman, Eva Smith, as an indication that when she did gain the vote later in her life, she would use it to usher in the new era of socialism.

In conclusion, Sheila is an essential part of Priestley’s case for social change. Having depicted her from the start of the play as a warm-hearted and sympathetic young woman, and having established a clear contrast between her and the proud and selfish Birling, Priestley can use her as an emotive and convincing advocate for his socialist views. As Mrs Birling recognises, it is Sheila who most effectively breaks down the ‘wall’ that separates the Birlings from the sufferings of the working classes: ‘But it's you – and not the Inspector here – who's doing it’. The 1946 London audience would easily have been able to imagine Sheila going on to become a convinced supporter of the post-war socialist revolution that was taking place under the Labour government of the time.