

How does Priestley present the change in Sheila during the course of the play?



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How does Priestley present the change in Sheila during the course of the play? How do you think this change reflects some of Priestley's ideas? In *An Inspector Calls* J. B. Priestley presents Sheila Birling's change during the play in order to reflect some of his own ideas. Sheila is one of the few characters in the play who changes the most in terms of views on social responsibility. Priestley purposefully chose to present Sheila in this way to show the audience that her change should influence them to change their views too.

Priestley was writing this play after a great time in change of the class system, after the Second World War. Priestley had witnessed the horrific events of both wars and realised the people in upper classes were still smug and pessimistic when it came to changing their views in the class system. In creating Sheila's character, Priestley was hoping the audience would take on board his powerful message. Priestley uses a range of interesting techniques in order to present Sheila's change. One of the most intriguing methods he uses is language techniques to convey certain messages.

At the beginning of the play, Sheila is presented as a stereotypical middle class young woman – immature and spoiled. Priestley brings this out through Sheila's character through her childish language such as "I'm sorry Daddy" and "go on Mummy". By addressing her parents in this manner, Priestley clearly wanted the audience to know she has an excited and strong-spirited attitude in life. This could suggest Priestley wanted to keep the play as realistic as possible in order to indicate to the audience that the events could have happened in real life as the Birlings are a typical example of a middle class family during the set period.

Furthermore, Priestley may have also chosen to do this to show the audience that upper class conventional behaviour views start from a young age.

Moreover, Sheila's stage directions are often described as being "half serious, half playful". This could suggest that as well as having childish traits, Sheila is also quite quick-witted and has wise instincts – she wonders why Gerald "hardly came" to her last summer, implying that she can tell that there is something not quite right and feels suspicious of Gerald's actions.

Priestley may have deliberately portrayed two very different traits within her to insinuate that Sheila has the decision to choose which trait she will develop when she's older, hence determining what kind of person she is. Throughout the rest of the play the audience are aware of Sheila's significant change, mostly because of her speech. Sheila adopts a mature and sophisticated personality when admitting her regret to getting Eva Smith sacked. She confesses it's "simply my fault" and "these girls.... hey're people". The quotes imply Sheila is willing to admit her responsibility and has changed for good. In doing this, Priestley wanted the audience that changing is for the best, as it has helped Sheila to become a better person in life therefore Priestley hoped that changing their views would help them become better people in life. Towards the end of the play, one can presume that Sheila has actually turned into the Inspector herself and becomes a moral judge.

Sheila even says "don't interfere" to her father and contradicts & undermines her parents. The audience can pick up on the fact that her language becomes similar to the Inspector's language such as "you began to learn something", which suggests Sheila has become wise enough to

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realise the Inspector is trying to break down this “ wall” her parents have put between their moral feelings and Eva Smith. Sheila spots and attempts to break it down herself, as she has realised that looking after one another in society is the best thing for everyone.

Similarly, Priestley uses the structure of the play in producing Sheila’s change to convince the audience that taking on social responsibility will change their lives for the best. The audience notices the distinct structure on who the Inspector chooses to interrogate at a time. We notice that Sheila is the second person to be interrogated, shortly after her father and just before Gerald. The fact that Sheila is interviewed between two people who don’t accept responsibility highlights who is able to accept responsibility and who doesn’t.

Furthermore, throughout the play Sheila is only woman in the play to accept responsibility which could perhaps suggest Priestley wanted to present young woman as strong minded. This is significant as many people thought women had a naturally lower status than men at the time and weren’t considered to be open minded. Also, Priestley could have directed Sheila’s change specifically towards the women in the audience to show them if Sheila is able to become open & strong minded by accepting responsibility, then they will too if they do the same as her.

Additionally, the forms play an important role in presenting Priestley’s opinions through Sheila’s change. An Inspector Calls is a modern form of a medieval morality play, in which Priestley uses the Inspector to investigate the character’s moral views and opinions. Morality plays were often used in

the Middle Ages to teach the audience a lesson. This applies to the play as we know Priestley hoped the audience would take on his ideas of socialism. Furthermore, morality plays often included themes based on the 7 Deadly Sins such as pride and lying.

However, Sheila seems to be free from all forms of these when she learns to accept responsibility. She even admits her own actions “drove that girl to commit suicide”. Priestley may have decided to present Sheila as having no association with the sins to indicate that because she changed for good, she will no longer be punished by God and won't suffer later in her life. Priestley was trying to clearly portray Sheila as learning her lesson so that the audience would feel like they had to do the same to become a good person like her.

In conclusion, Priestley has cleverly devised the language, structure and form in a coherent and clear way to help reinforce the idea that Sheila's change should help influence the audience to change as well. Priestley was determined to help the audience to become better people so that they will be generally more happy in their lives as long as they took on his idea of social responsibility. This is clearly shown by the fact that the younger generation are able to change, also implying that this was important as he knew it was people like Sheila who would help shape the future.