

Trace the  
development of sheila  
throughout the play



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Within this essay I intend to explore the possibility that Sheila transmogrifies from a very material, individualist being in a philosophical sense, to having a much more socialist perspective, including her thoughts on social responsibility, and her own family's role in this new attitude. In my opinion, Sheila's function within this play is to stimulate free thinking amongst the younger members of the audience, and encourage them to re-think their ideals, morals and belief, aiming mainly to turn the audience towards socialism. When we first meet Sheila in the first act, she comes across to the audience as immature, spoilt and very much materialistic - a typical upper-class adolescent female. She demonstrates her immaturity in the manner with which she addresses her parents, calling them: 'mummy,' and, 'daddy,' in the same fashion with which a toddler might address its mother and father.

This infantile attitude is due to her lack of life experience, and the fact remains that she has been mollycoddled throughout her childhood, slowing down her progression into adulthood. Sheila acts like a child, thus her parents treat her as they would a child. Despite being intelligent, as she shows when she half-serious, half-playfully told Gerald (her fiancé) how last summer he: 'never came near me, and I wondered what happened to you.' Her subtlety here is notable, she hints that she suspects he has been playing away from home, but is cunning and wily enough to disguise her conjectures.

At this particular point in the play, Sheila takes a very individualist stance, on top of being mercilessly materialistic. For example, when she receives her engagement ring, which is of course extravagantly bejewelled, and most likely terribly expensive, she announces to the room: 'Now I really feel

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engaged. ' This shows us that she isn't really in love, in the most enduring sense of the word, as she requires physical confirmation of love, rather than feeling the feelings that confirm real, true love. However, it is difficult to blame Sheila for her mental misdevelopment.

Throughout her life, she had been cosseted by her parents, spoiled, as it were. As young children we are extremely impressionable - our parents and siblings in particular are tremendously influential in our upbringing, as they are with us usually from our beginning to their end. Mr Birling is a staunch capitalist, who cares for little more than himself and his property (which, in his eyes, includes his family). The dinner was initially intended as a celebration of the joining in holy matrimony of Gerald and Sheila, but when Mr Birling stands up to say his piece, he brings into it business and profit, or as he puts it: ' lower costs and higher prices. For a man to bring this up at his own daughter's engagement party, individualism is inherent. When the inspector tells Mr Birling of his part in the death of an innocent woman, he refuses to accept any moral responsibility whatsoever, even going so far as to say: ' I can't accept any responsibility.

' This type of attitude typifies a man who cares about nothing save profit margins.. He is neither empathetic nor sympathetic, simply cold & uncaring. At this point in time, Sheila is the same.

However, when the inspector exposed Mr Birling's part in the death, Sheila had a very different reaction to that of her parents, revealing a whole different Sheila to the audience, and to her family. Instead of denying all responsibility as her father did, and treating the woman as just another

number, Sheila becomes caring and compassionate, telling the inspector: 'It's a rotten shame,' and: 'it was a mean thing to do.' However, the major turnaround in this scene comes when Sheila says: 'these girls aren't cheap labour - they're people. This statement directly opposes her father's beliefs, and up until this point, her own beliefs. A daughter who disobeys her father is one who is growing up to have a mind of her own - exactly what Sheila had been lacking up to that point. Sheila has only just begun to come out of her semi-brainwashed state.

She had been hidden away from all the harsh realities of life, and now has had a glimmer of what life is like for a normal, working class female citizen of England is like. She has yet to learn the full extent of the setbacks and difficulties an average girl her age has to endure. However, she wishes to find out about it, questioning the inspector about: 'what happened to her then?' This is another sign of Sheila's caring, as she wants to delve into the life of the girl, to really get to grips with who she was as a person. The inspector has a nasty surprise for her, however. He continues with his account of the girl's life, revealing how she was fired from an outfitters named Milwards, where Sheila reveals she frequently shops. The inspector tells us that she was fired because: 'a customer complained about her - and so she had to go.

He then showed Sheila - and only Sheila - a photograph of this girl, to which Sheila responds by giving: 'a half stifled sob,' and then running from the room. It is clear Sheila recognises the girl in the photograph and feels guilty about something concerning her. This is another area in which Sheila is separating herself from her parents beliefs and morals, and developing her

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own view on the world and its inhabitants. She feels guilt and remorse for her wrongdoings. As the inspector tells us: 'she's upsetting herself,' another sign of growing maturity. When Sheila re-enters the scene, she is clearly still emotional, stage directions denoting that she is: 'distressed,' and says things 'miserably.'

'However, most importantly, she assumes responsibility, admitting- 'it was my fault.' This is probably one of the most key advancements in Sheila's personality in the whole play, as it shows she has opened her mind enough to accept responsibility and feel regret for her actions - something her parents have already hardened themselves against. Perhaps most importantly of all, she learns from her actions, promising: 'I'll never, never do it again to anybody. This new-found maturity of course has implications on her relationship with Gerald. Instead of being the subservient 'typical woman' of the day in the relationship, she assumes the power role.

She does this initially by disobeying Gerald - he tells her to 'leave it at that,' to which she replies: 'We can't leave it at that,' - and then going as far as to call him a fool when he suggests his secret can be kept from the inspector. Sheila's evolution and expansion of mind continues into Scene two, where she persists in making her own decisions, rather than letting the menfolk make them for her. Gerald reacts poorly to this, accusing her of wanting to see him put through 'it,' - 'it' being the questioning (or perhaps even interrogation). Sheila resented this, telling him: 'so that's what you think I'm really like. I'm glad I realised in time.'

' This illustrates change in the way she feels about her husband-to-be, and a realisation that she doesn't have to fulfil the wishes of her mother, father or anyone else. She has become independent. However, this independence came at a price. To be freed from her parents reign, she had to be shown the hard side of life, and this has seriously affected her.

She felt a deep regret for what she had done, expressing that she ' can't stop thinking about it,' referring, of course, to her role in the death of Eva Smith. The change in Sheila is much marked, to an extent that even the inspector, who had at this point known her for at most a few hours, sees the change and validates it using his experience, saying of change: ' we often do the young ones. They're more impressionable. ' This quote is also important in understanding Sheila's role in the play, as given by the playwright. She is a young woman whose capitalist opinions have been completely turned around to become highly socialist. This is exactly what the playwright intended to happen to the young people in the audience after watching the performance.

The reason that this play is intended for younger audiences is simple, and best explained through the old proverb, ' the young shall inherit the earth. ' It is young people who will dictate the future, and young minds are nubile compared to more ' experienced,' world-weary ones, so it is the optimal time to influence the world, through altering the minds of the young. Another side of Sheila is revealed later on in Scene 2 - her sarcastic side. Sarcasm is often a sign of confidence, a trait Sheila could not be said to exude previously in the play.

It is, however, becoming increasingly apparent within her as the play progresses. An example of this sarcasm is given when Gerald is recounting his version of events with the woman known as Eva Smith. Mrs Birling suggests that Sheila would be much better off not hearing it – treating Sheila like a child – to which Sheila replies: ‘ You’re forgetting I’m supposed to be engaged to the hero of it,’ the word hero of course being used with inherent sarcasm. The next power-play from Sheila comes through Sheila’s choice of when to speak, rather than the words she uses.

Whilst Gerald – still a dominant male – is speaking, stage directions inform us Sheila is ‘ cutting in’ when she gives her next line. In terms of the dynamics of a group, when somebody cuts in they are displaying their power. In this sense, Sheila is making it known to her family she is no longer an undemanding push-over, she means business. Sheila actually voices this change to Gerald, telling him: ‘ you and I aren’t the same two people who sat down to dinner here. She also hands him back the engagement ring she received from him earlier, displaying her ability to make her own choices about her life.

Moving on to the third and final scene, the first test of Sheila’s newfound beliefs materialises. The inspector, the man who transformed her ideals in the first place, is exposed as a fake. Mr and Mrs Birling then automatically assume everything he had been saying was phoney as well, Mr Birling even accusing him of being: ‘ a socialist or some sort of crank. ‘ Despite this, Sheila sticks with her new teachings, telling her parents: ‘ it doesn’t make any real difference y’know.

This is solid proof that the metamorphosis Sheila underwent in her mind was genuine, and not just put up as a defence against the inspector. Her parents refuse to accept this, Mr Birling believing: ' This makes a difference, y'know. In fact, it makes all the difference. ' Sheila retorts with bitter sarcasm, flaunting the new-found edge to her personality. ' I suppose we're all nice people know,' when put in perspective, shows that Sheila knows that it's extraneous whether or not the inspector was real, it does not change the actions or sins the Birling family had committed. This is not only a challenge to her father, however, it is an invitation for the audience to examine their own consciences.

Have they taken advantage of people undeserving of such a fate? That is for the member of the audience to decide, but after already being exposed to all the bias throughout the play so far, for most of the younger members of the audience the answer would probably have been yes. This attempts to convince the audience further that capitalism is evil, and socialism is the way forward, the overriding message behind the whole script. Delving further into the script, the next time Sheila provokes thought from the audience is after Mrs Birling orders her to behave sensibly, at which point Eric defends her, and her socialist ideals. Two siblings uniting to challenge their parent's ideals in the period this production was set in (early 1910s) was almost unheard of, and certainly something likely to provoke deliberation amongst audience members.

The proposal that the youth are morally appeals to the youth in the audience, and encourages them to actively support a socialist establishment active in Britain. The argument continues in much the same fashion. Gerald  
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and Mr ; Mrs Birling try to convince Eric and Sheila (but secretly themselves) that the whole affair is irrelevant and all that matters is Mr Birling's finances and public image. Eric and Sheila passionately argue their case, but to no avail. Priestly warns, through Sheila, that it'll all end in ' Fire and blood and anguish. ' This is his warning to society - if Britain continues the way it's going, it could well end up in civil war, or worse.

. J. B. Priestly intended this production to appeal to the youth of Britain because, as the oft-quoted proverb cites ' the youth of today will rule the world of tomorrow. This means that if the majority of youth are in favour of socialist reform, it is highly likely that someone in favour of such reform would be voted into power - this play, at its most basic level, is nothing more than a piece of propaganda, intricately designed to subconsciously sway the most malleable, susceptible minds within the audience.

So far, Priestley's prediction of a capitalist-induced war has become increasingly likely to come true. Capitalism, socialism - it is irrelevant, as conflict has become so deeply engrained in the human psyche, it'll take more than revolution to rid the world of it.