

What is the  
importance of the  
characters sheila and  
eric?



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In the play “ An Inspector Calls” by J B Priestley, the characters of Sheila and Eric are used to represent the younger generation in Edwardian England, a time when traditional Victorian values were beginning to become obsolete. Priestley uses these characters to criticize and contrast with the older Birlings, and as a result they have a large impact on the course of the play and are both complex characters themselves.

Priestley represents Sheila as a typical upper class woman at first, yet allows her to develop into a self-sufficient and experienced woman through her experiences with the Inspector. We see in the opening stage directions that Priestley describes her character paralinguistically as “ young” and “ naïve” as well as “ excited”. What is more, Sheila is totally subservient to her father and Gerald, and even when she does dare to be critical she is only “ half-serious”. These descriptions of Sheila show her to comfortably fit in to the expected role of a daughter of a wealthy man in Edwardian; to be seen and not heard. By the end of the play however, Sheila’s stage directions are in stark contrast to the beginning; she speaks “ bitterly” and even “ interrupts” her male family members. She feels she is able to do this due to the moral superiority she has gained by accepting her responsibility for Eva Smith’s death, demonstrating Priestley’s own view of acceptance of guilt and learning from experience as empowerment.

Priestley then takes Sheila’s development one step further by having her take on the role of the Inspector and conduct her own ‘ moral’ inspection of the Birlings. She encourages Gerald to confess his affair and even warns Mrs Birling of the consequences of lying, using the metaphor “ building up a wall” which the Inspector “ will break down”. This idea is furthered by

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another metaphor concerning the Inspector: “giving them rope so they’ll hang themselves”, again uttered by Sheila. Sheila’s self-knowledge elevates her above the other Birlings and allows her to become morally superior. This transition is epitomized when Sheila rebukes Mrs Birling, saying that now “she’s the one being childish”. The use of the word “childish” is particularly significant and ironic as Mrs Birling had called Sheila a “child” repeatedly at the start of the play. This turning of the tables dramatically highlights Sheila’s growth and the importance of self-knowledge, a major theme throughout the play.

Eric is initially used by Priestley to probe beneath the surface of the Birling family façade and hint at the secrets which will be revealed later. Eric foreshadows Sheila’s tantrum at Milwards by warning Gerald of her “temper”. He suggests that there is something more to Sheila’s character than the “naïve” girl initially presented. Furthermore, Eric questions his father’s opinions and political statements. During Birling’s dinner speech, Eric prompts him with the question “what about war?” which leads Birling into his anti-socialist rant about “cranks”. This is ironic as the Inspector arrives immediately after the speech and Eric later points out that “one of those cranks turned up”. In addition, Eric’s question of war prompts Birling to make some predictions about the future in which he dismisses the possibility of war as “nonsense”. The dramatic irony would have been particularly effective for a 1946 audience (when the play was first staged), having just survived two World Wars, and would have highlighted Birling’s distinct lack of foresight and understanding, and demonstrating that Eric had unearthed some of the key flaws in the Birling family.

Priestley also uses Eric's character to bring Eva's tale of degradation to its climactic finale. By using proleptic irony, Priestley skews the chronology of Eva's story to allow Mrs Birling to condemn the father of Eva's child only for it to be later revealed that it was Eric all along. This use of proleptic irony creates great tension for the audience and amongst the characters of Eric and Mrs Birling, with Eric saying she " hasn't made it any easier for him". Additionally, through Eric's experiences with Eva, he has gained a slight moral education thanks to contact with the working class. This newfound moral fibre allows him to, like Sheila, accept his responsibility and learn from his experiences. He says that he is " not likely to forget", showing that the Inspector has succeeded in his attempts to encourage self-knowledge and communal awareness in Eric.

In conclusion, Priestley uses the characters of Eric and Sheila to highlight the importance of learning from experience, the key theme in " An Inspector Calls". He uses them in contrast with Mr and Mrs Birling which is clearly shown by Eric and Sheila's use of affirmatives like " Yes, " I am to blame" and " he's right, whereas the Birlings frequently use negatives such as " no", " I'm not" and " I don't. Both Eric and Sheila learn to challenge their parents' philosophies, as Eric tells his father " it's not a free country if you can't go anywhere else", and Sheila compels her mother to accept her guilt, accusing her of " not understanding". They are used by Priestley to preach his message of the importance of the younger generation and socialistic progress and highlight the irrelevance and injustice of class tradition.