An Inspector Calls: How Does Priestley Present The Character Of Sheila

The play concerns a rich family celebrating an engagement in 1912 who is interrupted by an inspector who links them to a girls death, themes emerge along with Priestley's message of socialism. Sheila is an innocent and passive girl who changes to become strong and independent. Sheila communicates Priestley's message and helps to tell us what is going on in the play. In this essay I will examine how Priestley presents Sheila, focusing on how she changes throughout the play and how she is Priestley's mouthpiece for his ideas. I will analyse her links to the themes in the play and how she affects the play.

We are first introduced to Sheila in Act 1, where she is very passive and easily pleased especially when Gerald proposes:" is it the one you wanted me to have?'' This represents how she was fine with the idea of Gerald choosing her ring showing us how vain and passive she really is. It also shows us that she is shallow which makes her easily pleased.

Priestley presents Sheila as childlike, supported by the fact that she called her parents "Mummy" and "Daddy" several times. For example, "I'm sorry, Daddy. Actually, I was listening." This represents her childlike behaviour and demonstrates how she thinks that everything revolves around her. Later in the play she realises how wrong her way of life is and so tries to convince her parents too. Sheila also uses her status and class (one of the major themes) to reduce her anger. This is shown when she gets Eva Smith sacked, her childishness is shown especially when she tells Eric that it's the only time she's "ever done anything like that," and she'll "never do it again to anybody." This is an especially childlike thing to say. But also using her status and class to get what she wanted also represents her childlike behaviour. Priestley believes that using your status and class to get what you want or make yourself feel better is wrong. The theme of status and class becomes clear later in the play as it helps Priestley to communicate his message of socialism to the audience. This shows that sheila is spoiled.

As Gerald made it obvious that he knew Daisy Renton before the Inspector interrogated him, Sheila talks to Gerald alone to try and get the truth about how he knows her so that she gets the truth from Gerald and not the Inspector as she knows the answer is not what she wants to hear. But she is also the first to figure out how the inspector works. She tells Gerald "Why – you fool – he knows. Of course he knows. And I hate to think how much he knows that we don't know yet. You'll see. You'll see." because she knows he is holding back his information on how he knows Daisy Renton. The repetition of "you'll see." This shows that Sheila has figured out and is confident with her theory of everyone being proven guilty as she is the one who has realised the Inspectors pattern. This represents her independence and confidence growing which will make her strong enough to convey Priestley's message. The interaction between Sheila and Priestley engages the reader and makes the reader think more deeply about what the message of the play is as it is now coming from two voices in slightly different ways.

Sheila is angry with her parents at the end of the play for trying to "pretend that nothing much has happened." Sheila says "It frightens me the way you talk:" she does not understand how they cannot have learnt from the evening in the same way that she has. This could be because

the Inspector was mainly targeting the younger generation purely because it is too late for the older generation. This means that it is up to the next generation. The younger generation to change the way people live their lives. Sheila has now seen her parents in a new, unfavourable light- helping Sheila to realise the wrongdoings in her life. At the very end of the play, she tells Gerald that she needs more time to think about them, this shows Sheila taking action and choosing her life without relying on others.

Sheila is used as Priestley's mouthpiece to convey his message on socialism, he uses Sheila to get his views across. For example, Sheila says: “You mustn’t try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl.” This shows how Priestley believes that we should all try to work together instead of just trying to get what's best for ourselves. Later in the play, Sheila goes on to say what's really important: all of what they confessed is true and wrong.

Towards the end of the play, Sheila changes to become less materialistic and more independent. Sheila is the one to point out that the way the Birlings are treating others is not fair. This helps Sheila to fulfil her main role in An Inspector Calls by helping us understand Priestley’s views on Socialism. She does this by telling us all of what is wrong with the way people are living (communism). Sheila changed dramatically throughout the play, she started as a shallow and materialistic girl but ended as an independent woman. The change that Sheila goes through represents the change that we all need to go through to achieve a better world, a socialist world.