Change of Sheila's Character in the Play An Inspector Calls

An Inspector Calls

An Inspector Calls is a play written by J.B. Priestly, that was first performed in1945 at a time where both World Wars were fresh in the minds of the people ; however the characters have no knowledge of the events that had the world in there grip! J.B. Priestly wanted to reach out to the general public, and in the following essay I will be discussing how Sheila Birling is presented in the play. I will also talk about how the author has used the character of ‘Sheila Birling’ to send his message across to his readers.

As the novel opens we see that ; Sheila Birling is celebrating her engagement with Gerald Croft and she is a giddy, naïve and childish young lady as when she receives the ring she excitedly goes up to her mum and exclaims “Look, mummy isn’t it a beauty?” the use of the word ‘mummy’ highlights her immaturity at the beginning of the play. This also shows that Sheila likes to be the centre of attention, even at a time when one is expected to be mature and serious -she acts like a child clamouring for attention from her mother. J.B. Priestly describes her as ‘a rather pretty girl in her twenties very pleased with life and rather excited.

She is also naïve because in the beginning of the play she appears to be immature and childish and does whatever her parents tell her, “I’m sorry Daddy actually I was listening” Sheila shows her naivety and lack of immaturity in the way she responded to her father. She immediately apologises; which shows she has been brought up well, a manner where she had been taught to be respectful to elders. She also refers to her father as ‘Daddy’, another immature/childish way of address.

As the play progresses, she matures and admires Gerald’s honesty, for owning up to his actions. Sheila shows an assertive side when she stood up to her mother and father and she also shows that she is conscientious and intelligent of the results of the investigation and instead of keeping it to herself she shares it with others ; this is a reflection on Sheila’s character. She not only stands for herself but for others.

“I tell you-whoever that inspector was, it was anything but a joke”

The change in Sheila’s character here is very evident. She has become more assertive, using phrases such as ‘I tell you’. The events of the evening have made her aware of the serious impact, one’s action can have. Sheila’s position is broadly dominating in the playas she is one of the main characters through whom Priestly tries to portray his message. In the play Sheila is shown to be obvious of the inspector’s critique of capitalism; she does believe that humans are responsible for one another’s actions. In the play Sheila is shown to be despondent, as she believed that she could not undo what has already transpired, but at the same time she’s committed to the fact that family can change their attitude.

“I don’t believe I will. So, you be careful.”

The quote above the uses Sheila’s character as a model judge for the younger generation. We

learn from her that new ideas that differ from the past can bring about a change not only to the youth of today but also the previous generation.

“And so, you used the power you had… to punish the girl”

In the quote above addressed to the inspector Sheila, with her change and growth across the play shows the independence women have gained. This collectively sums up the authors view and the changed status of women in society.

As the play develops the author shows the insightful aspect of Sheila. She can see things other characters cannot.

“Yes, of course it is. That’s what I meant when I talked about building up a wall that’s sure to be knocked flat. It makes it all harder to bear”

Sheila uses the metaphor of a wall that the inspector will knock down to show her insightful understanding of his methods. She knows that if they try to hide anything from him, it will just make things worse for them. The other characters don’t realise this as promptly as Sheila does.

By the end of the play she has grown up and has realised that her actions can have grave consequences. Sheila, like Eric, allows Priestly to show his opinions on youth. He felt that there was hope in the young people of post-war Britain. He saw them as the ones who would help solve the problem the country had with class and gender and social responsibility

“I know I’m to blame- and I’m deeply sorry”

This is seen in how Sheila is deeply affected by Eva’s death; she accepts responsibility straight- away and promises to never behave in such a way again. This is not the case with the older characters, Mr and Mrs Birling and even Gerald do not get the impression that they will change.

“But you are forgetting one thing I still can’t forget. If it hadn’t ended tragically then it is lucky for us. But it might have done”

Again, this shows Sheila is right. She has learnt from her experience and the quote above shows her maturity and intelligence. The author Priestly presents Sheila as a caring and thoughtful character, and an intelligent and realistic girl.

The audience reaction to the positive change in the childish behaviour is immensely important for the play. As it is obvious that the audience/readers like her, as she emerges into a more mature and intelligent adulthood. Being one of the main characters of Priestley’s novel “An Inspector Calls” she is ultimately appreciated for standing up for what is morally correct.

We notice that Priestly uses a very insightful way of converting the readers from Capitalism to Socialism- as he was positive that if they feel a connection with Sheila’s character, they feel a connection with Sheila’s character, they are more likely to make the switch!

Priestley creates Sheila’s character to appeal to the young generation especially the weaker sex, as she is strong and wants to gain more independence. Sheila represents the theme of

gender. Social responsibility and the younger generation.