



SHEILA ^{V3}

An Inspector Calls

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SHEILA AS A FOIL FOR EVA

In the stage directions, Sheila is described in the following ways

- *'Sheila is a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited'*

In the following dialogue, we learn that Eva shares many similarities with her:

- **Sheila:** (*rather distressed*) Sorry! It's just that I can't help thinking about this girl – destroying herself so horribly – and I've been so happy tonight. Oh I wish you hadn't told me. What was she like? Quite young?

Inspector: Yes. Twenty-four.

Sheila: Pretty?

Inspector: She wasn't pretty when I saw her today, but she had been pretty – very pretty.

- The point Priestley appears to be making is about how two people who appear to be similar in so many ways, can live through such contrasting situations simply because of the class of family they are born into
 - Priestley points to their contrasting situations explicitly through Sheila's own words: *'I can't help thinking about this girl – destroying herself so horribly – and I've been so happy tonight'*
 - Earlier in the play, when Mr. Birling is talking about her engagement to Gerald, he makes the remark that *'Sheila's a lucky girl'*
 - As with so much of what Mr. Birling says, there is a sense of irony about this statement because when we think more closely about Eva's description, we realise that Sheila is not just lucky to be marrying Gerald, but she is extremely fortunate to have been born into the circumstances that she has
 - It is a privilege that *'millions and millions of John Smiths and Eva Smiths'* will never come to experience, particularly if capitalists like Birling and Gerald can come together for *'lower costs and higher prices'*
 - The wider point Priestley is making here is about the inequality inherent in a capitalist society like the one the Birlings and Gerald are working towards.
 - A woman's position in this type of society is possibly the most fragile of all because if she lacks the power of status, then she may have to live through a plethora of degrading and life-destroying experiences such as Eva did at the hands of the entire Birling family.

"A PRETTY GIRL IN HER EARLY TWENTIES"

At the beginning of the play, Sheila is childish, and we immediately pick this up as, at the start, Sheila is *'very pleased with life and rather excited'*.

- We can see that at the start of the play Priestley wants us to see Sheila as a "girl", rather than a woman.
 - This is surprising to a modern audience, especially as "early twenties" implies an age of around 23.





- This also illustrates she hasn't really experienced anything terrible, unlike Eva Smith, and this is why she is childish - she doesn't think that people could be living like Eva Smith.
 - Priestley also seems to be somewhat dismissive of her:
 - telling us she is “excited” would demonstrate that she is excited by the moment –
 - she is going to be engaged tonight,
 - and knows this because that is what the dinner is for.
 - However, the modifier, “rather” also implies criticism, as though Priestley is suggesting she is too “excited”, and not in proper control of her emotions.
- We also know she's childish as she calls her mother 'Mummy' and we get the impression she always listens to her, as later in the play when Sheila confronts Mrs B not to tell the Inspector she knows nothing of Eva Smith on page 29, 'No, Mother - please!', Mrs B says 'What's the matter, Sheila' with "great surprise".
 - She isn't used to seeing Sheila act against her, which must show that Sheila has little independence before the Inspector arrived.
 - However, the fact that she was 'very pleased with life and rather excited' perhaps indicates that she may have enjoyed not having to think too much about the wider issues of society, and therefore she begins the play just as apathetic

SHEILA'S CHILDISH QUALITIES

Another childish aspect of her is that, although she never told Eric off for being drunk, she hinted it: 'You're squiffy'.

- Perhaps She is trying to tell her parents what Eric has been doing, but we see that she is not entirely like a child however.
 - A child would tell of a person straight away, so we can see she is slowly growing up.
 - Also 'squiffy' is an expression that 'girls shouldn't pick up', which shows us that, perhaps Sheila isn't as abiding as she seems.
 - Being childish, generally brings being self centred. And there are quotes that support this, such as the following:
 - Sheila: (half serious, half playful) Yes - except for all last summer, when you never came near me, and I wondered what had happened to you.'
 - Sheila wants all the attention from Gerald, and - although we know what had been going on with Daisy Renton - he could have been busy at the works, for all Sheila knew.
 - This implies a few ideas :
 - that Sheila doesn't think much about others and that she is self-centred because, again, he could have been busy.
 - This also illustrates her bad temper - she wants things to go her way.
 - At the very start: Sheila: (gaily, possessively) I should jolly well think not, Gerald. I'd hate you to know all about port - like one of these purple-faced old men.
 - Firstly, note the stage direction 'possessively' suggests her temper
 - She is essentially ordering Gerald what not to be
 - which suggests her bad temper and her childish character, but, since everything usually goes her way, we don't see much of this side.





DOES THE INSPECTOR KNOW EVERYTHING?

Priestley provides hints that The Inspector does not know everything

- and is not in full control of events
 - His interest in Gerald does not appear preplanned
 - “I see. Mr Croft is going to marry Miss Sheila Birling... Then I'd prefer you to stay.”
 - He clearly doesn't know that Gerald has had any part in Eva's life.
 - Perhaps he needs to prevent this marriage.
 - This will tie in with Priestley's purpose – if she does not marry him, there is a very strong chance that she will be able to change the future,
 - because by the end of the play, she has understood The Inspector's message
 - If she does marry him, whether she has learned the lesson is open to doubt
 - because she will be marrying a man who completely disagrees with The Inspector's teaching.

AMBIGUITY – DOES SHEILA *TRULY* LEARN?

Ambiguity is an important concept in “An Inspector Calls”

- If something is ambiguous, it has more than one single meaning and what is actually happening is open to interpretation.
 - For example, we could ask the following questions:
 - Is the Inspector supernatural?
 - Does he show all the characters the same photograph of the girl?
 - Are Daisy Renton and Eva Smith the same person?
 - Are there 2 death in the play or are they, in fact, the same?
 - With regards, to Sheila, the audience will generally see her as the heroine of the play because her stance against her parents' actions seems so strong
 - We see her as hope for change but when we look at her final words when Gerald offers her the ring back, she simply says
 - “no, not yet. It's too soon. I must think.”
 - These statements open up a number of questions such as:
 - What does she mean by “not yet”?
 - What does she mean by “it's too soon”?
 - What “must” she “think” about?
 - Is she considering taking Gerald back, who is so clearly not willing to change?
 - What does that say about her character?
 - Are her emotions too spontaneous and therefore not really reliable?
 - Is she too easily manipulated?
 - Is she strong enough to actually change?





- Is she powerless to change because she is a woman living in a deeply patriarchal society?
- If we cannot rely on her for change, who then, is the real hero?
- Is Eric the real hero?
- Is this the reason why Priestley makes Eric the last one to confess, because he wants to reveal the real hero at the end?
 - These are only some of the unanswered question in the play but the purpose seems to be that Priestley wants us to focus on the most important question of all: 'who is responsible?'

SHEILA AND THE 7 DEADLY SINS

7 Deadly Sins List & Meanings

1. Envy = the desire to have an item or experience that someone else possesses
2. Gluttony = excessive ongoing consumption of food or drink
3. Greed or Avarice = an excessive pursuit of material possessions
4. Lust = an uncontrollable passion or longing
5. Pride = excessive view of one's self without regard to others.
6. Sloth = excessive laziness or the failure to act and utilize one's talents
7. Wrath = uncontrollable feelings of anger and hate towards another person

We can easily attach some of these to the characters:

- Arthur Birling clearly personifies Greed or Avarice.
- Sheila clearly personifies Envy
- Gerald personifies Lust (and capitalist Greed)
- Eric personifies Gluttony (and this causes Lust through his alcohol abuse)
- Sybil Birling clearly personifies Pride

