

How does Priestley explore gender in 'An Inspector Calls'?

Priestley uses the characters of Gerald and Sheila to explore the pronounced differences between men and women in Edwardian England, particularly in the middle and upper echelons. As a keen advocate of women's rights, Priestley uses Sheila to underscore female vulnerability across society and the urgent need for personal and collective change. In contrast, Gerald, a young, handsome "man about town", and emblem of an intractable upper-middle class, sees no reason to modify his behaviour at the play's fatalistic denouement. In stressing these different, gendered attitudes towards change, Priestley draws his audience's attention to an unfortunate but fundamental reality: while the privileged few (Gerald specifically and privileged men more generally) may and probably will resist the new order, everyone else (Sheila and women everywhere) must forge forward to enact positive change in post-war Britain.

Sheila Birling starts the play a "pleased" and "excited" young woman who, though undoubtedly happy, is blind to society's ills: "how horrible! Was it an accident?" She can no more conceive of an unhappy future for herself as she can the brutal suicide of another person. Sheila's naivety, ignorance and infantilised nature are also evident in her use of language "mummy", "squiffy" and her passivity towards the opinions of others at the start of the play: "I'm sorry daddy". Her vulnerability as such is neatly summarised by Mr Birling: "clothes...not only something to make 'em look prettier - but - well, a sort of sign or token of their self-respect"; her precarious position, despite being a member of the privileged classes is made clear: Sheila must wait, prettily and obediently for a husband. She is utterly powerless and desperately needs change.

In contrast to Sheila, Gerald is presented as having independence, social standing and authority; Birling panders to Gerald ("you ought to like this port") and he is able, through monetary means and his father's business, to produce the very ring his fiancée desires.

The Inspector's visit proffers Sheila the means to observe society, in microcosm, and accept her part in Eva's suicide ("So I'm really to blame?"). As early as the end of Act one, we are able to discern Priestley's crafting of Sheila's awakening, a move perhaps in line with the historic vote for women in 1918 and 1928 to demonstrate the power women might have, should they embrace change and take responsibility for themselves and those around them.