

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Character Profile

Sheila Birling

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



First Impressions

Character in context

Sheila is the daughter of Mr and Mrs Birling, and the sister of Eric Birling. Her status is that of firmly **middle-class**. She's engaged to Gerald Croft who is of a higher social status to her.

Priestley portrays Sheila in the **stage directions** as "**a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited**". This initial portrayal develops and she gains maturity as the play progresses, following her acknowledgement of the part she played in Eva Smith's suicide. Sheila is **receptive** to the Inspector's message and noticeably evolves as a character. Her **jealous instincts** are replaced by a sense of **maturity** by the end of the play.



Sheila is a part of the **younger generation**, alongside Eric. Each child shows resentment towards the lack of **social responsibility** their parents feel. She takes on board the Inspector's message and takes on the role of his **proxy** (represents the Inspector) upon his departure by continuing to reject her parent's views.

Superficial engagement

The engagement between Sheila and Gerald is one formed on **materialism** and **capitalism**. Her obsession with material objects is demonstrated when Sheila needs the **physical token** of a ring to "**really feel engaged**". This ring is a **visual marker** of **ownership** and commitment from Gerald to their relationship.

- The notion of this ring **validating** their relationship is a **metaphor** for the nature of their marriage. It is founded on **strategic upward social mobility and business relations** between the Crofts and Birlings, rather than love.
 - Therefore, it is only natural that their engagement doesn't feel real until a **monetary investment**, the ring, has been made.
- Priestley presents this engagement to Gerald as **superficial** and **business orientated** to allow Sheila to develop in **maturity** and ultimately return the ring to Gerald by the end of the play.

Jealous tendencies

Priestley portrays Sheila as **immature** and **insecure** of her own beauty. It is important to consider why Priestley does this at the start of the play and what affect her behaviour has on the audience's perception of her as a character. Sheila is presented as having a jealous mindset, initially, to allow Priestley to develop the character later on in the play as she adopts the Inspector's message of **social responsibility**.

The immediate reaction of Sheila to news of Eva's death was to question her beauty: "**Pretty?**". Here, it can be inferred that Sheila's grief was greater due to Eva being pretty. This demonstrates Sheila's **warped view** of the world, as the value of someone's life depends on their outward



beauty. This view of value being linked to beauty extends to **social classes**, as those who are rich are able to improve their appearance with more beautiful clothes and make-up. Therefore, the logical extension of Sheila's evaluation of people is that upper classes are of a greater value than the lower classes. Priestley does this to encourage the audience to form a **negative perception** of Sheila and view her as **shallow**.

However, Sheila's jealousy is **validated** by the revelation of Gerald's affair with Eva Smith. Mrs Birling's reaction to Gerald's affair reinforces Sheila's jealousy and that men having affairs is **commonplace**: **"you'll have to get used to that, just as I had"**. Priestley does this to evidence the sacrifices women are forced to make in order to maintain the stability that marriage offers. The threat of Eva Smith extends beyond Gerald's loyalty. If Gerald values Eva's beauty to Sheila's, this would **compromise** Sheila's livelihood as she would lose the provider in her life.

Sheila as a victim

Priestley's presentation of Sheila could, however, be the **product** of her **environment** and the society which she has been exposed to. Sheila merely judges others by their beauty as a result of being judged on this sole value herself. Why does Priestley portray Sheila as a victim of her surroundings and are the contextual restrictions placed on women in early **20th century Britain** significant to her character?

- The women of 1912 had very little in the way of rights and **no political means** to argue for greater rights (women in Britain only gained the right to vote by 1918). This meant Sheila and other middle-class women of 1912 were expected to marry and fulfil the **domestic** role in the household.
- They were subject to a poor standard of education and were **dependent** on their male counterparts financially and for stability in their lives. This was due to women's jobs only paying a small fraction of men's jobs, while many employers refused to hire women.
- Sheila has become attached to her **"fairly substantial"** lifestyle and **"heavily comfortable"** house. However, Sheila cannot maintain this by herself; she requires a man to provide it for her. Therefore, middle-class and upper-class women are **forced** into marriage as the only means of sustaining the lives that they have become accustomed to. Marriage's purpose, therefore, must always have an element of **financial motivation** and not be solely for love.
- Priestley presents a true reflection of women in 1912, as women are valued on their **capacity to attract a man**. It is through men (in this case Gerald) that women (Sheila) can increase her position in the social hierarchy. This **victimhood** of women is demonstrated through Sheila's joy at receiving the ring and asking whether it was **"the one you (Gerald) wanted me to have?"**. It is at this point that Sheila **"really feels engaged"** as she is comforted by the **financial security** that Gerald provides, which is **symbolised** by the ring.

Parental manipulation

Priestley portrays Sheila as the result of Mr and Mrs Birling's manipulation. Priestley allows the audience to feel **sympathy** towards Sheila and her dislikeable behaviour as Priestley makes it clear that her **immaturity** and **materialism** is a product of her parent's influence.

Exam tip -

When analysing language techniques, ensure you refer to "Priestley" explicitly. This shows the examiner that you are considering his methods directly.



- Sheila's **materialistic** reaction to the ring is reflected by Mr Birling's **capitalist** and business focused speech to "**lower costs and higher prices**".
- Priestley intends for his play to be **educational** in its message and target the **younger generation**. Therefore, it is crucial that Sheila rejects the **traditional** and **outdated** mindset of the older generation, allowing a more **socialist** and **reformed society** to be created.

Similarities between Sheila and Eva Smith

The similarities between Sheila and Eva are created by Priestley to demonstrate the impact **women's upbringing** have upon their lives. He creates these parallels between the women to compare the **privilege** experienced by Sheila within her higher-class lifestyle, with the squalor and struggle experienced by Eva.

Exam tip -

You will develop your AO2 for characterisation, if you are able to include a direct comparison between the characters of Sheila and Eva.

The similarities between the characters is made explicit by Priestley as Sheila is described by the **stage directions** as a "**pretty girl in her early twenties**", while Eva is described by the Inspector as "**twenty-four**" and "**very pretty**".

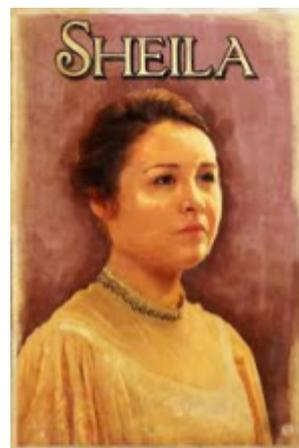
However, their perceptions of the **future** are presented as a stark contrast by Priestley and as a direct result of the **divisions in social class**. Sheila is "**very excited**" by her potential life of higher social status through marriage to Gerald whereas Eva's suffering was so great that she committed suicide; she couldn't bear to experience the future.

- The audience realises the differing factor between the characters is **class** and therefore it is this distinction that enables Sheila to live carefree.
- It is also class which sentences Eva to a life of constant suffering.

Priestley is able to convey his **promotion of socialism** through this **juxtaposition** of characters, within this **didactic** play (moral teaching).

Alternatively, it could be argued that Priestley creates these **similar characteristics** between Sheila and Eva as it enables the audience to feel more empathy with Sheila. Moreover, it makes it more believable that Sheila would change in her beliefs once she is made aware of how similar she is to Eva. Both these factors help to **further Priestley's own agenda of promoting socialism**.

- As Sheila is so similar to Eva she becomes the most responsive to Priestley's message as she can **empathise the most** (out of the Birlings) for Eva and the working classes.
- Sheila is also able to see the events through the desperate perspective of Eva, due to their similar experience. This is demonstrated through Sheila's disgust at her father's attitude: "**these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people**".
- Sheila is not exploited to the same extent as Eva is, yet, Sheila is nonetheless controlled by men and **surrenders her own autonomy**.



www.revisionworld.com



Inexcusable

Priestley portrays Sheila as **accepting of her role** in Eva's death, she refuses to make excuses for behaviour (as Mr and Mrs Birling did). The **personal reflection** that Sheila sees in Eva causes her to become unable to dismiss her role in the chain of events, which led to Eva's suicide. Her open stance to her own responsibility is a **distinct contrast** to the other characters in the play, who attempted to **avoid responsibility** or had to be forced by the Inspector to talk:

- Eric couldn't face the truth and impact of his actions and therefore **left the house**.
- Mrs Birling refused to accept responsibility as she deemed her case unworthy of aid and therefore used her "**influence to have it refused**".
- Mr Birling initially pretends to not know who the Inspector is referring to and then maintains a stance of not accepting responsibility.
- Gerald's tone towards the inspector is **misleading** and **reluctant** "**All right, I know her. Let's leave it at that**".

Through Sheila, Priestley is able to convey the message towards the audience to better society and reduce suffering. And, for this to be achieved, it is necessary to start seeing the world from the **perspective of the disadvantaged and persecuted lower-classes**, rather than distancing themselves from them. This genuine care is demonstrated by Sheila's **feminine compassion**, notably in response to Eva's death; "**how horrible!**".

Final Impressions

Permanent change?

The question as to whether Sheila has completely changed for the better by the end of the play is left in an **ambiguous** fashion by Priestley. This uncertainty is revealed by the use of **reverse syntax** in the phrase "**it frightens me, the way you talk**". Priestley inverts this sentence to create **uncertainty** about what is scaring Sheila. This causes her fear to become **central** to the sentence and prompts the question whether Sheila's fear is in fact more complex; does Sheila merely fear the way that Mr and Mrs Birling talk? or does she share her parent's fear of how their lifestyle would be impacted by an increased sense of **social responsibility**?

Exam tip -

This consideration of the play's structure will develop your AO2 marks. The examiner will recognise your consideration of both the form of the play and its structure.

Likewise, Sheila's uncertainty is reflected in her **half-rejection** of Gerald and his ring: "**we'd have to start all over again**". Priestley uses **cyclical structure** in the presentation of Sheila at the beginning and end of the play; she must decide on her engagement to Gerald. Despite Gerald's affair, Sheila does not completely reject him. Perhaps this implies that Sheila returns to the ideological position she held at the start of the play. Also, Sheila's failure to reject Gerald's ring is symbolic of her acceptance of **nepotism** (those with power or influence of favouring relatives or friends), **classism** and **patriarchy** that Gerald represents.



Symbolism of Sheila

The ideal recipient of the Inspector's message

Sheila's **convictions** (personal, strongly held beliefs) become more open to the Inspector's own views as the play progresses. Priestley demonstrates Sheila's instantaneous recognition of the Inspector's message, as she responds to her father's **dehumanising and capitalist approach** to business with "**these girls aren't cheap labour, they're people**".

However, Sheila is also presented as **ignorant** of the suffering occurring outside of her **privileged bubble**; the Inspector **enlightens** Sheila. Sheila's empathy is evident through the use of the **plural noun "girls"**, as she can relate to the **patriarchal oppression** they face.

- The impact of the Inspector's message is **visually demonstrated** by Priestley through the **stage directions** as "**she goes closer to him wonderingly**". This physical movement towards the Inspector is a reflection of Sheila's mindset moving towards that of the Inspector's **socialist ideology**.
- Priestley suggests, through the Inspector, that Sheila's youthfulness is responsible for her **assimilation** (understanding) of the Inspector's message as "**we often do on the young ones. They're more impressionable.**"
- Sheila's change in mindset to become more **receptive** to the Inspector's message allows her to continue his message and act as his **proxy**, when the Inspector departs. She understands the greater significance of the Inspector as a **moral teaching**, rather than just the threat of prosecution as she realises his **omniscience**: "**(laughs rather hysterically) Why - you fool - he knows. Of course he knows.**"

Sheila is portrayed as the **ideal exemplar** to the audience, showing them how they should react to the Inspector's message. In this manner, Priestley encourages the audience to take on the role of the Inspector and propagate (spread) the need for greater **social responsibility**.

Ideal representation of repenting and responding to vices (sins)

Priestley portrays Sheila as the perfect responder to her own **wrongdoings** as she accepts



www.bbc.co.uk

responsibility for her actions **immediately**, without deflecting blame onto others. The openness Sheila shows in accepting responsibility is evident as "**it was my own fault**" and that she "**was in a furious temper**". Sheila, in contrast to the majority of other characters (save Eric), places no blame on Eva. She accepts that her own faults of **jealousy** caused her to envy Eva's beauty and mistreat her.

This reaction directly contrasts Mrs Birling, who adopts the view that "**firstly I blame the girl herself**". Here, Priestley conveys that **maturity doesn't necessarily increase with age** - in fact the younger generation in Priestley's play are the most mature. Here, Sheila has clearly developed from the character she was at the start of the play, who echoed her mother's use of "**impertinent**" to describe Eva. Priestley, reminds the audience that for **positive socialist change** to



occur there needs to be **critical thought** and a move away from **inheriting toxic capitalist views**.

- ❖ Priestley was determined for 1945 to be a time of change and to not fall back into the **Victorian style divide in classes**. The implementation of the **Beveridge Report** ensured this and formed the foundation of the **Welfare State**.

Alone in her responsibility

Priestley's combination of Sheila's characteristics as young, receptive, feminine and similar to Eva, causes her to realise the **immorality** of her actions (more than the other characters). Why does Priestley present Sheila as the **most socially responsible**?

- The rest of the Birlings and Gerald are more or less **content in their own immorality** and are **indifferent** to their impact on Eva Smith. Priestley does this to:
 - ◆ Encourage the audience to **oppose societal values** that are accepted, yet **objectively immoral** (such as profiteering and labour exploitation)
 - ◆ Promote the need for a shift from outright **capitalism** to a more **socialist** society, thus embracing new and modern views.
- Sheila contrasts the other characters in the play with her determination to accept responsibility:
 - ◆ Eric's **inability** to accept the impact of his own actions is reflected through the **stage directions** as "**the front door slams**" and he flees the Inspector's inquiry.
 - ◆ Eric's vagueness in his description of his relationship with Eva suggests the extent of his involvement in Eva's suicide is greater than he lets on. Priestley achieves this through **euphemistic language** as Eric describes trying to force entry into Eva's lodgings as "**a row**".
 - ◆ Gerald's initial denial of knowing Eva demonstrates his **valuing** of his own **social status** over the life of Eva Smith (he would rather preserve his status than aid a legal inquiry).
 - ◆ Mr Birling suggests his firing of Eva was **righteous** to "**keep labour prices down**", despite paying his employees a sustenance wage. Blame is further deflected onto Eva, as Mr Birling describes her as a typical "**trouble maker**".
 - ◆ Mrs Birling is the most **zealous** to avoid responsibility. She blames Eva as she implies that "**girls of that class**" are **inherently dishonest**. Her deflections of blame extend to Eric (inadvertently) as she believes that father is to blame and "**If the girl's death is due to anybody, then it's due to him**".

After accepting responsibility, Sheila shows **permanent change** as she promises "**I'll never, never do it to anyone again**". This change in behaviour is, arguably, **more important** than accepting responsibility.

Sheila's receptiveness to the Inspector is dismissed

The **social responsibility** and remorse felt by Sheila is **objected** to by the other characters in the play. Gerald exercises his **social authority** over Sheila as he requests to the Inspector that she should be "**excused**" for becoming "**hysterical**". The use of this **adjective** is **inherently sexist** and bears connotations of the **mental disorder** 'hysteria'. This disorder can only be diagnosed to women (as it was caused by a 'wandering womb', which the prefix of "**hys**" meaning womb) and is characterised by **emotional excess**. This emotional excess Sheila exhibits is due to her passion



for the Inspector's message of the need to accept responsibility, change and the **immoral** treatment of Eva Smith. Sheila's **overwhelming** emotional response is necessary for change and **socialist reform**; it is this passion, which will prevent her from **regressing** back into her former mindset.

Hysteria

Historically, **hysteria** has been utilised as a means to control women.

- **Unfeminine traits** were **symptomatic** of hysteria, therefore, serving as a method to force women to adhere to predefined **gender roles** (e.g. staying at home and doing household chores, rather than becoming a strong political leader). This prevented women from attaining positions of power due to their tendency to exhibit excessive emotion.
- Priestley ensures that when Sheila challenges the **status quo** she is **condemned** and **dismissed** as **hysterical**:
 - The **stage directions** dictate that "**Sheila gives a short hysterical laugh**" in response to her mother's use of the "**silly word**" "**impertinent**". Sheila's laugh is **symbolic** of her rejection of Mrs Birling's treatment of Eva.
 - Mrs Birling objects to Sheila condemning Eric and "**severely**" informs her that she's "**behaving like a hysterical child**".
- The accusation of hysteria is used as an effective method to attack Sheila personally, rather than the socialist ideas that she attempts to argue. This form of **ad hominem** allows the Birlings and Gerald to continue their lives of privilege, without worrying about social responsibility.

Reaction of the audience

The audience is encouraged by Priestley to **relate to Sheila** and therefore identify with her view of increased **social responsibility**. It is crucial to understand why Priestley attempts to align the audience's empathy with Sheila and her views.

- Priestley infuses Sheila's language with **rhetorical devices**, which resonate with the audience: "**You knew it then. You began to learn something. And now you've stopped.**" This **group of three** is memorable of the Inspector's direct and **terse** (short) accusations against the Birlings.
 - Sheila must be the focus of the audience and who they find the most likeable. Priestley does this as Sheila takes on the role of the Inspector (once he leaves). Therefore, it is Priestley's intention that **the audience emulate Sheila** and take on extra **social responsibility**. Without Priestley portraying Sheila as likeable, his message of **socialism** would be less effective as the audience would not take on board the Inspector's thrust to the same extent and reform themselves.



www.bbc.co.uk



Relations with other characters

Rejection of parents

The values that Mr and Mrs Birling imposed on Sheila are rejected, increasingly, as the play continues. The **rebellion** of Sheila against her parents' established views is critical to the **didactic** (moral teaching) nature of the play.

- Both parents are directly challenged by Sheila, as she **condemns** her father “**these girls aren't cheap labour**”. Sheila views Mr Birling's employees as individuals and despises the exploitation of their labour, by her father. She also rejects her mother's use of “**impertinent**” as “**such a silly word**”.
- This rejection of her parents is further demonstrated by her refusal to commands, such as refusing Mr Birling's **imperative** to go to bed.
- She loses respect for her parents, as her **informal** and **childish tone**: “**look mummy isn't it a beauty**” changes to a serious and critical one: “**Mother, I think it was cruel and vile**”. This change from “**mummy**” to “**mother**” is acknowledged by Mrs Birling, who realises she can no longer **infantise** Sheila and therefore refers to her a “**young woman**”.

Alignment with inspector and awareness of supernaturalism

The Inspector is acknowledged to be, by Sheila, beyond the nature of a normal human. The Inspector's impression upon Sheila is echoed through her **repetition** of his final words “**fire and blood and anguish**”. The Inspector's supernatural attributes are recognised by Sheila, who realises the **homophone** (same pronunciation but different meaning) of Inspector Goole's name: “**ghoul**”. This, coupled with the Inspector's **omniscience** (knowledge of everything), creates an image of an **avenging angel** on a **moral crusade** for greater **social responsibility**.

Engagement to Gerald

Marrying Gerald is **symbolic** of Sheila accepting the **corruption**, gender and class inequality of society. It is important to consider why Priestley uses Gerald as a construct in this manner.

Sheila's question to Gerald: “**Is it the one you wanted me to have?**” reveals the control Gerald has over Sheila, in the beginning of the play. By the end of the play Sheila ends their engagement and returns the ring; rejecting Gerald extends to the rejection of the ideas he represents - the **individualist school of thought**. Therefore, this rejection is Sheila putting **principle and morality** before her own **financial security**.

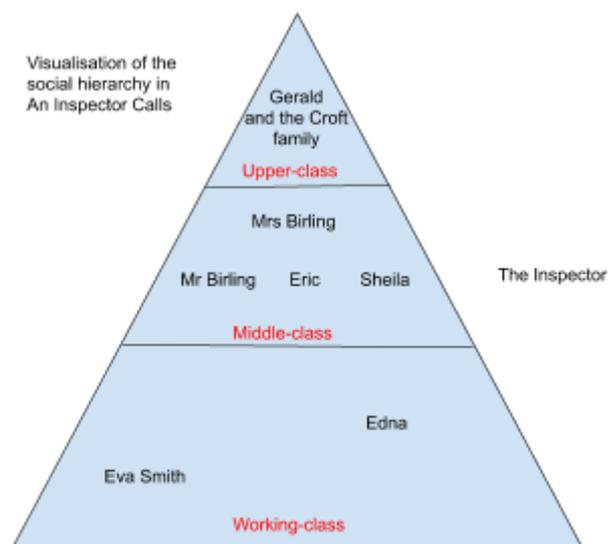


Figure 1



Sheila's initial relationship with Gerald excites her, Sheila is "**very pleased with life and rather excited**". The excitement of financial stability and power it will bring her allows her to be **blissfully ignorant** of life's **cruelties** and **inequalities**.

Rejection

Sheila's rejection of Gerald occurs directly after the Inspector arrives and reveals the corruption and exploitation within society. Sheila acknowledges that she has changed "**you and I aren't the same people**", as not only has Sheila changed how she views Gerald, but also how she perceives the injustices in society as she can no longer ignore them. Gerald's second engagement proposal follows the revelation that the Inspector was fake. Sheila is still reluctant because she understands that the Inspectors' message had a greater meaning.

The **authenticity** of the Inspector is irrelevant as the **injustices** in society are very real. Sheila exclaims that "**lucky for us**" there may have been no suicide for their actions, yet, this doesn't change their **immoral nature**.

Possible 'Topic Sentences'

- Priestley explores the superficial nature of Sheila's engagement with Gerald and the transactional purpose of their relationship to...
- Priestley explores the detrimental effect of the class-system through the similarities between Sheila and Eva Smith and the differing experiences of upper and lower-class backgrounds.
- Priestley explores the character of Sheila as the ideal recipient of the Inspector's message, as her role as the Inspector's proxy is Priestley's preferred response from the audience.



Sheila quote bank by theme

Theme	Quote	Analysis
Responsibility	<i>“Oh - how horrible”</i>	Sheila is the only character who expresses genuine emotion towards the suicide of Eva Smith. Priestley demonstrates this through the use of a dash , indicating Sheila’s authentic displeasure.
	<i>“I was in a furious temper” and “It was my own fault” and “I behaved badly too. I know I did”.</i>	Sheila is instantly open toward accepting responsibility and is self-critical of her selfish actions
	<i>“I felt rotten about it at the time”</i>	Priestley’s use of the informal adjective “rotten” demonstrates Sheila’s lack of maturity in vocabulary . However, she also shows remorse for her actions, which she instantly knew was wrong. Arguably, this is Priestley conveying the message that maturity is proportional to the level of social responsibility you feel, rather than using formal vocabulary .
	<i>“If I could help her now, I would” and “I’ll never, never do it again to anybody”</i>	Priestley evidences Sheila’s commitment to changing her attitude towards social responsibility .
	<i>“I suppose we’re all nice people now”</i>	Priestley uses this rhetorical device , coupled with a sarcastic tone to convey Sheila’s disapproval of her parents and Gerald’s lack of remorse. The lack of a potential criminal conviction doesn’t alleviate their immoral actions.
Older generation vs younger generation	<i>“It’s you two who are being childish - trying not to face the facts”</i>	Sheila recognises her parents’ faults. Priestley uses irony to expose the lack of responsibility and immaturity of Mr and Mrs Birling, as Sheila (the child) labels her parents as “childish” .
Parental manipulation	<i>“Impertinent”</i>	The use of the adjective “impertinent” to describe Eva Smith is unusual for the childish character of Sheila and is realised by the audience as influenced by the formal vocabulary of Mrs Birling.
Maturity	<i>“pretty girl in her early twenties” and “very pleased with life and rather excited”</i>	Sheila is initially portrayed through the stage directions as living comfortably and blissfully ignorant of society’s injustices. Priestley does this to develop Sheila as a character later in the play, into a more socially responsible person.



	<i>“You and I aren’t the same people“</i>	Sheila has gained maturity since her initial engagement with Gerald. Sheila’s perception of Gerald has changed and she can no longer ignore the injustices in society.
	<i>“You don’t seem to have learnt anything”</i>	Here, Sheila acknowledges the purpose of the Inspector’s inquiry - a moral teaching . Priestley does this to portray the older generation as stubborn and opposed to changing their stance on responsibility .
	<i>“No not yet. It’s too soon. I must think.”</i>	This pivotal moment is where Sheila must either accept or reject Gerald and the capitalist individualism he stands for. The use of this imperative “must” is a direct message from Priestley to the audience - to think for themselves.
Materialism	<i>“Now I really feel engaged”</i>	Sheila’s obsession with material objects is demonstrated when Sheila needs the physical token of a ring to “really feel engaged” . This ring is a visual marker of ownership and commitment from Gerald to their relationship.
	<i>“Is it the one you (Gerald) wanted me to have?”</i>	Priestley’s use of this question reveals the extent of patriarchal control Gerald has over Sheila. Beginning with the choice of ring and inevitably extending to controlling the minutiae of quotidian life (little details of everyday life).
Capitalism vs Socialism	<i>“Pretty?”</i>	Here, it can be inferred that Sheila’s grief was greater due to Eva being pretty. This demonstrates Sheila’s warped view of the world, as the value of someone’s life depends on their outward beauty.
	<i>“But these girls aren’t cheap labour - they’re people”</i>	Priestley demonstrates Sheila’s instantaneous recognition of the Inspector’s message, as she objects to her father’s dehumanising and capitalist approach to business.
	<i>“impertinent is such a silly word”</i>	Sheila, later on in the play, has developed in maturity and rejects her mother’s use of the formal adjective “impertinent” to criticise Eva as “such a silly word” .

