

AQA English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Themes

Gender

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/)



Gender

Gender is pivotal to your understanding of how and why the characters interact in the way they do. Priestley shows how the **ideas and constructs** behind **gender** and **gender roles** within society influence the ways characters interact with each other and view themselves. Priestley's main message is that **traditional gender stereotypes are damaging and actively stop society progressing**.

Development of the theme

Within the play, different female characters are used to show the **different roles women have within society** and how these women are **expected to act** within a **patriarchal society**. Equally, Priestley uses the interactions between the male and female characters within the play to comment upon **traditional gender roles** and how he thinks society should progress in the future.

Don't forget

It's important to remember that Priestley wrote the play in 1945 when women had gained many more rights than they had had when the play was set in 1912. The audience would therefore be quite shocked see the archaic views and treatment towards women in *An Inspector Calls*.

The Inspector is introduced to the family to slowly break down the gender stereotypes. Although he is male, unlike Mr Birling or Gerald he is not a **hypermasculine** character; he **"need not be a big man but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness," (Act 1, pg 11)**. Therefore, he does not have the physical attributes associated with dominant masculinity, but his presence and **"purposefulness"** present a more powerful alternative.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/mUSGgscLjDZ8CSC88>

Priestley suggests through the Inspector's behaviour that **masculinity doesn't need to depend on violence, aggression, or intimidation**. The Inspector is impressive, intelligent, compassionate, and patient - the **opposite** of typical, toxic masculinity. He takes over from Mr Birling as the **dominant male figure** on stage, foreshadowing Priestley's hopes for a more progressive future.

Womens' Roles

When Priestley was writing in the 1940s, society's **understanding** of gender had progressed massively compared to when the play is set. The two World Wars challenged **conservative notions of gender**. With so many men sent to war, women took on jobs which had previously been done by men. This **revolutionised** the way women were viewed and also made them realise how much they were able to contribute towards society. When the men returned from war they found women reluctant to go back to domestic roles.



Although society in 1945 was much more progressive than in 1912, there were still some that disagreed with these changes. They **idealised** the pre-War years, and wanted to **uphold tradition**. The **Women's Suffrage movement** had caused a lot of **hostility** towards suffragettes, with men and women disapproving of their demands because they **threatened tradition**. By focusing on the **dark side** of this era, illustrating the **conflict** and suffering that was a result of **gender stereotyping**, Priestley confronts his audience with the **harsh reality** of what it would be like if these traditions were upheld. He suggests that the open conversations had and progress made in the 1940s is **beneficial** for everyone.

Female Characters

The female characters within the play all represent different versions of women within society. Mrs Birling upholds traditional values of the **subordinate female**, Sheila develops into the '**New Woman**' with strong opinions she's not afraid to share with the men in the play and Eva is a lower class woman who is taken advantage of by men.

Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling is symbolic of the traditional 1912 woman, when in the presence of men she acts as their subordinates. Despite it being evident that she is an opinionated woman, she only has opinions about other female characters and is careful not to get involved in any men's business. It is important to note that Mrs Birling is from the class above Mr Birling but despite this, because she is a woman, she is automatically his **subordinate**.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/yqeGFJEMUHE3Gc327>



She is judgmental and strict, a **representative** of those in the 1940s who wanted to return to the old ways. Her **conservative** views uphold **patriarchal rule** (male dominance) and, like her husband, her misogyny is particularly **targeted at lower class women**.

Dependent on men

It is made obvious to the audience that Mrs Birling doesn't have any legitimate power within her life. When she introduces herself to the Inspector, she references her "**husband**" and his position as "**Lord Mayor only two years ago**" (**Act 2, pg 31**). This shows the audience that a woman's status in society was dependent on her husband's position.

She also **adheres** to the **traditional view of the family** where **the man is in charge**. Indeed, once the Inspector has left, she says, "**Now just be quiet so that your father can decide what we ought to do**" (**Act 3, pg 61**). Perhaps Priestley is suggesting that women



invalidate themselves and other women when they believe the **narrative of male dominance**.

Upholds patriarchal values

Mrs Birling not only adheres to strict **gender conventions** but she also actively works to suppress other women and keep them within the constraints of societal gender norms.

She tries to pass down her traditional values about women to her daughter. She teaches Sheila to be **dependent** on and **loyal** to men, suggesting **internalised misogyny** is passed on through generations of women. She explains, ***“When you’re married you’ll realise that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business. You’ll have to get used to that, just as I did” (Act 1, pg 3).*** She teaches her daughter to **resign herself to mistreatment and neglect because it is ‘necessary’**.

- The phrase ***“just as I did”*** presents it as a **tradition** through generations and it is evident that Mrs Birling thinks this is the way things should be.
- By calling it ***“important work”***, Mrs Birling implies **only a man’s work is valuable**.

Many believed that women were stupid and unable to understand practical business matters and politics, one of the many reasons why women were shut out of conversation. In addition to this, it was seen as ‘unladylike’ to comment on politics or world-affairs. Mrs Birling accentuates this belief and is keen to keep male and female roles separate. She announces, ***“I think Sheila and I had better go into the drawing room and leave you men -” (Act 1, pg 5).***

- By suggesting the women move to the ***“drawing room”***, Mrs Birling wants to physically separate the two genders.
- Men were expected to occupy the **public sphere**, with discussion of politics and business, while women were **confined** to the **private sphere** of the household. Priestley is outlining these two spheres in a visual way.

Attitude towards other women

Mrs Birling’s attitude towards other women is **mocking** and **reductive** which mirrors her husband’s sexist condescension. She refers to Sheila being ***“over-excited” (Act 2, pg 33)***, ***“a hysterical child”***, ***(Act 2, pg 48)***, and ***“childish” (Act 3, pg 59)***. These were all terms that were commonly used by men to **undermine** women.

- She uses these descriptions to **invalidate** Sheila’s concerns, presenting her as **irrational** and **immature**. Priestley shows how women also used misogynistic or ‘gendered’ language to dismiss others.

“Hysterical” is particularly relevant to the presentation of women as **female hysteria** used to be an **official medical diagnosis**. Believed to be linked to the **womb**, it was applied to women who were **overly anxious** or **causing trouble for others** among other symptoms. It was therefore associated with the **weakness of femininity**. This means it was used to **silence** women who were **not acting in the way men wanted them to**.



Eva Smith

Eva Smith is the direct opposite of Mrs Birling, she works and isn't afraid to voice her opinion to the men. Even though Eva is a working class woman who endures a lot of hardship, **Priestley does not portray her as a weak, self-pitying victim**. Instead, she is **assertive, outspoken, determined, and righteous**. This makes her an **atypical** presentation of femininity, **subverting** the stereotypes and gender roles surrounding women.

Priestley suggests these qualities were part of the reason she was treated so poorly by the Birlings: she **defied** their expectations of working class women being respectful and **passive**, thus **angering** them.

When considering the exploitation of women within the play you should note that Eva is **symbolic of working class women as a whole**. It can be argued that each step of Eva's story **outlines a different way women are oppressed**.

Strong opinions

Eva was a ringleader of the factory strike which shows she has a strong voice and is a leader. Mr Birling says he fired her because ***“she'd had a lot to say - far too much - so she had to go,” (Act 1, pg 15)***. This shows how he wanted to **cancel** her rebellious opinions.



- If Eva had ***“far too much”*** to say, this suggests Mr Birling did not like how Eva was disagreeing with him and questioning his **authority**. He views this as her **acting out of line**.
- Priestley shows how women were expected to be **demure** (reserved and modest) and **soft spoken**.

Similarly, Mrs Birling refuses to help Eva because she acted with ***“impertinence” (Act 2, pg 43)***, suggesting she was not as kind and respectful as a woman should be. Also, she claims Eva's choice not to take stolen money was because of ***“ridiculous airs [...] elaborate fine feelings and scruples” (Act 2, pg 46)***, suggesting **women shouldn't make moral decisions or show any independent thought**. She expected Eva to follow the path given to her by taking the money and not causing any problems for others.

Pregnancy outside of marriage

Eva's experience with Eric and then Mrs Birling allows Priestley to explore all the **taboos** and **stigmas** women had to **contend** with due to pregnancy outside of marriage. Unmarried women were viewed differently to married women, and having a child as an unmarried woman was a **huge scandal**. Eva's story about a ***“husband who'd deserted her”*** was an attempt to make her story sound more **respectable** and **pitiable**. If she admitted to being pregnant without being married, others would view her as **lustful** and **irresponsible**.



Mrs Birling recalls how **“She had to admit, after I began questioning her, that she had no claim to the name, that she wasn’t married, and that the story she told at first - about a husband who’d deserted her - was quite false,” (Act 2, pg 44)**. This outlines various **societal views on marriage and motherhood**.

- Eva had **“no claim to the name”** of the Birling family, but felt she **needed** to introduce herself as **“Mrs Birling” (Act 2, pg 43)** to improve her chances of receiving aid. This reflects **women’s dependence on their family for security**.

While Eric, an upper class man, could sleep with a working class girl and not face consequences, Eva was left with a baby she couldn’t support. Priestley shows how **the stigmas surrounding unmarried women and marriage between classes** meant **many women were trapped without help**.

Sheila

Sheila’s character acts as a bridge between the conservative Mrs Birling and the assertive Eva Smith. During the play we see Sheila’s **transformation** from a **stereotypical upper class girl** into a woman who is **assertive, self-assured, and independent**.

The Inspector enables Sheila to construct and voice her own opinions, by doing so she becomes self aware. This **empowers** her, showing how respecting women and their intelligence gives them **autonomy** and a **confident sense of self**. Priestley suggests the ways in which society treats and portrays women makes them appear weak and **two-dimensional** because they haven’t been allowed to explore their own **identities**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/1ennZHN4VPKrpXRT7>

Her character arc can be seen to **imitate the progression of Women’s Suffrage from 1912 to 1945**. She can be seen as a representation of the **New Woman**.

Beginning of the play

At the beginning of the play, Sheila is presented as **naive, materialistic, and spiteful - all traits that would be typical of female characters in literature**. Her fascination with clothes and jewellery, as well as being stereotypically feminine, suggests she is **greedy** and **shallow**.

- She is excited to an almost unbelievable extent by her engagement ring, declaring, **“It’s wonderful! [...] Mummy - isn’t it a beauty?”** and claiming, **“Now I really feel engaged,” (Act 1, pg 5)**. The use of **“Mummy”** **infantilises** her, furthering her role as the stereotypical naive girl of the upper classes.
- However, her materialistic behaviours may be used by Priestley to show how women were **conditioned** to rely on clothes and jewellery for pleasure and **self-expression**. Priestley suggests women were so **restricted** in their lives that they had to rely on material possessions.



Sheila's treatment of Eva

Women, particularly in the early twentieth century, only had **worth** if they were **deemed beautiful**. They couldn't get an education or work for a high wage, so they had to rely on attracting a husband to support them. Priestley demonstrates how **men made beauty something women had to compete for**, pitting them against each other in order to get a husband and be **financially secure**. Sheila's jealousy towards Eva is a result of being taught that she needed to be the most beautiful in any room. Eva, as a working class woman, was the only person Sheila could be angry with in a **socially acceptable** way.

When she describes how she was **"in a furious temper"** and took it out on Eva because she was **"jealous"** (Act 1, pg 23-24), this seems to present women as **petty** and **cruel**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/YHCakovN2R7TIWIL8>

On the other hand, it can be interpreted as another example of how women are **conditioned** by society to act in a certain way. Women couldn't take out their anger on men or in public, so they had **limited outlets**. Sheila admits how Eva **"was the right type for it, just as I was the wrong type. She was a very pretty girl too [...] if she'd been some miserable plain little creature, I don't suppose I'd have done it,"** (Act 1, pg 24). This implies she viewed Eva as a **threat** because of her beauty.

Sheila's interaction with Gerald

Sheila's interactions with Gerald reflect the progress she makes in finding her own voice within the play. Initially, Priestley shows how Sheila has to **repress** her own feelings to appear **respectable** and **conform to societal norms**. At the start she speaks **"with mock aggressiveness"**, and when interrogating Gerald about last summer, she does it in a way that is **"half serious, half playful"** (Act 1, pg 3).

- The way she interacts suggests she is afraid of questioning the men.
- The **duality** in **"half"** may also connote **internal conflict** between wanting to be assertive but also being unable to be assertive due to being a woman.
- Priestley suggests she uses a **mask** to disguise her true feelings, ensuring she remains **likeable**.



In contrast, after her interrogation with the Inspector, she is no longer **restrained**. She voices her frustration with Gerald, **"Why - you fool - he knows. Of course he knows"** (Act 1, pg 26), suggesting she will no longer **tolerate** his lies. This behaviour would be



particularly shocking because she is challenging the dominance and intelligence of her fiancé, which goes against the values of patriarchy.

Priestley describes how ***“She looks at him almost in triumph. He looks crushed”*** (Act 1, pg 26), suggesting the power in their **relationship** has **shifted**. By facing the truth, Sheila is **liberated**, and Priestley shows how this empowers her, making her **stronger and more capable than those who are still trapped in their lies**.

Sheila and her family

Sheila starts to **challenge** the systems she had previously **obeyed**. When her family try to excuse her from the conversation, she refuses, explaining, ***“I want to understand exactly what happens when a man says he’s so busy at the works that he can hardly ever find time to come and see the girl he’s supposed to be in love with,”*** adding that she is ***“supposed to be engaged to the hero”*** of the story (Act 2, pg 34).

- Priestley suggests she has recognised her own **self-worth**, as she is determined to hold Gerald accountable for his actions rather than excusing him.
- The **sarcastic “hero”** suggests she no longer respects Gerald, and sees him for the pretender he is.
- The **repetition** of ***“supposed to be”*** presents their engagement as a **hollow myth or obligation**.

When she ***“hands him the ring”*** (Act 2, pg 40), this is a symbol for how she is **rejecting his lies and his control over her**. Priestley suggests Sheila is able to **see through patriarchal inventions**, such as marriage, to see that they are **tools to control women**. Priestley illustrates how **these systems of inequality depend on the silence and compliance of the oppressed in order to survive**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/MYjk9bv416K2mV4i6>

New Woman

The progression of Sheila’s character can be interpreted as an **allegory** for Women’s Suffrage. Her **newly gained independence and sense of self** also show how the **conventions** and stereotypes surrounding gender can **change with time**. Sheila and Eric break away from their parents’ beliefs, showing how traditions can be **reforged**.



The Male Characters

Like the female characters in the play, Priestley uses the male characters to explore the reasons behind male behaviour and also the ways in which men can treat others in society.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling is a **symbol** of **traditional patriarchy** and **sexist values**. He expects to be **unchallenged** in everything he does, emulating the **dominance** men had in 1912. He treats women in a **condescending, disrespectful manner**, even with his own daughter. Priestley shows that Mr Birling's **misogyny** blinds him to the cruelty of his actions towards Eva Smith, because he doesn't recognise her as a human of equal worth.

Men as equals

Priestley demonstrates how Mr Birling **prioritises** the interests of his fellow men over the interests of the female characters because he only sees men as his **equals**.

During his celebratory toast, Mr Birling addresses Gerald directly rather than Sheila. This implies he cares more about Gerald's happiness than his daughters or that he's more comfortable talking to Gerald as his **peer**. He tells Gerald, **"Your engagement to Sheila means a tremendous lot to me. She'll make you happy, and I'm sure you'll make her happy," (Act 1, pg 4).**

- As well as ignoring his daughter, he makes her engagement all about himself which suggests he has **ownership** over her actions and successes. It also conveys his **narcissism** (self-obsession).
- The phrase **"she'll make you happy"** alludes to the belief that a wife's **only duty** was to please her husband, and suggests Mr Birling views Sheila as a **gift** he is giving to Gerald. Because he references Gerald's happiness before Sheila's, Priestley suggests Mr Birling is only concerned with pleasing Gerald. He doesn't think the relationship should be **mutual** and **equal**.

Loyalty to men

After learning of Gerald's affair, it is evident that Mr Birling sides with Gerald. He doesn't care that his daughter has been hurt as the engagement is the most important factor to consider.

It is evident that he doesn't think a woman should have the **right** to object to a man's desires. He says: **"I'm not defending him. But you must understand that a lot of young men -" (Act 2, pg 40).** This **perpetuates** the idea that women should **tolerate their husband's mistreatment of them rather than standing up for themselves**.

- Mr Birling's reference to **"a lot of young men"** shows how society believed men had an **uncontrollable sex drive**, and so men's **infidelity** was an **accepted part of culture**.



<https://images.app.goo.gl/H3SL8j1LA5CXCzGj6>



- Priestley shows how **male dominance and male solidarity isolated and ignored women**, and that society has taught women to always be subservient to men and their flaws.

His treatment of women

Mr Birling treats women in a **condescending manner** which reflects the misogynistic culture of the 1910s. He explains to Eric, **“Clothes mean something quite different to a woman. Not just something to wear - and not only something to make ‘em look prettier - but - well, a sort of sign or token of their self-respect,”** (Act 1, pg 9). This portrays women as **superficial** and **materialistic**.

- The phrase **“token of their self-respect”** suggests a woman’s worth is dependent on how she looks.

Sexualisation of Eva

Mr Birling’s treatment of women is shown to be **hypocritical**. He **sexualises** Eva Smith when he recalls, **“She was a lively good-looking girl - country-bred, I fancy,”** (Act 1, pg 14), suggesting her appearance was more important to her identity than how good a worker she was.

- The **adjective “lively” infantilises** her, while **“country-bred”** portrays her as an animal or livestock, not a human being.
- The phrase **“I fancy”** suggests Mr Birling is **fantasising** about her as a sexual object.

Protection of Sheila

In contrast, he attempts to exclude Sheila from all discussions of Eva’s death and Gerald’s affair in order to protect her. This reflects how the treatment of women **varied based on their class**. He declares, **“There isn’t the slightest reason why my daughter should be dragged into this unpleasant business,”** (Act 1, pg 17). He is happy for Eva to be sexualised and left out on the streets, but wants to **preserve** his daughter’s **innocence**.

- The **adjective “unpleasant”** and the **verb “dragged”** **connote** filth, showing his fear about **tainting** Sheila’s naivety.

His attempted **censorship** of sex and prostitution and his focus on Sheila being a **“young unmarried girl”** reflects how society **obsessed over female purity, virtue, and chastity**. Priestley suggests upper class women were only respected if they were still **‘pure’** - typically, whether they were **virgins** or faithful in marriage. Lower class women were viewed as prostitutes, so were abandoned.

Eric

As the son of Mr Birling, Eric is a symbol of how **the younger generations of men were taught the misogyny of their fathers**. Priestley presents misogyny as **a tradition that is sustained to benefit men**. At the same time, Priestley uses Eric and his relationship with his father to examine the **damaging effects of masculinity**.



Tension between Eric and Mr Birling

Priestley explores how the **tension** between Eric and Mr Birling is caused by the **pressures** of masculinity. These interactions suggest the pair are **competing for power**. The two clash often:

- When Eric suggests they should **“drink their health and have done with it”** and Mr Birling replies, **“No, we won’t,” (Act 1, pg 4)**.
- Mr Birling tells Eric, **“Just let me finish, Eric. You’ve a lot to learn yet,” (Act 1, pg 6)**.

Mr Birling objects to the way his son is **challenging his authority**, and views him as **inadequate** and **inexperienced**.

We see how Mr Birling is **unimpressed** and **disappointed** with his son for **not conforming to his standards of successful masculinity**. He asks **“What’s the matter with you?” (Act 1, pg 11)** when Eric objects to his joke with Gerald, and calls him a **“hysterical young fool” (Act 3, pg 55)** when he gets upset over Eva’s death. This suggests he is **judging** Eric for showing emotion and being too **sensitive**.

- The **adjective “hysterical” emasculates** (takes away his manliness) Eric because of its connotations of weak femininity.

In return, Eric accuses Mr Birling of **“not”** being **“the kind of father a chap could go to when he’s in trouble” (Act 3, pg 54)**, suggesting the **emotional detachment** and **aggression** Mr Birling views as masculine has **distanced** them from each other. Priestley implies **toxic masculinity** prevents men from supporting each other, and instead makes them fear others.

Marriage

Marriage was seen as a major life goal, and made men the head of their own households, so was viewed as a **symbol of manhood**. Priestley shows how Eric has crumbled under the pressure he feels to get married and make his father proud. To explain why he slept with Eva, Eric explains, **“Well, I’m old enough to be married, aren’t I, and I’m not married” (Act 3, pg 52)**.

Eric’s treatment of Eva

Eric’s treatment of Eva is an **allegory** for how most upper class men treated women and viewed sex. Priestley shows how men **abused** and **exploited** women, particularly prostitutes, and how they took advantage of **desperate** situations some women were in.

- Eric recalls how Eva **“wasn’t the usual sort,” (Act 3, pg 51)**, later clarifying, **“I hate these fat old tarts round the town,” (Act 3, pg 52)**.
- This is a **bigoted** description of women, with the **profanity “tarts”** showing how he shames women for **sex work and displaying sexuality**.



The audience knew by this point that it was his family's fault Eva Smith was on the streets. Eric is therefore blaming the **"tarts"** for the situation he contributed to. He describes Eva as not the **"usual sort"** to justify why he slept with her, suggesting she was a more respectable, 'tasteful' option, but his actions show how **hypocritical** he is. Priestley demonstrates how upper class men **condemned prostitutes while simultaneously using them**. He suggests women, particularly lower class women and sex workers, were **scapegoats** that men used to disguise their own mistakes or flaws.

Alongside his bigotry, Eric **objectifies** and **sexualises** women. He describes Eva as **"pretty and a good sport"**, (Act 3, pg 52), suggesting his attraction to her was **superficial**. **"Good sport"** connotes kindness or generosity, implying Eva tolerated Eric while he took advantage of her. **"Sport"** can also refer to a hunting game, presenting women as **prey for men**.

The Inspector emphasises how Eric **dehumanised** Eva when he describes how he **"just used her for the end of a stupid drunken evening, as if she was an animal, a thing, not a person,"** (Act 3, pg 56), showing how men's desires were treated with infinitely more value than women's.

→ Eric insists **"it was all very vague"** (Act 3, pg 52) and he **"was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty,"** (Act 3, pg 51). This shows how he didn't, and won't, take responsibility for his actions, because his violence was **natural** for a **"chap"** and he couldn't **restrain** himself. Priestley shows how **society treated violent masculinity as if it were natural or even desirable, and so couldn't be helped**.

Gerald

Whereas Eric's masculinity is crude and imperfect, which makes him a disappointment to his father, Gerald is a **symbol** for the **refined, cultured masculinity of the upper classes**. He isn't a dandy, but he is well-liked and well-respected about town, making him the perfect **respectable gentleman** and the perfect son-in-law.

Although he is polite and charming, Priestley reveals how his misogyny is **insidious** (subtle but harmful). He is shown to be **manipulative** and **selfish** in his behaviour towards women, showing how even the most respectable men are corrupt.

Silencing of Sheila

Priestley shows how Gerald uses **gender stereotypes** to his **advantage**. He tries to **silence** Sheila when she discovers his affair and tries to remove her from the dining-room by saying, **"I think Miss Birling ought to be excused any more of this questioning. She's nothing more to tell you. She's had a long, exciting and tiring day - we were celebrating our engagement, you know - and now she's obviously had about as much as she can stand,"** (Act 2, pg 27). By **speaking for her**, Gerald suggests he knows her



<https://images.app.goo.gl/YXuFMWR9Rbj1HTFHA>



mind better than she does, symbolising how **men stole women's voices**. This exchange epitomises the way **women were erased from conversations that concerned them**.

- His tone is **patronising** and **belittling**. The **adjectives "long, exciting and tiring"** present women as **delicate** and **childlike**. They also allude to **female hysteria** - Gerald is trying to **invalidate** her before she reveals his secrets.
- Priestley illustrates how **sexist stereotypes were invented and used to benefit or protect men**.
- The aside **"we were celebrating our engagement"** **stakes his claim over her** as her husband-to-be.

Hypocritical views about women

Like Mr Birling and Eric, Gerald's views on women are shown to be **hypocritical**. Firstly, he believes **"young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things" (Act 2, pg 27)**, but the Inspector rightfully points out, **"We know one young woman who wasn't, don't we?" (Act 2, pg 28)**. This suggests Gerald has **double standards** for upper class and working class women.

- Priestley accuses men of **abandoning lower class women** in **"unpleasant and disturbing"** circumstances while **pretending to care about women's fragile innocence**. It appears that Gerald pretends to care about Sheila's state of mind in order to remove her from the conversation.

Objectification of women

Later, he explains how the Palace bar is **"a favourite haunt of women of the town"** but he didn't intend to stay long because he **"hate[s] those hard-eyed dough-faced women"**, (Act 2, pg 34), portraying prostitutes and working class women as **grotesque** and **hostile**.

- **"Hard-eyed"** and **"dough-faced"** refer to the women's **appearance**, implying if a woman doesn't look the way Gerald wants, he will avoid her. Her personality is irrelevant.
- In contrast, he recounts how Eva **"looked quite different"** and was **"altogether out of place down there"**, but was **"very pretty [...] young and fresh and charming"** (Act 2, pg 34-35).

As he is purely attracted to her appearance it is clear he sees her as a **sexual object**. The **adjectives "young and fresh"** may refer to her **virginity**. Sleeping with her would be a **sexual conquest**, as taking a woman's virginity was seen as a sign of **masculine strength**. By claiming she was **"different"** and **"out of place"**, Gerald tries to argue she was different from the other **"women of the town"**. Like Eric, he defends his attraction to her, and tries to show that his tastes are more distinguished than other men's. Therefore, **he condemns others for their sexual desires while celebrating his own**.

Eva as his mistress

Through keeping Eva as his mistress, Gerald has **objectified** her and used her as a **physical token of his masculinity**. The Inspector asks him if he **"decided to keep her - as [his] mistress" (Act 2, pg 36)**, as if he were making a decision about a pet not a person. Sheila summarises how he **"set her up as his mistress and then dropped her when it suited him" (Act 2, pg 41)**.



- The **verbs** “*keep*”, “*set up*” and “*dropped*” all portray Eva as an **object** that Gerald **controlled**.
- Furthermore, “*keep*” implies she was his **possession**, while “*dropped*” connotes **carelessness** or dumping rubbish.

He supposes their affair was “*inevitable*” because she was “*young and pretty and warm-hearted - and intensely grateful,*” (Act 2, pg 37). These descriptors portray Eva as the **ideal submissive woman**.

- The **adjective** “*inevitable*” presents **masculine desire** as **irresistible** and **unyielding**. Furthermore, he admits he “*adored*” being “*the wonderful Fairy Prince*”, arguing “*nearly any man would have done*”, (Act 2, pg 38), suggesting his **selfish exploitation** of Eva’s “*intense*” gratitude was a **natural** part of his masculinity.

Priestley shows how Gerald used Eva to **nurse his own ego**, as she made him feel “*important*” and **powerful**. He suggests **masculinity is fragile and depends on the submission of women for validation**.

Things to note

Gender and sexism are not the main focuses of Priestley’s play. Unlike with other main themes, the characters aren’t confronted about their bigotry and misogyny, and they **don’t explicitly repent**. Priestley possibly did this to avoid making the play more controversial than it already was.

Regardless of the characters’ awareness of the influence gender has on them, **gender politics is a constant undercurrent in their dialogue**. Priestley does this to show how **inequality** in society is **multifaceted** and is not dependent on one thing. Eva Smith is treated poorly because she is working class **and** because she is a woman. Only if society **addresses all of its prejudices and biases will social equality be possible**.

