

Write about Sheila and how she is presented throughout the play. [40]

- Refer to the extract and events in the play as a whole;
- Show your understanding of characters and events in the play.

At the start of the play, Priestley describes Sheila as being '*very pleased with life and rather excited*.' This excitement is due to her engagement to Gerald Croft – a wealthy and successful business man. Through her engagement, Sheila has met society's expectations to marry, with her choice of husband being a wise choice both socially and economically. As well as her engagement, Sheila is celebrating and toasting her and her family's success, and it can be argued that she is very much like her parents in being '*pleased with life*', whilst being oblivious and ignorant of others.

However, very early on there is a suggestion that everything isn't as it seems, '*last summer, when you hardly came near me*.' The audience immediately suspects Gerald's infidelity, but Sheila does not pursue this, possibly highlighting a lack of confidence at the start of the play, aware of her lowly position within the family. Her pressure to conform is compounded with her mother's retort, '*Sheila, don't tease him*.' In spite of this, Sheila is in a very joyful and comfortable mood at the start, completely unaware of what is about to ensue.

Once the Inspector begins to question Mr Birling's attitudes towards the lower classes, Sheila responds '*these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people*'. This statement conveys her caring and compassionate side, as well as her willingness to speak out against her parents' aloof views of society. The word '*people*' once more shows her considerate nature and belief in equality.

Her reaction is the complete opposite of her parents, '*oh, how horrible*,' and she becomes eager for her parents to adopt a similar response, '*mother, a girl's just died*' once more highlighting her compassionate and emotional personality.

Sheila is forthcoming with her involvement in Eva Smith's suicide, portraying her honesty and eagerness to show remorse. '*She was very pretty...I couldn't be sorry for her*' shows that she was once vain and pompous (much like her parents) as she acted purely out of jealousy, fully aware of the dire consequences of her actions against a lower class girl.

However, upon giving her admission, Sheila is remorseful, sorrowful and regretful, '*I'll never, never do it again*' with the repetition of '*never*' underlying her desperation to learn and to change. She is aware that her only option now is to alter her ways, to reform, '*why did this have to happen?*'

As the inquiry progresses, she becomes aware of both the Inspector's power and purpose, mocking Gerald's attempts to cover up the truth, '*you fool, he knows, of course he knows*.' Sheila has now changed from the passive character she once was, to a voice of reason, much like that of the Inspector, demanding to know answers from those who she foolishly trusted.

Sheila becomes even more perceptive when she is able to predict the Inspector's next movements, highlighted when she pleads to her mother '*now mother don't you see*'. She is keen for her family not to put up '*a wall*' between them and Eva Smith, knowing full well that the Inspector will simply break it down. Her perceptiveness is also a key reason why she begins to question and doubt the Inspector before anyone else.

Sheila's confidence is symbolised when she offers the ring back to Gerald, '*you'd better take this with you*' highlighting that she is willing to stand up to and break from her parents (as well as society's) expectations.

Once the Birling family realise that the evening was a hoax, Sheila's stance on the matter does not wain. At the start of the extract, Sheila states '*(tensely)...it frightens me the way you talk.*' Highlighting her shock and bewilderment at her parents' reaction. An irreparable divide has formed between the generations, '*frightens*' and her reformed character almost pleads with her parents to listen, to change (tensely). She then explains '*(passionately) You're pretending everything's just as it was before,*' once more conveying her positively changed character. She speaks for the audience, as well as for the Inspector after his departure. The fact she is described using the adverb '*passionately*' symbolises her eagerness and near desperation for her parents' arrogance and dismissal of responsibility to be proved wrong.

Sheila echoes the Inspector's damning final words, '*I remember what he made me feel – fire, blood and anguish*' showing that she is willing to break from her parents' arrogance and false view of the world. Sheila, like her brother Eric, learns her lesson about responsibility and we feel confident that it will be the '*famous younger generation*' who will go on to form a better and fairer society. Sheila embodies Priestley's desires for the world – whilst understanding and admitting our faults, learning from them to become wiser and more caring '*we don't live alone. We are responsible for each other.*'

However, at the end of the play, prior to the final phone call, Gerald offers Sheila the engagement ring back (symbolising the little that he has learned). Though we may expect otherwise, Sheila doesn't refuse the ring, '*it's too soon.*' This response may highlight her forgiving nature, as shown in her response to Gerald's confession '*in a funny way I respect you more than I did*'. But it may also suggest that she isn't completely willing to break from society's expectations, as marriage ensured a secure future.

The audience may well be left frustrated with Sheila's final words, but she does speak out against the wrongs of society (represented by her parents) and more significantly, she takes on the role and voice of the Inspector after he has left, desperate to teach his lesson about responsibility. Sheila is the voice of Priestley's new society, '*you began to learn something*'. Through her guilt, she learns her lesson and becomes a reformed character.