



First Rate Tutors

An Inspector Calls

Model Answers



- **Four model answers**
- **Eight exam questions**
- **Quotes & Revision Notes**

Model Answers

How does Priestley reveal the important roles that Sheila and Eric have in An Inspector calls?

Write about:

- **how Eric and Sheila respond to their family and to the Inspector**
- **how Priestley presents Eric and Sheila by the way he writes.**

J. B. Priestley uses the characters of Sheila and Eric Birling as important examples of the terrible way those in the upper classes treat the poorer members of society. However as the play progresses and they learn of their transgressions, as well as the devastating impact that they had on Eva Smith and Daisy Renton, they are used as powerful examples of the change that the wealthy are capable of. Sheila and Eric become extremely remorseful and they provide potent examples of people who have the power to spark social change. This essay will examine the important roles that they both have in “An Inspector Calls.”

Firstly, we meet the character of Sheila Birling and we learn that she is “a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited.” She is engaged to Gerald Croft, who is the son of a wealthy and aristocratic family and she seems to be quite excited, childish and she relies on her parents for guidance: “go on, mummy. You must drink our health.” Priestley presents Sheila’s character in this manner at the outset of the play as contextually – he uses her character to show how insulated the children of wealthy middle class and upper class people were. Her childish attitude is a reflection on how detached many people in the middle and upper classes were from society. Priestley purposefully chose to set the play in the Edwardian Era which was just before the onset of the First World War as a way of showing the stark divides that existed between women like Sheila, who by birth were gifted with plenty, as opposed to women like Eva who were exploited and mistreated from their youth and through their adulthood simply because they were part of the powerless working class.

While Sheila’s character is quite effeminate, she has a strong side to her as she is assertive. This is in direct contrast to her brother Eric, who at the start of the play is presented as somewhat irresponsible and troubled. He appears isolated and mysterious as he “guffaws” at a private joke that Sheila derides: “You’re squiffy.” We increasingly sense that he may be an alcoholic as Eric himself hints at this when he sarcastically proposes a toast to the engagement of Gerald and Sheila: “We’ll drink to their health...” It is interesting that of the two siblings, it seems that the weaker one is a man and it appears that Priestley did this as a way of reversing the roles that were traditionally assigned to men and women at the time. While Sheila is outspoken and assertive – which at the time were perceived as

casual sexual flings with. The damaging and insidious effects of social class divisions is presented through Eric's relationship with Daisy as this is Priestley's way of showing that a divided and unequal social class system robs many women of their agency and humanity.

Moreover, Sheila's encounter with Eva Smith is important in showing how highly exposed people in the working classes were exposed to the whims of selfish upper class people. We learn that when Sheila visits a shop and encounters Eva working there, she is instantly jealous of her. Sheila recalls that when she tried on a dress that did not suit her, she knew it would suit Eva: "She was the right type for it, just as I was the wrong type. She was very pretty too..." Sheila uses her power to get Eva unfairly fired as she resents the fact that she catches her smirking at her appearance. Priestley uses Sheila's encounter with Eva to reveal the total power that those in the upper middle classes as well as the elite had over the working classes, as well as the unfair manner in which they exercised this control. This created a high level of damage among working class people who were helpless to their whims, hence Priestley reveals the disproportionate power the rich had over the poorer people in a socially divided class system.

To conclude, Priestley presents the idea of social class as a challenge that caused the marginalisation of poor and weak members of society. He uses the journey as well as the tragic suicide of Eva Smith and Daisy Renton to show how brutally marginalised working women – and by extension working class people – were as well as how upper middle class people as well as upper class people totally disregarded them. This play is used to teach and warn the wealthier in socially divided systems to have more care and regard for the poorer among them, otherwise they can have a tragic impact on these people.