

1

Home sweet home

How does Priestley present the opening and the character of Sheila?



Your progress in this unit:

- explore how Priestley opens the play
- understand and explain the character of Sheila at the start of her journey
- understand the characters at the start of the play and their relationships with Sheila
- explore the way Priestley presents characters to an audience
- develop a response to writing tasks.

GETTING STARTED - THE PLAY AND YOU

A suitable marriage

- 1 Imagine you have a friend from a very privileged background. You are worried that their upbringing has made them spoilt and naïve. They are about to get married, but you know that the person they are about to marry is not all they seem to be. Write down the conversation you would have with them as a short play script (no more than ten lines).
- 2 One day you might be a parent. Will you want to help your children decide who to marry? Write down your ideas about this in a short letter to yourself to be opened at the age of 45.

GETTING CLOSER - FOCUS ON DETAILS

The start of the play

The Birlings, a well-to-do family, have gathered to celebrate the engagement of their daughter, Sheila, to Gerald Croft. They sit around a large

dining table in the centre of the stage. We can tell by the **setting** and the costumes that this is just before the First World War. We find out shortly that the year is 1912.

- 1 Read the opening stage directions. Then copy the following table and use it to list the details Priestley gives and to explain what these details reveal about each character.

Character	Details	What the details reveal
Arthur Birling	'in evening dress', 'white tie' 'heavy-looking', 'portentous' 'provincial in his speech'	wealthy and well-dressed a bit pompous-looking – wanting to impress? speech that can be rural in origin – maybe not as sophisticated-sounding as Birling would like?
Sybil Birling		
Eric Birling		
Sheila Birling		
Gerald Croft		
Edna		

- 2 How do you think Priestley wants his audience to feel about the Birling family at the opening of the play? Discuss this in small groups.

First impressions of Sheila

In this section, you will explore the character of Sheila and the relationships between different characters in the play. During these activities, you should use references from the text to support the points you make. Keep your quotations short and to the point. Identify key words that you could use in your writing.

- 1 Look closely at Sheila’s lines in the first section of the play, before the arrival of the Inspector.
 - a What are your first impressions of Sheila? Create a spider diagram to record your thoughts.
 - b Use the information from your spider diagram to write two or three paragraphs about your first impressions of Sheila’s character. Write about **what she says** or **what others say about her** and use quotations from the text to support your opinion.

- 2 Choose two pairs of characters. In pairs, talk about what you think their attitudes are to each other at the start of the play. Remember to back up your opinions with evidence from the text.
- 3 Choose any three characters. Write a paragraph for each character, explaining what they think of the others. Write in the **first person**, as if you are the character. Try to make sure that your ideas and opinions are true to the text.



Key terms

setting: the description of the place in which a story is set.
first person: a way of writing that tells a story through the eyes of one of the characters, using the pronouns ‘I’, ‘my’ and ‘me’.

All five are in evening dress of the period, the men in tails and white ties.

Stage direction: Act One



GCSE English Literature for AQA: An Inspector Calls

PUTTING DETAILS TO USE

Characters and relationships

We’ve selected this extract to help you develop your understanding of the play and so that you can have more confidence to use textual evidence in your written responses.

Eric *(rather noisily)* All the best! She’s got a nasty temper sometimes – but she’s not bad really. Good old Sheila!

Sheila Chump! I can’t drink to this, can I? When do I drink?

Gerald You can drink to me.

Sheila *(quiet and serious now)* All right then. I drink to you, Gerald.
For a moment they look at each other.

Gerald *(quietly)* Thank you. And I drink to you – and hope I can make you as happy as you deserve to be.

Sheila *(trying to be light and easy)* You be careful – or I’ll start weeping.

Gerald *(smiling)* Well, perhaps this will help to stop it. *(He produces a ring case.)*

Sheila *(excited)* Oh – Gerald – you’ve got it – is it the one you wanted me to have?

Gerald *(giving the case to her)* Yes – the very one.

Sheila *(taking out the ring)* Oh – it’s wonderful! Look – Mummy – isn’t it a beauty? Oh – darling – *(She kisses GERALD hastily.)*

Eric Steady the Buffs!

Sheila *(who has put ring on, admiringly)* I think it’s perfect. Now I really feel engaged.

Mrs B. So you ought, darling. It’s a lovely ring. Be careful with it.

Sheila Careful! I’ll never let it go out of my sight for an instant.

Mrs B. *(smiling)* Well, it came just at the right moment. That was clever of you, Gerald. Now, Arthur, if you’ve no more to say, I think Sheila and I had better go into the drawing-room and leave you men—

Birling *(rather heavily)* I just want to say this. *(Noticing that SHEILA is still admiring her ring.)* Are you listening, Sheila? This concerns you too. And after all I don’t often make speeches at you—

Sheila I’m sorry, Daddy. Actually I was listening.
She looks attentive, as they all do. He holds them for a moment before continuing.

1 Home sweet home

- 1 Working in groups of four, take part in a 'silent discussion' about Sheila:
- Place a large sheet of paper in the middle of a table and write 'Sheila's character' in the middle.
 - You have eight minutes to write notes, ideas and sketches about Sheila's character at this point in the play.
 - You can communicate with each other as much as you like, but **only** through writing. You must not talk to each other.

You may have to work out some things about her character by what she says and by what other characters say about her. For example Eric says: '**She's got a nasty temper**'. This might imply that she is rather spoilt and that she bosses her brother around.

Use the notes you make in this activity to help you with the writing task at the end of the unit.

- 2 Now you are going to put Sheila in the hot-seat. Each person in the group should write down four questions that they would like to ask Sheila, then follow the steps below. Try to make your questions open and challenging. For example:
- Why do you think your brother Eric says you have a nasty temper?
 - Why do you go quiet when Gerald asks you to drink to him?

- a Place one chair with three others facing it.
- b Take it in turns to sit in the hot-seat, in role as Sheila.
- c Answer the questions put to you by the other three in the group. They should make notes of your answers.
- d If you don't know the answer to a question, make something up!



Watch some actors preparing questions for Sheila on Cambridge Elevate.



Learning checkpoint

Use your four questions from the hot-seat activity to write a short 'question-and-answer' interview with Sheila. You could write this as an article for a magazine. In your interview or article, you should:

- ✓ show what you know and understand about Sheila's character and use some quoted details from the text
- ✓ include your own interpretation of the character of Sheila.



I think it's perfect. Now I really feel engaged.

Sheila: Act One

GCSE English Literature for AQA: An Inspector Calls

Characterisation

When looking at people in a play or a novel, you need to be aware of the difference between **character** and **characterisation**.

If you watch a performance of *An Inspector Calls* and the actor playing Sheila is doing a good job, you will feel that Sheila is a real person. This is character. Characterisation is the methods that a writer uses to present a character to the audience and make them realistic.



Watch an actor discuss playing Sheila on Cambridge Elevate.

Now that you have explored how Priestley presents Sheila’s character to an audience, you are going to organise that information and plan a further piece of writing. Before you start, read through the extract again.

The following tasks and questions will help you understand Sheila’s relationship with the other characters. Work in pairs to discuss or carry out each activity, making notes as you go.

- 1 How does Priestley use language in the extract to show the audience that Sheila is wealthy, attractive and intelligent?
- 2 Write down three quotations that suggest Sheila’s life might be rather restricted.
- 3 Think about Sheila’s relationship with her brother, Eric. Write a short paragraph summing up what Eric thinks about his sister. Include quotations from the text to support your interpretation.

- 4 Priestley writes the stage direction ‘*For a moment they look at each other*’. What do you think this detail means?
- 5 Write three bullet points to explain what the dramatic device of the ring tells us about the relationship between Gerald and Sheila.
- 6 What do you think Sheila’s reaction to the ring suggests about the kind of young woman she is?
- 7 Sheila describes the ring as ‘*perfect*’. What does the language Sheila uses tell us about her character at this point in the play?
- 8 Write a short paragraph about Sheila’s relationship with her father. Support your opinions with at least one quotation from the text.



Read more about character and characterisation in the play in Unit 13.



Key terms

character: a person in a story; even when based on real people, characters in plays or novels are invented or fictionalised.
characterisation: the techniques a writer uses to describe characters and make them seem real.

GETTING IT INTO WRITING

Writing about the beginning of *An Inspector Calls*

You need to develop ways of showing your skills in your written responses to *An Inspector Calls*. Your writing for GCSE English Literature will be assessed on:

- your use of detail
- your own interpretations
- your understanding of Priestley’s writing skill and techniques for the theatre
- your use of relevant terminology.

In your response to a question, you should:

- use detail from the text to support your interpretation
- consider how Priestley has created the characters
- show how Priestley’s writing affects an audience
- interpret and analyse the text in a persuasive way.

The following three example student responses show how a basic answer can be improved.

A basic answer shows that you are familiar with what the characters **say** and **do**, and can make some comments on them:

Mr Birling thinks he is very important. He keeps telling the others that he is a ‘hard-headed’ businessman and has been ‘on the Bench’ and a ‘Mayor’, and has a chance of becoming Sir Birling.

A good answer shows that you can use quotations to explain **why** they are interesting or **why** they matter:

Mr Birling is shown to be someone who likes people to know that he is successful and has held some high-status positions. This is because he is ‘provincial’ and his wife is his ‘social superior’, so he needs to draw attention to his achievements.

GCSE English Literature for AQA: An Inspector Calls

The best answers show that you understand **how** characters have been created by a playwright. You explain what the characters say and do, and refer to the author’s **ideas** and **purposes**:

Priestley makes Birling an arrogant, self-made man who is anxious to get on with upper-class people like the Crofts and to raise his social status. Priestley does this by his use of stage directions to the actor and by writing speech that is full of self-praise and showing off. For example when Birling talks to Gerald, Priestley writes: ‘Thanks. (*Confidentially.*) By the way, there’s something I’d like to mention – in the strictest confidence – while we’re by ourselves.’ The playwright is showing us that Birling is very pleased that he can speak to a member of the aristocracy in such an equal way. He believes he has moved up in the world.

- 1 Look back over your work so far. Aim to write two paragraphs in which you explain how Priestley introduces some of the characters and the relationships between them at the beginning of the play.

As you plan and write, make sure you:

- a consider the techniques Priestley uses to create his characters
- b back up your ideas with evidence from the text, using relevant quotations
- c use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures.



Learning checkpoint

When you have finished, swap your response with a partner and read each other’s work. Assess each other on how well you have:

- ✓ commented on relevant selected textual detail
- ✓ made some personal interpretation of characters and relationships
- ✓ explored the playwright’s ideas and attitudes
- ✓ used a range of vocabulary and sentence structures
- ✓ used accurate spelling and punctuation.



Complete this assignment on Cambridge Elevate.

GETTING FURTHER

Turning points

In this unit, you have focused on Sheila’s character at the beginning of her journey.

- 1 As you read and watch the play, make a note of the major **turning points** for her character. Try to find two or three extracts that are significant points in Sheila’s journey.
- 2 Use the same technique to explore the journeys of the characters of Gerald, Eric and Birling.

Sketching Sheila

- 1 Spend no more than five minutes doing a pencil sketch of Sheila, paying particular attention to the costume she might wear.
 - a Draw an expression on her face that sums up her attitude in the extract in this unit.
 - b Add some labels and annotations to your drawing to explain the choices for your design.

- 2 Work in pairs. **A** is the director of the play, **B** is the designer. **B** has to pitch a design for Sheila’s costume to **A**.

- A** As the director of the play, you will want to interrogate every aspect of the designer’s ideas. Have they properly understood the character?
- B** Remember, as the designer you will be keen to explain how the detail of your design expresses Sheila’s character.



Hear more about the designer’s job on Cambridge Elevate.



Key terms

turning points: in any drama, characters have important moments in which their character changes or develops; these key moments are referred to as ‘turning points’.

Well, don’t do any. We’ll drink their health and have done with it.

Eric: Act One

