

BBC BITESIZE

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the BBC Bitesize English literature podcast.

Jean: We're here today to help you dive a little deeper into some of the texts in GCSE English literature. Don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with revision. It's important to let you know that in this podcast, there will be discussions of suicide and sexual abuse.

Carl: In this series, we're going all the way back to 1912 and into a fictional town in the Midlands called Brumley to explore JB Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls*.

Jean: I'm Jean Menzies, author and ancient historian.

Carl: and I'm Carl Anka, an author and journalist, and in this episode, we're going to take a look at the second set of characters in *An Inspector Calls* and get to know Sheila, Eric, and Gerald.

In the last episode we talked about Inspector Goole who acts as the play's moral conscience, we talked about Mr And Mrs Birling, parents of the family who live by more old fashioned 19th century values. But in this episode, we're going to be looking at the younger generation of characters. So let's get back to the dinner party.

Jean: When the play begins, the family is celebrating Sheila and Gerald's engagement. Let's start with Gerald since he's the only one who isn't a Birling. We get our first introduction to Gerald through the stage directions:

Carl: Gerald Croft is an attractive chap about 30 years of age, but very much of the easy well-bred young man about town.

Jean: The Birlings are pretty pleased about Sheila and Gerald's engagement. Gerald comes from a family of upper class business owners and Mr Birling hopes their families can join forces in business

Carl: and that by marrying Sheila, Gerald will improve the Birling's social status.

Extract:

Birling: Your father and I have been friendly rivals in business for some time now – though Crofts limited are both older and bigger than Birling and company – and now you've brought us together, and perhaps we may look forward to the time when Crofts and Birlings are no longer competing but are working together – for lower costs and higher prices.

Gerald: Hear, hear! And I think my father would agree to that.

Mrs Birling: Now, Arthur, I don't think you ought to talk business on an occasion like this.

Jean: At the beginning of the play, Gerald is confident and charming, but this quickly changes when the inspector reveals that he had an affair with Eva Smith when she was going by the name Daisy Renton.

Carl: First, Gerald is evasive and tries not to talk too much about it. But then he realises that Sheila already suspected they had an affair. So Gerald opens up and reveals that he knew Eva/ Daisy.

Jean: But she was not happy with him.

Extract:

Sheila: Well, Gerald. Were you in love with her?

Gerald: It's hard to say. I didn't feel about her how she felt about me.

Sheila: Of course not. You were the wonderful fairy-tale prince. You must have adored it.

Gerald: All right, I did for a time.

Jean: You don't really get to be a knight in shining armour if you end up having an affair and cheating on your girlfriend.

Carl: Not at all, but unlike the Birlings, Gerald did make Eva/ Daisy happy. She adored him. And he gave her a safe place to stay when they were having their affair. But then he ended it. Eva was left heartbroken.

Jean: There's such a problematic power dynamic in this relationship. Eva/ Daisy is totally dependent on Gerald for money and shelter. So the play does hint at the ways that society is unfair to women. This kind of relationship is not healthy.

Gerald: She told me she'd been happier than ever before, but that she knew it couldn't last - hadn't expected it to last. She didn't blame me at all. I wish to God she had now. Perhaps I'd feel better about it.

Jean: Now Sheila gives him back her engagement ring after she hears the truth. And at the end of the play, when the family finds out that Inspector Goole isn't who he said he was, Gerald tries to give Sheila her ring back, which really shows he hasn't changed.

Extract:

Gerald: Everything's all right now. So what about this ring?

Sheila: No, Gerald, not yet. It's too soon. I must think.

Jean: now, it takes a lot for a party to start with someone trying on their engagement ring and then for it to end with them calling off the engagement.

Carl: Yep. And that's because Sheila goes through a real transformation. Let's rewind to the start of the play.

Extract:

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.)*

Jean: Sheila is a privileged and naive young lady whose parents treat her like a child. She’s introduced to us through the stage directions:

Extract:

Sheila is a pretty girl in her early 20s, Very pleased with life and rather excited

Jean: In the first half of the play, she speaks gaily, half serious, half playful. But by the end of the play, she speaks severely and passionately.

Jean: So when the inspector first arrives, she’s shocked by the news of Eva Smith’s death and feels really bad. She has an emotional response, which really highlights the difference between her and her mother.

Extract:

Sheila: Sorry, it’s just I can’t help thinking about this girl destroying herself so horribly. And I’ve been so happy tonight.

Carl: But when the inspector starts to question Sheila, she almost immediately knows what part she played in Eva’s death. She looked at a dress in a shop and she didn’t think it looked good enough. But then she caught a glimpse of Eva Smith holding the dress up to her body, it looked so good with Eva that it instantly brought Sheila’s insecurities out.

Extract:

Sheila: It just didn’t suit me at all. I looked silly. I went to the manager of Millwoods. And I told him that if he didn’t get rid of that girl, I would persuade mother to close our account with them.

Carl: using your influence to punish someone just because you can. I wonder when she picked her up from...

Jean: The apple does not fall very far from the tree in this case. But unlike her mother, Sheila immediately feels guilty for her actions and takes responsibility for the negative effect they had on Eva’s life.

Extract:

Sheila: I felt rotten about it at the time. And now I feel a lot worse.

Carl: As the play goes on, Sheila matures and shows her assertive side by standing up to her mother and her father. She also refutes their belief about working class people. This really speaks to a growing sense of social responsibility.

Extract:

Sheila: These girls aren't cheap labour. They're people.

Jean: She shows us that she's insightful and intelligent. She can see where the inspector's investigation is going and tries to warn her family not to deny the role they played in Eva Smith's death.

Carl: Indeed, by the end of the play, Sheila has matured and has realised that her actions can and did have grave consequences. She knows that the story of Eva Smith has changed the way that she sees the world.

Jean: And unlike her parents, Sheila isn't the same person at the end of the play. She matures from a girl to a woman. She ends her engagement with Gerald and shows genuine remorse.

Extract:

Sheila: Everything we said had happened really had happened. If it didn't end tragically then that's lucky for us. But it might have done.

Jean: Unlike her parents, she will actually learn something from the inspector and so does her brother Eric.

Carl: When the play starts we're introduced to Eric, the Birling's son. He's a man but his parents still treat him as a boy.

Jean: Eric is in his early 20s. Not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive.

Carl: And you can see that boyishness in the way that the stage directions describe the way he speaks and acts

Jean: Rather noisily, uneasily, defiantly, miserably and sulkily

Carl: When the dinner party starts you can tell that Eric isn't very confident. And at one point, he tries to stand up to his father, but his father talks down to him.

Jean: It becomes pretty clear that Eric is drunk at the dinner table and later it's revealed that he's been drinking too much for quite some time. But his mother thinks that Eric is just her perfect baby boy.

Carl: Mrs Birling is completely oblivious to who her son really is. Until she finds out that Eric aggressively pushed Eva Smith into sleeping with him when he was drunk. And then Eva Smith became pregnant. We have to pause here and call out what that behaviour really is, because it really isn't acceptable.

Jean: Although the words aren't used in the play themselves, we know as an audience that what Eric has done is sexual assault.

Extract:

Eric: Yes, I insisted – it seems. I'm not very clear about it, but afterwards she told me she didn't want me to go in but that – well, I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty – and I threatened to make a row.

Jean: After getting her pregnant, Eric tried to take some responsibility for Eva and the unborn child. But instead of earning his own money, he stole it from his father's business so Eva refused to take it.

Carl: At the end of the play, Eric takes responsibility and stands up to his parents and gets angry at his mum for not helping Eva when she went to the women's charity.

Extract:

Eric: (*almost threatening her*) You don't understand anything. You never did. You never even tried – you.

Jean: Although he's still not my favourite character, Eric shows that he can be assertive when he's expected to actually act like an adult. The inspector's questioning forces Eric to take responsibility for his actions. And by the end of the play, we as an audience no longer see him as the childish boy, his parents treat him as but as the grown man who has done something terrible that the inspector highlights him as.

Extract:

Eric: I stole some money. But the money is not the important thing. It's what happened to the girl. And what we all did to her that matters.

Eric: Whoever that chap was, the fact remains that I did what I did. And mother did what she did. And the rest of you did what you did to her. It's still the same rotten story.

Carl: The inspector has had a real effect on both Sheila Birling and Eric Birling. Their parents treat them like children, but the inspector treats them like adults and gets them to take responsibility for their actions.

Jean: By the end of the play, the audience has hope that the younger Birlings have learned some kind of lesson, that they'll leave the dinner party less likely to take advantage of their power and influence and more likely to take responsibility for their actions.

Carl: As Sheila said, they're not the same people sat down for dinner at the start of the evening.

Jean: No, they're not and in the next episode of the podcast, we're going to be talking about the key themes in An Inspector Calls.

Carl: We have a lot more to discuss. Listen to the other episodes to find out more.

Jean: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize English literature podcast.