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Gender Sensitization in “An Inspector Calls”: A Feminine Gendering Portrait of Social Landscape by J B Priestley

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Abstract

Amidst in cultural landscape of England, Priestley in “An Inspector Calls”, sternly advocates about the idea of feminine-gendering-landscape in pre-war British society. Through the massive representation of feminine characters of the play, he tends to open the reality of white-skinned-men of the society who as per patriarchal or men-gendered attitudes how suppress the women in the pre-war British society. “An Inspector Calls” set in 1912, amidst cultural landscape of Britain, a time when there was a class divide and gender sensitization and especially feminine-gendering who expected to know their position and place in provincial or metropolitan landscape in British society that is evident from the doom character of the play-Eva Smith alias Daisy Renton. So, Priestley explores the idea of gender discrimination through Mr. Arthur Birling, Gerold Croft and Eric birling in one side and Sybil Birling, Sheila Birling with especial attention on Eva Smith by the plaintiff Goole on other side.

Keywords: cultural landscape, feminine-gendering, social landscape, metropolitan landscape, provincial landscape, gender discrimination

Introduction

The three act play, “An Inspector Calls” is a such type of work in which the playwright present a gender sensitive case with his stylistic way of writings in which male lust and sexual exploitation of the weak by the powerful white-skinned British- also a call by the millions of British mouth to English society.

Social landscape of women between Two-Wars

Historically, the family as a social unit had undergone a significant transformation during the first fifty years of the twentieth century, not only because of the two world wars in which whole generations of men had died, but also because of increase in social mobility and leisure time and a significant increase in the levels of professionalization among lower-middle and middle-class women. With two world wars only some twenty-one years apart, two out of three generations of women had differentiated expectations in terms of their place in the employment market. Women were often required to work in traditionally ‘male’ vocations during each of the two world wars and, although legislations and social theory aimed to reverse the position after each, by the 1950s middle-class women were a strong component of the workforce. With the newly acquired partial franchise in 1918 and the full vote in 1928, women had growing social power as voting citizens, despite the various Married Women’s Laws which prohibited them working in certain professions once married. Such transformations were bound to change the structure and operation of the family as a working unit, and this was something of which Priestley was aware. In his essay published in the early 1920s, “In Praise of the Normal Woman”, he berated the generation of ‘elderly men’ who were ‘secretly terrified by the ‘new type of woman’.

Priestley’s new-gender-gradient theme

In the 1930s, Priestley began a new career as a dramatist, a form of writing many have considered best suited to his great talent. His plays were impeccably crafted, sometimes experimental and are characterized by pre-war settings and various perspectives on time, they include: : “Dangerous Corner”, “When We Are Married”, “I Have Been Here Before” and his most famous play “An Inspector Calls”.

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The later, "An Inspector Calls", combined his fascination with the nature of time with his ideas about society. As a socialist, Priestley was interested in the class system and how it had the power to divide society. The division in classes plays an important role in "An Inspector Calls". The drama is set in 1912, a time when there was a class divide and *gender sensitization* in Britain and many were expected to know their place in society and not attempt to disrupt that position.

Initially, in this three-act-play a fictitious character in terms of disguised Inspector ironically revealed the *gender-sensitive-issues* of a true story. The way of confession by the whole family regarding the death of the victimized girl shows the gender-discrimination prevailed under the British society.

Gradient towards female characters in the novel

Priestley includes a strong range of female characters in "An Inspector Calls" from an upper-class superior people, through a vain daughter to an oppressed factory workers, showing he wanted to convey from all types of social backgrounds. However, Eva Smith, the working class girl, was the only character who suffered the most because of her *gender-sensitization*, she was treated differently by all character throughout the play. She had value in society what so ever and we have seen this on many different occasions. Sheila is representing the young youth and woman in general, she is taking a stand for all the lower class women who are not treated very well by the society and this also comes back to J. B. Priestley's message from this book that we are all responsible for each other, and we all have to look out for each other.

The *theme of gender* is presented to the readers as well as audience as dramatic irony as well, since this play was written in 1912, the play shows how women were in that certain period of time, they did not have as many rights, they were not treated equally with men, in fact they were seen to be lower than men.

However, in the time that this play was written in 1945 woman had a lot more rights due to the fact that when men left the country for war, which according to Mr. Birling was not supposed to happen, all the women were the people who looked the country and kept it going, women become more interdependent and the society just grew and become a lot more open minded with their thoughts.

The consequences of the Birling's actions highlights Priestley's ideas on social responsibility---do we look after one another in society. The difference between the younger and older characters' reactions to Eva Smith's death shows how Priestley viewed the younger generations. He viewed the younger generation as hope for the future and this is why both Sheila and Eric learn from the Inspector.

Men-gender gradient towards feminine gendering

How the male characters behave towards the females in the play highlights important points on *gender and inequality*. As in the play the British men went away to fight during II World-War, their positions in work had to be filled by women. This helped change existing perceptions. Men had to acknowledge the fact that women were just as capable as them. As a result of this, many women enjoyed a newfound freedom that working and earning money allowed them. Not all men saw this change in attitude as a good thing and stayed stuck in the past. Priestley explores the impact of

these *new gender roles* through the independence of Eva Smith and the sexist attitudes of Mr. Birling.

Priestley shows Mr. Birling's idea about women when Mr. Birling is telling Eric and Gerald about women's attitudes towards the cloth they wear through these lines, "***not only something to make 'em look prettier-but-well, assort of sign or token of their self-respect***", shows that he has a patronizing view of women, making the suggestion that clothes are a sign of self-respect for them. He has a stereotypical view of women here and does not see them as individuals but suggests that all women think in the same way.

Here, Priestley shows the mentality of early twentieth century British middle class men's stereotype gender view about women of the society.

Mr. Gerald makes sexiest and superficial comments about the women in the bar he visits-another sign of *gender sensitization*. The lines of the drama, "***I hate those hard-eyed dough-faced women***", Gerald shows that he can be very superficial in his view of women. If they do not meet his standard of how they should look, he dislikes them.

Here, Priestley shows that how in one side Mr. Gerald was eager to marry Shiela of Birling's family and on the other hand castigated remarks on the bar-tender-girls and the women who visited bar seems to him only they are meant for flesh of the women attracts him sexiest only is atypical mindset of ruined British middle class men's mentality about the feminine gender.

Feminine-gendering gradient towards female-gender

In the next act of the play how Mrs. Birling being a pre-twentieth-century women of Britain prejudiced about a lower-middle-class working women Eva through the lines, "***She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position.....***" that even women like Mrs. Birling can be just as cruel and old fashioned as the men are. She does not try to empathise with a member of her own gender. This also highlights her negative attitude towards the working class women.

Through the above lines Priestley shows how a motherly women have no compassion in her heart about her own gender, equally shows the traits of gender discrimination attitudes of not only about the British society but also about the whole world.

Conclusion

Lastly and leastly the words of supernatural ominous inspector, "***If men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish***" has been read as a parable about social landscape of feminine gendering in English society. The romantic idea of gentlemanly chivalry towards "fallen women" is also debunked as being based on male lust and sexual exploitation of the weak by the powerful. In inspector's final speech, the victim girl is referred to as a representative for millions of other vulnerable working class female, and can be read as a call to action for English society to take more responsibility for working-class people prefiguring of the post-World War II welfare state.

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