

## HOW DOES PRIESTLEY USE GERALD CROFT'S STATUS TO SHOW HIS IDEAS ABOUT SOCIETY

Within Priestley's didactic play, Gerald manifests as a paragon of social superiority, his status precedes him which foreshadows how he will later abandon morality to favour egocentric preservation of status. He is introduced as a fashionable socialite who can navigate life with ease: "the easy, well-bred young man-about-town" which synonymises a high status and comfort within Edwardian society. The unorthodox descriptor of "well-bred" stands out to a modern audience as animalistic, reminiscent of pedigree dogs or horses. Perhaps this serves to admonish the attitudes towards status at the time and regard them as inhumane. Moreover, the idiom "man-about-town" implies a level of worldliness and sophistication yet also suggests his status grants him a hedonistic and frivolous lifestyle. This could foreshadow the later events of the play as we hear of him physically 'about-town' picking up women from the Palace bar; from this, it seems there is an abuse of his status to indulge in hedonism. As Act One unfolds it becomes apparent that Gerald is puppeteered by his status, as a "well-bred" man much of his worldview is imposed on him by his parents and upbringing. Gerald is "embarrassed" by Mr Birling's proposition that his mother would believe he "might have done better" for himself socially than marrying Sheila. Whilst this embarrassment could be a response to an awkward and taboo topic being brought up, Gerald's own mention of his "mother" and "father" make the audience question otherwise. Perhaps he does hold the beliefs of his parents in high authority and is thus embarrassed by his failures to uphold the orthodox of his class. The audience are conditioned to simultaneously condemn Gerald's values and pity him as it seems he is trapped within the chokehold of his upbringing and these internalised beliefs. Gerald Croft, therefore, serves as Priestley's tool to portray how ingrained societal values are and how status was given overarching gravitas.

Priestley uses Gerald to interrogate how genuine emotion was corrupted by class; it appears Gerald is only able to navigate the events of Eva's life and death through business semantics. Initially, he detaches himself from, and downplays her death by referring to it as "suicide business" which comes across as apathetic and callous. As an aristocrat, he adopts the belief that disagreeable matters are beneath him, through euphemising her suicide as "business" he doesn't allow it to become real in his own world. A vocational semantic field endures throughout the play through phrases such as "install her" and "in return" which reduce even his romantic encounter with Eva to be economic. Perhaps this is a diatribe against the ways even love is corrupted by money and finance in British society. In one sense we could pity Gerald as perhaps distancing himself from reality is a coping mechanism to protect himself from grief, however, as the play unfolds his materialistic character comes to light thus it seems far more likely that is a means of him denying responsibility for both Eva's death and his liaison reducing them both to matters of "business". This materialistic and apathetic attitude is epitomised at the end of the play through him claiming "Everything's all right now, Sheila. (Holds up the ring.) What about this ring?". Priestley's use of metonymy portrays Gerald's lack of compassion, substituting the prospect of marriage for the physical noun "ring". Rather than a romantic affinity Gerald perceives marriage as a social construct; something void of emotion. Priestley critiques how his status has confined him to view the world through ingrained societal beliefs rather than through humanistic emotions. The focus back to the proposal also grants the play a cyclical structure which is an opportunity to highlight Gerald's failure to change; the audience condemns how he retreats into the "easy" life his status brings him. Ultimately, Priestley ridicules how capitalism regards wealth over emotion and presents this as overtly undesirable to a 1945 audience.

As a result of his status and gender, Gerald is egocentric, and is compelled by a desire to act as a 'knight in shining armour'. It is ironic as his heroic attempts were instead injurious. Gerald perceived Eva's "soft brown hair and big dark eyes" as a "cry for help" in order to justify his pursuit of her as philanthropic. His perception of heroism is skewed by the capitalist preoccupation with wealth, as he could provide monetary aid, he was blind to the notion that he could emotionally abuse Eva by abandoning her after a short while. The feminine semantics of "soft...hair", "dark eyes" and "cry" profit off the misogynistic 1912 belief that women are not only weak but only serve as objects of attraction; Gerald establishes a power imbalance to position himself within the role of a saviour. There is also an undertone of bitterness to this imbalanced relationship as Priestley establishes a predatory-prey dynamic between the two of them; Eva is described as "fresh" which brings connotations of consumption. Although Gerald attempts to present his actions as heroic it is clear that they are in fact exploitative. This would not be received well by Priestley's contemporary audience, succeeding the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 women in 1945 were far less repressed than the women in the play. Priestley suggests that it was these hardwired capitalist beliefs that allowed female repression to thrive thus chastising capitalism and appealing to his female contemporaries who had a taste of emancipation and would despise the thought of society regressing to the way in which it was in 1912.

In conclusion, Gerald irrevocably epitomises the 'untouchable' upper class in his hedonistic indulgence in the "easy" life of an aristocrat. He operates in a realm where the consequences of his behaviour cannot reach him thus permitting him to act selfishly and recklessly. Priestley comprises the play as an allegory to teach that it is the enduring capitalist attitudes to class which are responsible for encouraging this behaviour. At times the audience may pity how Gerald is really a marionette of his status, however, they are ultimately disappointed by his lack of desire to break free from the chokehold of his capitalist upbringing.