

The Play Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw

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Keywords: George Bernard Shaw; *Pygmalion*; realism; class; drama

Abstract: George Bernard Shaw is a prolific writer who won the Nobel Prize in 1925. His work, *Pygmalion*, is an indirect representation of his personal growth and reflects his understanding of his time, especially his concern for the reality of the lower class. The play's attention to the myth Pygmalion shows the writer's strong desire for social reforms. With this in his heart, Shaw, along with Ibsen, initiates a revolution in drama: they use drama to represent social reality, to broadcast their social ideas, and to inspire the audience to realize these ideas. This article is intended to review the play and myth and is divided into five parts. The first part introduces the playwright Shaw; the second part looks back into the social background of the Victorian Age; the third part is the research of the Pygmalion effect and the original myth; the fourth part is the analysis of the play in detail; and part five is the summary of the whole thesis.

1. Introduction of George Bernard Shaw

1.1 Bernard Shaw as a Dramatist

George Bernard Shaw was born into a lower-middle class Protestant family in Dublin, Ireland on July the 26th 1856 and worked as a clerk between 1871 and 1876. He moved to London at the age of twenty. His early years here, between 1876 and 1884, were filled with frustration and poverty, he was relying on his mother during this period, he said about this period I did not throw myself into the struggle for life: I threw my mother. His move to London has totally changed his view to life.

George Bernard Shaw is a name in the English history that brought to the history plays and different writings. Drama for Shaw was a movement that could be utilized as an ethical operator through his shows, he inhabited as far as understanding good issues. In addition, the spoke of various problems in his plays to help the general population of society to consider the issues. The subject matters that he highlighted in his plays are marriage and equivalent rights for men and women; prostitution and its reasons, connections and numerous other social subjects. The majority of his plays are instructional as they contemplate over some social issue being predominant in the general public.

1.2 Bernard Shaw's Drama

George Bernard Shaw is recognized as one of the greatest dramatists in the British history of literature, some critics compare him to Shakespeare who regarded as the greatest writer in the

English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist; it is not easy to be compared to such a great man, it is not said spontaneously or by compliment; but it is because Bernard Shaw is in fact a great dramatist who had a great influence and a footprint to the British literature.

From 1890 to 1950, the English drama was well-known for its prominent playwright Bernard Shaw [1]. He was eminent by using theatre to address his messages and discuss social issues. Shaw was influenced by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Shaw also championed. Like James Joyce, he fervently admired Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright whose plays seemed to sound the death knell for Victorian social certainties. Ibsen's *The Doll House*, for example, dramatized the growing movement for the emancipation of women, a cause Shaw adamantly supported.

1.3 The Irish Influence on Bernard Shaw

Shaw always intends to show his Irish contempt for English, while remarking that the English are incapable of making a play or presenting one. Shaw confirms the non-existence of the English influence on the theatre because the rich purchased powerful Englishmen, as well as preferring politics and church activities. The Irish origins of Bernard Shaw had massive reflect in his writings in which he always commented on different issues and social problems that prevailed in the English society. Shaw himself confided that he is a specialist in the immoral and heretical plays, deliberately with an objective of transferring the nation to his opinion and beliefs on all social and ethical matters. It is a very brave struggle which he undertook to enforce the public to reconsider its morals. In a specific mode, the prefaces proved the thing by which he could manipulate the public conscience, whereas the play is the vehicle by which he conveyed the thing. Through an artistic employment of the dramatic presentation on stage, he created a social awareness in the dull conscience of the existing society.

2. Social State in the Victorian Age

2.1. The Social Classes in the Victorian Period

Throughout most of civilization, people have been divided into social classes: Upper Class, Middle Class, and the Working Class. In the 19th century England, there was a high aristocratic society that distinguished itself from the rest of the English society, consisting of the elegantly dressed Bourgeois class sharply contrasting the poor peasant class that is the upper class [3]. Then there is a middle class, less comfortably than the upper class and less powerful, but respected nonetheless. At the bottom there is the lower working class replacing the majority of people, rarely having the requirements of life and never considered by other classes, no matter how long or hard they worked on improving their circumstances. Nevertheless, the society would still perceive them as a long-termed slave, even if the social class theme comes to an end, the lower class or the underdog will proceed the visual aid till the end of the Victorian era changes the regime.

2.2. Living Conditions and Working Conditions

The 19th century witnessed rapid population increase; the reasons for which are not very clearly explained. But some of the reasons that can be quoted are mortality rate lowering, an increase in the child survival rate.

The movement of the population after the Industrial revolution from countryside to cities seeking jobs in factories made a great growth in population; a large number of skilled and unskilled workers went in search of jobs though they were very lowly paid. Another consequence of this is the overcrowding of towns and cities; thereby resulting in the creation of slums as accommodation that

had become extremely expensive for the common people to afford. In this era of living conditions that varied from a class to another, since these conditions are related to the financial status of the individuals, it is a period of extreme social inequality, and industrialization that caused rapid changes in everyday life that affected the entire classes. In general, people were living in harsh conditions in a period that witnessed a huge child labour.

Children were expected to support their families. They are made to work in dangerous places, some novelists and social commentators spoke about the rapid change and the effects of industrial revolution on the Victorian classes and their living conditions. That is to say, each effect that predates the stances of a regular living, would eventually raise the question of which direction the country is heading for.

3. Pygmalion Effect

3.1. Background Story of Ancient Mythology

In Greek mythology, Pygmalion was a legendary figure of Cyprus, who was a king and a sculptor. In book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion was a Cypriot sculptor who carved a woman out of ivory. Post-classical sources name her Galatea.

According to Ovid, when Pygmalion saw Cyprus practicing prostitution, he began detesting the faults beyond measure which nature has given to women. He determined to remain celibate and to occupy himself with sculpting. He made a sculpture of a woman that he found so perfect he fell in love with it. Pygmalion kisses and fondles the sculpture, brings it various gifts, and creates a sumptuous bed for it.

In time, Aphrodite's festival day came and Pygmalion made offerings at the altar of Aphrodite. There, too afraid to admit his desire, he quietly wished for a bride who would be "the living likeness of my ivory girl". When he returned home, he kissed his ivory statue, and found that its lips felt warm. He kissed it again, and found that the ivory had lost its hardness. Aphrodite had granted Pygmalion's wish. Pygmalion married the ivory sculpture, which changed to a woman under Aphrodite's blessing. In Ovid's narrative, they had a daughter, Paphos, from whom the city's name is derived.

In George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play *Pygmalion*, a modern variant of the myth, the underclass flower-girl Eliza Doolittle is metaphorically "brought to life" by a phonetics professor, Henry Higgins, who teaches her to refine her accent and conversation and otherwise conduct herself with upper-class manners in social situations. This play in turn inspired a 1938 film adaptation, as well as the 1956 musical *My Fair Lady* and its 1964 film adaptation.

3.2. Pygmalion Effect

The Pygmalion effect, or Rosenthal effect, is a psychological phenomenon in which high expectations lead to improved performance in a given area and low expectations lead to worse. The effect is named for the Greek myth of Pygmalion. The psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson present a view that has been called into question as a result of later research findings in their book *Pygmalion in the Classroom*; borrowing something of the myth by advancing the idea that teachers' expectations of their students affect the students' performance. Rosenthal and Jacobson held that high expectations lead to better performance and low expectations lead to worse, both effects leading to self-fulfilling prophecy.

According to the Pygmalion effect, the targets of the expectations internalize their positive labels, and those with positive labels succeed accordingly; a similar process works in the opposite direction in the case of low expectations. The idea behind the Pygmalion effect is that increasing the leader's

expectation of the follower's performance will result in better follower performance. Within sociology, the effect is often cited with regard to education and social class.

4. Analysis of the Play

4.1. *Pygmalion* as a Social Play

Most of the Victorian novelists, writers and playwrights tackled social themes in their writings describing, criticizing and commenting on their social issues and problems. *Pygmalion* was one of the Victorian age plays. It is a comedy about a phonetics expert who, as a kind of social experiment, attempts to make a lady out of an uneducated Cockney flower-girl [4]. Although not as intellectually complex as some of the other plays in Shaw's theatre of ideas, *Pygmalion* nevertheless asks important questions about social class, human behaviour, and transformation of individual and how a person can be influenced by such a change.

Pygmalion is a social play in the first place that explicitly comments on issues of class, gender, identity, class conflict and other social themes. Ganz claims that: “*Pygmalion* illustrates the difference and tension between the upper and lower class in the Victorian period”. A basic belief of the period is that a person is born into a class and that no one can move from one class to another”. [4]

Bernard Shaw's Play addresses the discourse of education and its interrelationship with other discourses, such as class, identity, and the transformation of individual. It also deals with the dynamics of teacher-student power relationship in the context of education discourse. Believing that education is for all people and from all classes. In this play Bernard Shaw talks about the struggle of flower girl named Eliza that struggles to change her lower social class by education and learning so she can talk as a lady from a high class which is the upper class and by that she can break the basic beliefs and the outstanding idea in the Victorian society that each person who was born in any social class cannot change his or her class. Shaw refuses this belief and believes that any person can improve his/her own life through his/her own effort.

The social play *Pygmalion* is a reflection of Bernard Shaw's socialist view, as it is apparent in most of his works. He believed that any artistic work should have a message to convey; his main interest was social themes as a socialist in the first that: “*Pygmalion* illustrates the difference and tension between the upper and lower class in the Victorian period. A basic belief of the period is that a person is born into a class and that no one can move from one class to another”. [2]

4.2. Class Struggle

Pygmalion examines this theme primarily through the character of Eliza, and the issue of her struggle to change her social class. People in the Victorian age mostly judge any person from his appearance and his social class. There are many aspects in the society which are influenced by social class such as the way of speaking, dressing, and thinking. Bernard Shaw portrays this issue first through Eliza the flower girl who is not satisfied with her social situation. The major character Eliza who is a lower-class girl as Shaw described her:

She is perhaps eighteen, perhaps twenty, hardly older, she wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed. Her hair needs washing rather badly. [6]

The fact is that Bernard Shaw described the lower-class people in general through Eliza, people are poor, non-educated, they hardly find a work, all of these descriptions reflect a lower-class appearance and real life. Bernard Shaw, in fact is describing how lower-class people suffer in their life while the upper capitalist class is living in totally different conditions that are surely better in all

fields. The lower-class people were also ignored and had no value in a society that judge by appearances.

Shaw shows that again through another character Professor Higgins who represent an upper-class society. Higgins the upper-class man attacks Eliza by insulting her and saying: “you see this creature with her curbed English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days” [6]. It can be interpreted in the sense of those who are poor will remain poor for the rest of their lives Eliza's.

Social class is what helped dictate how formal her English would be. This struggle of language, way of speaking, dressing and so several other aspects are in fact the fuel of the class division; if someone is judged by what he wears or how he speaks, it is really not fair because in the end man should be never judged by his appearance.

The struggle of Eliza, the flower girl, and why she did not want to continue her life living in such conditions is represented when Professor Henry Higgins who gave her an offer she could not refuse. Higgins is a well-known phonetic expert who studies the science of speech. This character is the direct protagonist of Eliza and yet the observer oftentimes can identify with him as well. His eccentricities and brusque attitude are almost present as comical. He is very unconcerned about the others' feelings and desires but that does not necessarily mean he is centered on himself.

Rather, he feels he is serving the human race at large and that anyone in the way of that is not worth his time. He brutally criticizes Eliza and her crude pronunciations of words. To the snobby, intolerant Higgins inarticulateness and ignorance concerning proper dialect and language produces a verbal class distinction that functions as an external indicator of what class in society one may belong to [4]. Higgins is represented as he is proud by teaching Eliza and changing her from a cockney girl to a duchess. He says to his mother:

But you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul.

Throughout the play, Ms. Doolittle persists to achieve her goal of being a lady from a higher class; the real challenge is of her ability to accept that new different society by its various principles. Bernard Shaw uses Eliza's cockney speech as derogatory towards British society, though the same criticism is cast upon the upper class, the class that judge people from their speech. Higgins and Pickering's treatment of Eliza throughout her growth differentiated from each other. Eliza Doolittle rises to a higher rank not only due to expertise of Higgins and Pickering, but also through her own development as a woman. Her transformation from a lower-class girl to a middle-class lady shows the true concern of *Pygmalion* that is centered on the class system and the resulting changes of a capitalist society, Though Shaw obviously states the theme of this play in the Preface to be confined to phonetics. Bernard Shaw criticized the vulgarity of lower-class language through Eliza who portrays the lower Victorian class characteristics as it is shown in this quote from the play: ‘Ow, eezyə-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewddan y' də-ootybawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awyathahtpyin. Will ye-oopy me f'them?’ [6].

Shaw's comment on Eliza's speech shows his distaste for the cockney accent. According to John A. Mills, Shaw indulges in sporting such as a language, revealing his continuing interest in the comic possibilities of cockney dialect. On the other hand, Shaw cleverly uses this vulgarity of specific dialect to criticize the superficiality of upper class.

The class struggle in this play is a central theme that is portrayed through Eliza whose desire of change motivates her to be a duchess by learning the high-class dialect, and again; this was a portrayal of the class division which was built on the dialect. The playwright signifies that it is a speech alone that makes the difference between a flower girl and a duchess. It is evident that Bernard Shaw represented his view to social classes' variations through the class struggle which

resulted from these variations.

4.3. Social Values

Eliza's reaction to her transformation differs from that of her father's, Alfred Doolittle, due to their contrasting circumstances of rising into higher class. Introduced by Shaw with the full complement of phonetically spelled cockney sounds, Eliza is represented that she wants to change her lower social class to a higher class by learning and aiming to be a duchess to update her speech and manner. On the other hand, Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's father is represented as a materialistic man. Alfred differs from Eliza in many aspects, for he is thrust into a higher social class, not by updated speech or manner, but by money. Shaw's aim to expose the vanities of Philanthropy for he shows how a man's behaviour is a consequence and not due to his character, but of his situation [5].

Both of these characters' views differ in the perspective of how each attains their middle-class status. Alfred is forcefully burdened by the responsibility of actually having money, whereas Eliza tries to change everything about her to gain a respectful position in the professional class since she was not respected by most of people; who would look at her as a lower class flower girl who cannot change anything and she is living only to wait for her death as all poor people from her class, but Shaw comes to say that no one was born to die but to change; this view is portrayed through the character of Eliza who broke all rules, beliefs and thoughts that the Victorian people were believing through their belief that is each person who was born in social class could not change their class. Mr. Doolittle's character exemplifies Shaw's contempt for the poor class and the morals that have risen from such standards.

Another social value is again depicted through the major character Eliza who refused the request of Mr. Higgins to marry her, Eliza resisted all of his advantages that would make her a higher class lady that any lower class girl wants and dreams to be in such a situation and position, Mr. Higgins her teacher who thought that he can dominate her personality and her attitudes, but he discovered that Eliza's values and principles are the part of her personality that can never be changed in opposite to her desire to change her social class. Eliza gains the strength she needs to venture into the professional world by herself after being forced to change her values by Higgins and Pickering. This strength results in her independence and departure from Higgins, only to marry Freddy who is from her social class and they share the same values and principles.

The transformation of Eliza is in fact a standpoint to the theme of *Pygmalion*. The importance at first appears to rest in the power Higgins expressed by achieving this transformation. As the play unfolds, however, the focus shifts so that the effects of the change upon Eliza become central. The truly important transformation that Eliza undergoes is not the adoption of refined speech and manners but the learning of independence and a sense of inner self-worth that allows her to leave Higgins.

Social values are deeply represented in the play, Bernard Shaw wants to show that circumstances may change people, in fact, values and principles would not change easily especially those people who look at their principles as it is something sacred. Class division, social values, and identity have appeared to make a stand for the people who demanded and fought for it at the time. From the point of striking poverty to a well-known voice that the people recognized and depended on while living their lives awaiting such rights to come to them, they knew such facts were to be fought for rather than dreamed of, such as in the play *Pygmalion*, where the theme was about a poor girl from the class that had nothing. Eliza who was from this class is represented that she is more reserved even she reached the bottom of the higher class with her new dialect and behaviour which indicates the great transformation of her personality but not principles and values.

4.4. Identity and Appearance

Pygmalion explores how social identity is formed not only through one's way of speaking, but also from the appearance. One's physical appearance indicates his social class. In the opening scene of the play, any Victorian individual could know anyone from his clothing, moreover, the prejudgment from the appearance is a craft in the Victorian society; people judge each other from their appearances.

Eliza and the gentleman, for example, easily know each other's status through their different attire. As Pickering comments in Act Four: "many noble people believe that one's appearance displays one's natural identity and character, thinking that style comes by nature to people in their position." [6] Somewhat similarly, at the end of the play, Higgins tells Eliza that he cannot change his nature. But the importance of appearances in the play reveals that identity often is changeable, and does not come naturally as it is performed or worn like a costume. Eliza is the most obvious example of this. As she wins Higgins' bet for him, she fools people into assuming that she is from a noble background by changing her appearance. Even before her complete transformation, her own father fails to recognize her in act two only because she has changed clothes and bathed. Eliza showed that she has changed and she is not the same person she used to be, she has shown an external change rather than on the inside because she still reversed to her original dialect at certain times.

Overall, Eliza has changed; in many different ways which include her new identity that has accompanied her improved hygiene, self-esteem, confidence, views and her relationships such as the one that was formed with Freddy. Eliza has found her self-importance and independence and she can now leave Higgins, without his need all the time, as she left with Freddy. Eliza will continue to work hard and fight for the identity she thought she deserved. Eliza's identity significantly changes over the course of the story, but her essence remains true to the hopeful Cockney speaking girl we met at the beginning of the play.

5. Conclusion

Pygmalion is one of Shaw's most popular plays like all of his great dramatic works. The story of the transformation of a flower girl from a lower class to a new and different high class. The ending of *Pygmalion* provokes an interesting controversy among critics. Higgins and Eliza do not marry at the end of the play, while the play as it is usually produced often reconciles the two main characters; this non-romantic ending unlike the usual endings of the prominent plays had various interpretations and numerous messages to be conveyed and that what made the play one of the most successful plays in the world. George Bernard Shaw is shown to be critical of society and its conforming classes, both lower and upper statuses. Those are unfortunate enough to have grown up in England, they are known by their lowly origins that were apparent in the English society due to their distinct mannerisms and accents.

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