

Rereading “Pygmalion”: Highlighting the Thematic Concerns and Socio-Political Issues of Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion.

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This paper aims to through some light on Bernard Shaw’s play Pygmalion and various themes which it deals with. The play is a modern adaptation of Ovid’s Pygmalion myth. The Pygmalion of Shaw’s play turns up as Henry Higgins, a teacher of English speech; his Galatea is Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl whom Higgins transforms into an English lady by teaching her to speak accurate English. Shaw uses Eliza’s cockney speech as derogatory towards British society, though this same criticism is cast upon the upper class; whose sole judgment relies on the speech. The play echoes the growth and transformation of a Flower girl into a Duchess. It also encompasses various themes including Language, Class division and position of women and British society at that time.

As a devoted socialist and dramatist, Bernard Shaw’s primary goal was to restructure the existing social conditions and theatrical conventions by his works. He believed that every work of art should have a social function. As John Gassner also observes, Shaw discarded the doctrine of art for art’s sake and nihilistic tendencies, and regarded art as a means of liberation from materialism. In Pygmalion’s class-conscious society, major characters are almost discriminated according to their social class and their level of education. As it is apparent, on the lower side stands the uneducated-ragged flower girl defined in terms of the lower-class standards and on the upper side the professor of phonetics representing the power and ideology of the upper-class. Hence, in the play Shaw unveils various aspects of social hypocrisy and discrimination on the basis of class structure of British society.

“A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere - no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift to articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton...”

Language is an important aspect of one's characters in British society as Shaw portrays it in his "Phonetic Play". Higgins and Pickering study linguistics and phonetics, in Act one takes note of how people from different backgrounds speak differently. The preoccupation of mind with this particular idea of examining one's language to judge his/her character and social status reflects the psyche of British society at that time. In the preface to *Pygmalion* Shaw himself exclaimed that "The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it." The "experiment" tool of Higgins and Pickering, Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl and her conversion into a Duchess can be traced through the transformation of her language. In Act one where Eliza because of her short and grammatically wrong sentences becomes a subject of absurdity, in Act five same Eliza emerges as the "new woman" embodying independence and sophistication. Eliza's transformation depicts that social distinctions such as accents, age, class barriers can be overcome by language training. It becomes interesting to note that how language for higher class becomes an experiment or a source of entertainment where as for lower class it is a set of rules which one must learn to get a decent job or living. The financial consequences of one's language are significant in the play as Higgins tells Pickering that it is possible for "men [to] begin in Kentish Town with £ 80 a year and end in [upper class] Park lane with hundred thousand [pounds]"

It is the British society or rather hypocrisy and vanity of British society that Shaw has been most critical towards in this play. He speaks of the class distinctions which is not natural and can be broken down. As discussed before, Shaw uses language as a bridge between class divisions but this bridge is momentary since it lacks financial support. The journey of Eliza and her father expresses Shaw's belief that people are able to improve their lives through their own efforts. But the shift from lower class to middle class does not fancy Mr. Doolittle as he considers himself being trapped in middle class morality. He is jovial being poor and miserable being rich. One may analyse how Shaw enjoys ridiculing all three class divisions. It is Shaw who speaks in the voids of the play that the difference between a lady and a flower girl lies rather in her treatment than in her behaviour. It is Eliza whom Shaw uses as an instrument to walk on the 'bridge' of class divisions to take off the mask of upper class British society. The manners which upper class brags about is itself missing from its pioneers which can be marked when Mrs. Higgins in Act five

apologises “I am sorry to say my celebrated son has no manners”. Even the language, which is the key element of class distinction in this play, has not been appropriately learned by the upper class citizens as in act three Neppomuck says, “Can you shew me any woman who speaks English as it should be spoken?” Though Eliza was successful in tricking all those at garden party but she knew no matter how well she get dressed or how splendidly she speaks, she can never be a part of this upper class’ double standards, “I have done my best but nothing can make me the same as these people.”

The concept of “new woman” too can be addressed in this play through the characters like Eliza Doolittle and Mrs. Higgins. Eliza the “squashed cabbage leaf” despite being in all the odds emerges as a strong, independent woman who to assert her presence. She would even through a slipper on the face on this dominant, hypocrite and self-absorbed society and its guardians. She throughout the play affirms a strong moral code in which she has apparently rejected dissipation “nobody ever saw a sign of liquor on me”. She from the beginning has the determination to better herself and not at any point does she thinks of giving up even when Mr Higgins calls her name and abuses her. Her fierce independence and self worth can be seen when she states “Ive right to be here if I like, same as you”. Eliza though belonging to a lower class denies to be restrained in the hierarchical structure of society and therefore gains her independence in her marginality. One may say that making Eliza ‘a misfit’ was Shaw’s way to give her the ultimate liberty out of the claws of society. Eliza is nobody’s responsibility and declares the same in Act two, “I can buy my own clothes” Eliza’s self sufficiency comes forth in the final act when she exclaims that “I could make something of him (Freddy)”, this final statement of her shows that she is no more a subject of any “experiment”.

Mrs Higgins whom Berst described as “the ideal of candour, good manners, sophistication and kindness which are at heart of true gentility and as such she provides the standard against which Eliza’s growth throughout the play may reasonably be measured.” Mrs. Higgins too can be called the “new woman” since she is the only one after Eliza who can resist Higgins and is not subjective to anybody’s authority. She only has the ‘manners’ of which British Society boasts of. She is the woman of dignity and strong moral code and one who would not entertain anybody’s impudence even if he is her own son, which is evident

when she says “I should have thrown the fire irons at you”. It is therefore that Eliza out of all the characters chooses Mrs. Higgins to go to in Act five because only she could have given her the emotional and spiritual support which she has been longing for from Higgins and Pickering.

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* addresses an individual's capability to advance through society, an idea as old as social distinction. Shaw does so through the social parable of a young English flower girl named Eliza Dolittle, who after receiving linguistic training assumes the role of a duchess. Shaw uses his judgment solely on language to ridicule the superficiality of upper class. His portrayal of characters is so vivid that their emotions and thoughts are directly conveyed to audience and readers. Shaw, “the allowed fool of literature” in his “phonetic play” concentrated on the gulf between two extremes of society and how language becomes a device to both highlight and blur this division. The representation of female characters especially Eliza and Mrs Higgins are of great significance since it is through them that reader gets the image of “new woman” in society. Through *Pygmalion* Shaw reflects the social milieu of British society and it's beliefs in a satirical manner.

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