

Myths of creation: A study of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* is based loosely on the tenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and details the relationship between Pygmalion, the sculptor and Galatea, his creation. Shaw is well known in literary circles for his vociferous protest against the class distinction primarily in the United Kingdom. In the present study this researcher aims to put forward Shaw's literary genius that went behind combining a mythological tale with that of a critique of the then existing class system. Some of the major themes that Shaw uses in *Pygmalion* center on the pretentious nature of high society and the vulgarity of the low society. Shaw uses characters to put forth novel ideas and it is probably why his plays have been called "dramas of ideas". The same is true for *Pygmalion*; however, in this play he uses comedy as a tool to bring forth ideas related to how the class system works in a society that is extremely class conscious. The present study also delineates the differences between the play penned by Shaw and the movie adaptation entitled *My Fair Lady* of the aforementioned play that has been directed by George Cukor and produced by Warner Bros.

Keywords: Transformation, class consciousness, creation, creator, adaptation, comedy, slang, high culture, low culture

1. Introduction

Harold Bloom's introduction to *George Bernard Shaw* (2011) ^[1] posits that Eric Bentley's judgment of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) is indeed: It is Shavian, not in being made up of political or philosophic discussions, but in being based on the standard conflict of vitality and system, in working out this conflict through an inversion of romance, in bringing matters to a head in a battle of wills and words, in having an inner psychological action in counterpoint to the outer romantic action, in existing on two contrasted levels of mentality, both of which are related to the main theme, in delighting and surprising us with a constant flow of verbal music and more than verbal wit. (18) A play that uses the myth of Pygmalion to put forth what Shaw felt was wrong with the first part of the twentieth century was an unanticipated success that even Shaw was unable to predict. Written during the turmoil filled 1910s and 1920s this play proved to the world that Shaw was indeed one of the greatest playwrights ever to emerge during the twentieth century. This play also restored the general populace's admiration and faith in Shaw's genius, a faith that rested upon Shaw's ability to accurately portray and predict the gruesomeness that people experienced before and during World War I. What caught the public's eye was the fact that Shaw could so adroitly handle a serious theme and morph it into a comedy of gigantic proportions.

The manner in which Shaw plays with stereotypes is also probably one of the reasons why this play went on to win critical accolades. Though Shaw called it a romance one realizes that such a simple and singular naming requires serious justifications as to why Shaw called it a romance, despite its ending. Bearing that in mind Bloom suggests that if one to take at face value than the play would have to be called Galatea and not Pygmalion. He supports his argument by calling it "an inversion of romance" rather than a romance per se. (18) Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a collection of legendary

stories written in Latin and dating back to 8ce consists of fifteen books amongst which, the tale of Pygmalion features in the tenth one. Pygmalion, a Roman poet being utterly appalled by the low morality of the women during his lifetime, creates a sculpture made of Irony and names it, Galatea. However, he soon falls so deeply in love with his own creation that he prays to the Goddess Venus, who then breathes life into his sculpture. This Roman myth has spawned multiple adaptations in diverse genres such as dramas, musicals and motion pictures. George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's musical, *My Fair Lady*.

Another strongly suggested critical aspect is how Shaw uses the Cinderella theme in *Pygmalion*. However, most critics believe that he had indeed tweaked the traditional theme and that this tweaking is especially seen in the way the work ends. Shaw's ideas of metamorphosis is quite clearly depicted in the mature way he handles the changes one can see in a simple Cockney flower girl, who upon tutoring becomes almost undistinguishable from that of a member of the nobility. The superficiality and pretentiousness of the Victorian era is explicitly seen in the manner in which Shaw uses the flower girl, Eliza Doolittle who unknowingly or perhaps unintentionally pokes fun at the so-called-upper class society.

What is unique about *Pygmalion* is the way Shaw uses the plot and sets the very same plot in the age that it is critiquing. One is aware that Shaw is portraying the Victorian age in *Pygmalion* but placing the plot in the Victorian age is almost similar to forcing the audience to acknowledge the falsity of the era. One is not left with any choice other than to confront the spuriousness of period. "Parodying the £5 Virgin: Bernard Shaw and the Playing of Pygmalion", an essay observes that: By contextualizing the play within the Victorian climate that inspired it, I demonstrate that Shaw's early battles with stage censorship and social purity linger in works that seem preoccupied with other concerns. (Marshik 70) The Irish Nobel

Laureate, George Bernard Shaw was known primarily for his contribution to the performing art, in this case, comic drama. He was also quite notorious for his propaganda oriented writings which in turn explains the negative press that generated during his life time.

Shaw was also involved with literary criticism that more often than not was due to his affiliation with Marxism. He received the Nobel Prize in literature (1925) for his writings, especially the highly acclaimed *Saint Joan* that was performed in the year 1924. According to the Nobel Committee Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize; for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty. (The Nobel Foundation) Though Shaw initially refused to accept the Prize, he still went to Stockholm to receive the Prize, since he felt that he could not let Ireland down. Ultimately, Shaw received the Nobel Prize, but nonetheless refused to accept the prize money, since he felt that such a large sum of money could best be used where it was really required. When the Committee did not what he suggested, he donated the money to Swedish literary works that were being translated into English during that time. Shaw's answer to questions pertaining to his rejection of the Nobel Prize can be understood by Shaw's words that appeared in a review entitled, "No Thanks Nobel" in *Barnes & Nobel Daybook*: I can forgive Alfred Nobel for inventing dynamite, but only a fiend in human form could have invented the Nobel Prize. (King) Shaw has written almost sixty two plays beginning in the 1890s and ending in the 1950s, however not all of his plays are full length plays, some of the more critically acclaimed being *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1894), *The Devil's Disciple* (1896), *You Never can tell* (1896), *Man and Superman* (1902), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Getting Married* (1908), *Pygmalion* (1913), *Heartbreak House* (1920), *Saint Joan* (1923), *The Apple Cart* (1928) and *Geneva* (1936) to name just a few.

Shaw's *Pygmalion* also won the Academy Award for the best writing and screenplay in the year 1938, however, Shaw has reportedly said that the Award was "an insult for them to offer me any honour; as if they had never heard of me before- and it's very likely they never have." (IMDB)

While analyzing *Pygmalion* it is pertinent to see the work from a perspective that takes into account some of the most significant happenings that were occurring in the British society. It was a time that saw the assassination of the archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, an act that caused the outbreak of World War I. It was period that witnessed the death of almost eight million people, most of them being civilians. The gruesome nature of war and killing evoked in Shaw, a curiously combined sense of compassion and repulsion and it is this eclectic mix that one can notice in *Pygmalion* too.

Shaw's outrage was directed at the British society's oblivious manner in which they saw the general populace's misery and pain. One can often find Shaw directing his sharp wit at the concept of British colonization as well as industrialization. Britain during that period was considered to be quite a big colonial power and it was World War I that quite surprisingly increased the size of the British Empire.

Colonization too brought about a significant change in the number of people who were then moving into the cities, hoping for better wages and a better chance at their livelihood. It was a period that saw unskilled labourers willing to work for

mere pittance and this was acerbated by the fact that there were very few job opportunities to be had. Limited employment opportunities combined with a mass exodus of people from villages to cities was responsible for the squalid state of affairs and this was portrayed quite effectively by Shaw in this play. The concept of class system in the British society is put forth very effectively in the manner in which the so-called upper class members treat the so-called lower class members such as the Doolittles. It is in such a setting that Shaw situates *Pygmalion* and uses the aforementioned Roman myth to delineate the class struggle that was quite evidently seen in the British society.

The play begins with two men meeting on a rainy evening in Covent Garden, Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering and betting that given enough phonetics training Higgins would in essence transform a Cockney speaking flower girl, Eliza Doolittle into a well-articulated duchess. Eliza turns up the next day at Higgins laboratory in Wimpole Street to offer Higgins a shilling in return for teaching her how to speak properly, which would then help her get a job in a flower shop. Shaw shows the callousness of the British upper class by depicting the derisive laughter of Higgins at what he feels is an outrageous offer from Eliza. However, upon consideration Higgins takes it as a challenge and goaded by Colonel Pickering's offer of financing the apparent "experiment", accepts the offer.

Colonel Pickering challenges Higgins by adding that he needs to get Eliza's training completed before the ambassador's garden party, where he intends to see Eliza passing off as a duchess. Higgins begins his experiment by making his housekeeper bathe Eliza and dress her and the change in Eliza is so noticeable that even her father, a dustman fails to recognize her when he comes to Higgins with the intention of getting some money off Higgins.

Higgins begins his "experiment" and the plot moves forward by two months and one can see Eliza's almost triumphant first trial at Higgins' mother's house. This first trial of Eliza's transformation involves the Eynsford Hills, a family comprising of a mother and her two children, Freddy and Clara Eynsford. However, Eliza does slip into her native cockney accent at the end, proving that she still has a long way to go if she were to pass off as a duchess, which is indeed the main point of the entire enterprise.

Mrs. Higgins begins to feel a little apprehensive about the effect that the whole exercise might have on Eliza and finds that both Higgins and Pickering are callous enough to not think about Eliza's future. Mrs. Higgins confronts the duo after all the guests leave and tries to convince them that their "experiment" might not be as good an idea as Higgins and Pickering were expecting it to be. Shaw uses the character of Mrs. Higgins to caution the upper class citizens that though they might think of themselves as superior beings they too require a certain degree of compassion and understanding for those who are less fortunate than themselves. However, her words fail to convince Higgins and Pickering, who then make plans for Eliza's true test.

Eliza's second trial at the ambassador's party and though the actual party is not staged, the viewer comes to know about Eliza's triumph through Higgins' and Pickering's words. What is surprising to Eliza is that both Higgins and Pickering do not see her as a person but as an instrument that brought them victory and a sense of fulfillment. The dehumanizing attitude

towards Eliza and the indifferent air with which they consider her is so abhorrent to her that she throws the slippers that Higgins was searching for at him and returns the jewelry that he had hired for her. Higgins, however, is flummoxed by Eliza's anger and is unable to understand the reason for her ire. The next day upon finding Eliza missing, Higgins rushes to his mother's house to tell her that he had been unable to trace Eliza. Upon further questioning, Mrs. Higgins gets to the crux of the matter and explains to Higgins that: She had become attached to you both. She worked very hard for you, Henry! I don't think you quite realize what anything in the nature of brain work means to a girl like that. Well, it seems that when the great day of trial came, and she did this wonderful thing for you without making a single mistake, you two sat there and never said a word to her, but talked together of how glad you were that it was all over and how you had been bored with the whole thing. (69) Higgins' arrival coincides with Eliza's father's arrival, who having taken Higgins' advice found wealth beyond his imagination. Mrs. Higgins takes both Higgins and Pickering to task for playing with the hopes and aspirations of Eliza and also for not being careful with her as far as her emotions were concerned. Eliza, however, is not too disappointed with Pickering and feels affectionate towards Pickering for always treating her with respect. Eliza explains the reasons for her affection thus: It is not because you paid for the dresses. I know you are generous to everybody with money. But it was from you that I learnt really nice manners; and that is what makes one a lady, isn't it? (72) The play ends with Eliza's threat that she will go to work with Nepommuck, Higgins' rival phonetician and walks away with her father who is about to get married. Higgins calls out the chores that he expects Eliza to do, assuming that Eliza will come back to him. Eliza is also aware that she does indeed have choices that she will have to make such as getting married to Freddy, since she does have the wherewithal to pass off as a duchess.

Shaw manages to keep the plot almost similar to that of the Roman myth, however, he does tweak it by not letting the central male character, Higgins fall in love with his own creation, Eliza. The other difference that one can see lies in the lack of romance in Pygmalion. Higgins never thinks of Eliza as a potential lovable character and sees her as nothing but a means to an end. He sees Eliza is a mere accoutrement or an instrument that can be used to experiment in order to boost his own ego. What is interesting is that Shaw puts forth not one but two Pygmalion-like characters, Mrs. Pearce and Pickering instead of one, Higgins.

Though Shaw's play is modeled on the Roman myth, he ends up questioning the inconsistencies of myths and romances by juxtaposing them with the ordinary and quotidian aspects of life.

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