

The Theme of Education in Shaw's Play Pygmalion

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Abstract

Pygmalion is regarded as most appealing and most popular of all Shaw's plays. George Bernard Shaw was renowned Irish playwright and critic. His influence on Irish and Western theatre, culture, and politics extended from the 1880s to his death. He wrote more than 60 plays. Shaw includes members of all social classes in this play from the lowest (Liza) to the servant class (Mrs. Pearce) to the middle class (Doolittle after his inheritance) to the gentle poor (the Eynsford Hills) to the upper class (Pickering and the Higginses). The class structures are rigid and it should not be tampered with. That is why the example of Liza's class mobility is most shocking. In *Pygmalion*, a society is divided, separated by language, education, and wealth. Shaw clarifies how that gap can be bridged successfully. *Pygmalion* is all about turning a poor girl into a duchess.

Key Words: Problems of the contemporary society, Division and separation of society by language, education and wealth

Introduction:

The contribution of Bernard Shaw to the modern English drama is appreciable and significant. He discusses a serious problem of the contemporary society as intensely as he can. That is why the readers call his plays 'Comedies of Purpose.' While writing plays, Shaw converted the society to his views and ideas. He had no other purpose and incentive to write plays. Education according to Shaw is enlightenment. Like a rainbow it unfurls many colours, right from child development up to higher education. It is not reading books but understanding. It is the art of imparting knowledge, not thrusting knowledge into the unwilling throat.

In *Pygmalion* education is used as a tool for emancipating working class individuals. Eliza gets uprooted and has to give up personal feature. Language is associated

with identity and finds a new identity through education. Eliza's change and transformation demonstrates that social distinctions such as accents, age, class barriers can be overcome by language training. It becomes questionable however if language reveals or forms one's character. Eliza's outcry at the end of the play denies the idea. Yet she understands herself that better education is connected with social progress. Eliza's problems show that language alone provides a superficial transformation. She lacks education to become fully integrated. *Pygmalion* is a complex work of art with a number of themes. But its central theme is the education of Eliza Doolittle. She rises from ignorance and darkness to spiritual light through successive stages of despair, self-realization, illumination and social identity. Eliza Doolittle is introduced in the play as

an illiterate ignorant girl selling flowers in Convent Garden. She speaks the kind of Cockney which only the native Londoners can understand. At this stage she is crude, ill-mannered and saucy. Eliza requests a gentleman to buy flowers from her. But the gentleman gives her three pence and moves away from her without taking any flowers. A bystander advises her to give some flowers to the gentleman who has given her money. He says that a person is watching her from a distance and taking notes and he might be a detective. She might be arrested for soliciting customers in the street. At this the flower-girl is both frightened and irritated. She remarks that she is a poor girl who earns her living honestly. She only spoke to the gentleman to buy some flowers from her and uttered no other word. Eliza protests that she cannot be arrested and driven on the streets for speaking to a gentleman. She defends herself saying that she is like any other woman.

Colonel Pickering a student of Phonetics has come to London all the way from India to meet Professor Higgins. He meets Higgins during his encounter with Eliza. He expresses his happiness over meeting him. He stays in Higgins' house. Colonel Pickering is proud of the fact that he can pronounce as many as twenty four distinct vowel sounds but he is much surprised to find that Professor Higgins can distinguish among as many as one hundred and thirty distinct vowel sounds. Eliza is ambitious. She wants to raise high in life to become a salesgirl in a flower-shop. The very next day Eliza calls on Prof. Higgins and expresses her desire to take lessons in Phonetics. Then Eliza tells him that she has come there to

take lessons on pronunciation from him. She finds fault with him for not having offered her a seat. She says that she is prepared to pay him like any other lady. Higgins accepts her as his student. But he tells her that he is a strict disciplinarian. Higgins says to her that first of all she must prepare grammar. This is an easy way to improve her pronunciation. Higgins decides to transform the shabby flower-girl into a fashionable lady. The process of education seems difficult to Eliza in the beginning. Eliza has courage, talents and determination. She faces the ordeal boldly. As her education proceeds, she realizes that the difference in a flower-girl is not how she behaves but how she is treated. Higgins continues to treat her as a low-class flower-girl.

In the third Act of the play, Eliza's progress in her education is tested. She is dressed like a lady, behaves like a lady and all are impressed. Eliza of Act III is quite different from the flower girl of Act I but her education is not yet complete. Her small talk betrays her social background. She has not yet learnt what a lady should talk in a social gathering. She talks about matters which easily betray her low origin. Her language is almost flawless. Higgins teaches her to pronounce English correctly and also to dress elegantly and cultivate fine manners. He has done all this over a long period of time and the girl has caused him a lot of trouble. Prof. Higgins has thrown a bet to Pickering that he would turn Eliza off into a Duchess within six months. He started the experiment a few months before and she is getting on very quickly. Higgins is hopeful of winning the bet. Eliza is learning almost a new language. Eliza is quick in learning.

After a few months Higgins invites Eliza to Mrs. Higgins' home to check how she conducts herself and what impression she leaves on his mother's friends from the fashionable society. He has advised Eliza to keep strictly to two statements only – 'Fine day' and 'How do you do'. In his mother's house, Mrs. Higgins tells Higgins that Eliza is a triumph of his art and also of the art of her dress-maker but every sentence that Eliza uttered had given her away. Higgins continues to give Eliza lessons in Phonetics. After six months Eliza is taken to the party of an ambassador. Now she is able to pass off not merely as a Duchess but as a princess with royal blood in her veins. All are deceived by her lady-like manners and deportment. During the course of her education in Phonetics her soul has been awakened and she has progressed from spiritual darkness to light. She is spiritually transformed and that is the real education. She now seeks social identity. Her soul has been awakened and she is aware of the problem. Eliza begins to seek for emotional fulfillment. After the Ambassador party Higgins does not treat her as a Duchess. That is why Eliza decides not to stay in Higgins' house even a moment longer. Professor Higgins has completed his experiment and she is no longer of any use to her.

Eliza has suffered terribly at the hands of her stepmother, her father, Higgins and even Mrs. Pearce, the house keeper. But her soul has not been crushed. She does not lose her vitality and spirit. Some fairy godmother as in the Cinderella story comes to her rescue and everything is set right. As she comes out of the house of Higgins at midnight she

meets Freddy a romantic young man passionately in love with her. When Eliza is determined to marry Freddy Higgins does not welcome the idea because according to him Freddy is a fool. But Eliza opposes his idea. If he is weak and poor and wants me, may make me happier than my betters that bully me and don't want me. (Pygmalion: 101) Eliza marries Freddy and sets up a flower shop with the help of Colonel Pickering. They work hard; learn book-keeping, accountancy and type-writing. Thus Eliza undergoes a course of education in the play. In the process, she is not only made a lady, her soul is also awakened. She has acquired self-confidence and her search for identity had been successfully completed.

Conclusion:

Shaw is one of the most successful delineators of characters. The characters of both Higgins and Eliza are memorable. Both these characters have been endowed with life by the dramatist. The habit of swearing, losing his temper at the slightest provocation, his consciousness of himself as a Professor of Phonetics, his love for his mother and his devotion to his profession make Higgins a living personality whom the readers love and admire. Eliza too has been convincingly drawn, first as an ignorant, illiterate flower girl and then she becomes a fine lady. Eliza's transformation surprises the readers by the proficiency. Eliza's education has made her a lady. She cannot go back to her former environment and sell flowers as she used to do. She has been cut off from her earlier environment. She has become a lady and has lost her earlier identity. Eliza is confronted with the

problem of loss of identity and alienation. She must search for belongingness in the new social environment to which she has been raised by her education. Eliza's individual assertiveness is unquenchable. She works out her own destiny and marries Freddy because the life force tells her that he would make a better father to her children. Eliza was not a dunce. She was inherently intelligent. Higgins cannot claim to have made Eliza. All that he gave to Eliza is her

language. Even before she met him, she possessed intelligence, dignity and individuality. After all the education she received from Higgins, she is able to express herself better. Higgins' contribution in the making of Eliza is not a bit more and not a bit less than this. Thus it is clear that Eliza's inherent quality of intelligence has been shaped by education that she acquired from Higgins. Shaw deals with the consequences of social circumstances

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