

Plays comparison: pygmalion, a doll's house and trifles essay

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It will probably be safe to suggest that there are moments, in just about any person's life, when he or she consciously prefers to believe in a certain perceptual illusion, as opposed facing the uncomfortable truth about something that this illusion is there to conceal. This especially appears to be the case in the situations when what happened to be the actual truth, simply does much of a logical sense in the concerned person's eyes. In my opinion, this is exactly what the character of Blanche du Bois had in mind, while coming up with the statement, " I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!" (Williams, 1947, p. 128).

There is even more to it - the above-quoted suggestion appears to reflect people's unconscious tendency to focus on ' what ought to be truth', as such that fills their lives with the actual meaning. In its turn, this explains why the motif of a ' liberating deception/'magic'' being better than a ' damning truth' is quite common in the works of literature/dramaturgy. In this paper, I will explore the validity of the earlier suggestion at length, while illustrating how the mentioned motif is being presented in the plays *Pygmalion* by Bernard Shaw, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen and *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell.

One of the most philosophically deep aspects of the message, conveyed by Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, is that the foremost indication of a particular person being an ' aristocrat' de facto, is his or existential nobleness. This particular trait of one's psyche, however, rarely correlates with what happened to be the concerned individual's socio-economic status within the society. Hence, the sheer plausibility of the play's plot, which revolves around the story of

Eliza's rapid transformation from a vulgarly speaking/behaving 'flower girl', into nothing short of a sophisticate 'lady of substance'. Apparently, even when she was a 'flower girl', Eliza never ceased being an idealistically minded person, who used to aspire to attain the state of self-actualization, as a socially prominent citizen.

Allegorically speaking, the character of Eliza can well compare to a gemstone, completely covered with filth, which one day ended up discovered and cleansed of it. Therefore, there is nothing odd about the earlier mentioned transformation, on the part of Eliza – this process was not really concerned with the character's qualitative 'metamorphosis' into someone else. Rather, it had to do with the fact that, after having learnt how to speak proper English and to act 'mannerish', Eliza was able to realize what constituted her true calling in life. This is the reason why, after having helped Professor Higgins to win his bet with Colonel Pickering (by the means of proving herself capable of learning the manners of a 'lady'); Eliza began to experience the sensation of an acute emotional distress. After all, the end of the 'deal' between the two meant that she would have to return back to the 'rock bottom', from where she was picked initially.

Yet, this was something Eliza could not possibly do – after having been washed of the 'filth' of her past as a vulgar commoner; she would never be able to let it become the integral part of her personality again. This explains the significance of the play's scene, in which Eliza continues with the act as a 'lady' – well after the 'deal' between Higgins and Pickering was over, “
Eliza: How do you do, Professor Higgins? Are you quite well? Higgins:

[choking] Am I – [he can say no more]. Eliza: But of course you are: you are never ill. So glad to see you again, Colonel Pickering. Quite chilly this morning, isn't it?" (Shaw, 1912, p. 72). Apparently, for Eliza the illusion of being a 'lady of substance' was much more truthful than the actual truth about her humble origins as a 'flower girl'. This is the reason why she could not help but to continue 'acting up' – quite contrary to her conscious awareness of the act's misleading essence.

The motif of illusion underlines the discursive significance of Ibsen's play, as well. The validity of this statement can be well illustrated, in regards to the fact that the play's plot is essentially concerned with a forgery, committed by Nora, in order to borrow a large sum of the bank, so that her husband Torvald could restore his health, while vacationing in Italy. In its turn, this allowed Torvald to be able to advance his professional career of a bank-clerk. Despite the fact that the moral inappropriateness of such her deed was causing Nora to experience a great deal of an emotional unease, she nevertheless continued to keep Torvald thoroughly unaware of what had happened – hence, making it possible for him to enjoy the illusion of being a 'self-made' man. This, of course, exposes Nora's motivation behind her decision to commit a fraud, as having been highly humanistic and consequently – morally justified.

Nevertheless, even after having realized that it was just the matter of time, before Torvald discovers the infidelity in question (due to Krogstad's blackmailing letter), Nora continues to act rather arrogantly – during the party (featured at the end of the final Act 3), she passionately dances and

loudly laughs, as if there was indeed nothing for her to fear. As it was pointed out by the author, “ Nora dances more and more wildly... She does not seem to hear him (Torvald); her hair comes down and falls over her shoulders; she pays no attention to it, but goes on dancing” (Ibsen, 1879, p. 55).

Rationally speaking, such Nora's behavior does not make much of a logical sense - having been fully aware that her forgery was about to be revealed, she should have refrained from enjoying herself. Yet, it was clearly not the case. The reason for this is quite simple - Nora strived to make the best out of the remaining hours of her 'matrimonial happiness'. The only way for the character to succeed in this was applying a mental effort into not-acknowledging the sensation's sheer short-lastingness. In words, there was indeed a good reason for Nora to live up to the provisions of du Bois' suggestion, mentioned in the Introduction.

The motif of a 'magical' deception, as such that is being much more preferable to truth, can also be found in the play *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell. Generally speaking, this play exposes the fact that the patriarchal assumption of women's cognitive/perceptual inferiority does not stand any ground. Quite on the contrary, as the play effectively illustrates, when it comes to paying attention to 'trifles' (seemingly insignificant details), women often prove themselves unsurpassable, which in turn qualifies them for a number of jobs that are being traditionally considered 'manly', such as the job of a criminal investigator. After all, it were namely the characters of presumably 'dumb' housewives Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who uncovered

the truth that Minnie Wright did in fact kill her husband – hence, proving themselves intellectually superior to their own husbands, prescribed with the responsibility to investigate the murder of Mr. Wright.

This provides us with the partial insight into why both of these women decided to not to expose Minnie as a murderer – they simply loved their husbands little too much, in order to consider making the concerned men aware of their own male-chauvinistic arrogance. After all, as a saying goes – arrogance (illusion) is bliss.

There is, however, even more to it – Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters were perfectly mindful of the fact that it would be highly unethical to go about confirming Minnie's guilt, on their part. The reason for this is that, while in the marital relationship with Minnie, Mr. Wright never ceased mistreating her as a soulless commodity. Apparently, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters felt sorry for a poor woman and decided to keep a secret of what really did happen in the Mr. Wright's household, “ Mrs. Hale:

His neck, choked the life out of him... Mrs. Peters (with a rising voice): We don't know who killed him. We don't know” (Glaspell, 1916, p. 9). By acting in such a manner, both women were able to prove themselves highly virtuous individuals.

I believe that the earlier deployed line of argumentation, in defense of the idea that under certain circumstances, illusion is indeed better than truth, is fully consistent with the paper's initial thesis.

Glaspell, S. (1916). Trifles. Web.

Ibsen, H (1879). A doll's house. Web.

Shaw, B. (1912). Pygmalion. Web.

Williams, T. (1947). A streetcar named desire. Web.