The mutual exclusivity of class and morality in george bernard shaw’s ‘pygmalion’...

Experience, Human Nature

The honest and compelling transformation of a simple flower girl from a disempowered ‘ draggle-tailed guttersnipe’ to a ‘ fierce’ woman who demands what she ‘ want[s]’ and feistily laments the loss of her ‘ independence’ is emblematic of the laudable qualities that Shaw wishes to highlight in the human person, existing regardless of social status. The result of this transformation is antithetic to the hypocrisy, questionable morality and lack of emotional intelligence of her Pygmalion figure, and others who belong to this class to which Eliza aspires, as Shaw exposes the redundancy of the institutionalized class system and advocates for its dissolution, as the class of the characters play is shown to exist independently of their morality.

The play finds its roots in a mere ‘ foll[y]’ for the revered Professor Higgins. This is a confronting description for the audience, as the word ‘ folly’ implies than for Higgins, this girl’s life is reduced to a casual undertaking of little thought and consideration, which established the idea that Higgins regards human emotions rather like scientific objects; something to be experimented on, and to an extent abused, for personal pleasure. He declares that ‘[he] shall make a duchess of this draggle-tailed guttersnipe’. This proclamation, with its imperative and commanding ‘ I’ and ‘ shall’ establishes Higgins as a figure whose pride and desire to display his elocutionary talents is boundless, with blatant disregard for the effects of his actions on this girl. Furthermore, this personal and self-directed language imparts a sense of self-importance and conceit around the character of Higgins. He considers himself above his test subject, and as such, Eliza might as well be ‘ a pebble on the beach’ to him – a symbol that dehumanizes her, and blends her among the rest of her class, who were blanketed as immoral, defunct and of

little worth; as commonplace as a pebble among thousands. The audience is later to learn that this cursory and supercilious judgement of Eliza was misplaced, though for now Shaw introduces Higgins as a character of comedic value, whose ‘ folly’ excites him to the extent that he is ‘ carried away’ by the linguistic challenge it poses. He demands that the task be started ‘ now! This moment!’; the repetition of exclamation marks here accentuating the fervent, almost childlike desire of Higgins to toy with his new plaything as soon as possible, exacerbating the audience’s perception of Higgins’ somewhat childish behavior that is so unadulterated in nature, and so oblivious to its consequences. This desire is symbolized by a ‘ hurricane’ in the stage directions, and it is exactly that – a destructive force which wreaks itself upon anything so misfortunate as to come in its path – in this case, Eliza. She later echoes these sentiments, calling Higgins a ‘ motorbus: all bounce and go, and no consideration for anyone.’ Shaw presents us with a figure who, for all his intellectual merits, is blind to the emotions of others and the immorality of his toying with a living girl; one who evidently has an integrity and pride (‘ you got no right to touch me’).

The sense of a pervading obliviousness among the upper class is perpetuated by the figure of Clara in a later scene in Mrs Higgins’ apartment. The brusque ‘ Ahem!’ of Higgins abruptly interjects the free-flowing ramblings of Eliza, and as such marks a pointed contrast in the tempo of the conversation, breaking away from a period that rather resembles a stream of consciousness now that Eliza is ‘ at ease’, acts in this way as an obvious cue as to Eliza’s true identity and social standing. Despite this, Clara’s social

ineptitude perhaps equals that of Eliza, as she fails to recognize this. Furthermore, she fails to see that the subject matter of which Eliza speaks; men drinking themselves ‘ cheerful and loving-like’, is entirely inappropriate, instead justifying it; ‘ it’s all right, mamma, quite right.’ The repetition of ‘ right’ evokes a sense that Clara is very steadfast and headstrong in her view, which only exacerbates the irony of it as she continues to make a mockery of herself. She fails to pick up on the scarcity of money in Eliza’s past (‘ fourpence’) and is instead so focused on her ‘ elegant diction’ that she disregards the plain inconsistency of what Eliza is saying, which is so in contrast to the setting; the prim ‘ Elizabethan chair’ and later, the ‘ ottoman’, both being symbols of luxury, comfort and wealth. Through the character of Clara, Shaw suggests that members of the upper class are so obsessed with status and outward appearances that they are blinded by their concerns of being perceived as ‘ old-fashioned’.

In contrast, Mrs Pearce’s sole concern, when introduced to the ‘ folly’, is morality. The density of punctuation in her utterance ‘ Yes; but-’ create a fragmented and conflicted voice which is strained by an aghast disdain for Higgins’ treatment of Eliza, which she evidently views as immoral. As Higgins ‘ resort[s]’ to ‘ his best elocutionary style’ to woo Eliza, complete with the alliteration and hyperbole of his assertion that the ‘ streets will be strewn with the bodies of men shooting themselves’ for her, the dramatic and almost poetic language is intended by Higgins to sweep Eliza away – he is proud of this linguistic prowess which he assumes she has never experienced before, and therefore believes she will simply do as he says in

accordance. Mrs Pearce however, is the foil to this ardent language with her blunt interjection, ‘ nonsense’. She deals in the sphere of morality and reality, saying that Higgins ‘ mustnt talk like that to [Eliza]’ and ‘ must be reasonable’. She is ‘ resolute’, and a symbol of maternal care for Eliza, as she runs to Mrs Pearce and Pickering, her consort in morality, for ‘ protection’. Without Mrs Pearce and Pickering, the character of Higgins would be far less evocative than he is; these characters prove that, unlike the common perception of the time, a disparity in social class does not automatically permit someone to berate and dehumanize someone, as Higgins does to Eliza.

After her transformation is complete, Eliza laments that she is ‘ a slave now, for all [her] fine clothes’. Here, the word ‘ for’ introduces a tone and voice of regret, despite being surrounded by the luxury of ‘ fine clothes’. Unlike Clara, Eliza is not concerned with this sense of luxury or the intellectual ‘ treasures’ of Higgins, and instead has a more internalized, personal view of the situation, as she yearns only for her ‘ independence’, the simple life of the ‘ flower basket’, this acting as a very natural image that is concurrent with Eliza’s purity and emblematic of her as a character. This aids in developing the audience’s sense of Eliza as a character who values human, personable morals and qualities above all else. In this life, her appurtenances matched her social standing, instead of the disjointed existence with which she is now faced. During this dispute with Higgins, Eliza is described as ‘ rising’, which creates a power and confidence around her character that is consistent with the ‘ fierce’ protestations she makes against Higgins’ use of her. This

description evokes a sense of growth in that, she was previously a figure that would cower in the ‘ hurricane’ of Higgins – in their first meeting, she ‘ steals back to her chair’, a submissive action which is now in stark contrast to her new found dynamism and courage. This ultimately reveals that before her transformation, Eliza was confined to, and defined by her class. She is now empowered by her transition, but no less moral than the ‘ good girl’ that innocently came to Higgins for help. It is through the character of Eliza that the audience comes to understand that morality, as well as courage or intelligence, are not reserved for the upper class. Shaw’s characters constitute a diverse moral landscape, that exists irrespective of class, showcased by the character of Eliza who exists as a moral beacon at one end, and the unscrupulous (though affable) character of Higgins at the other, whose disregard for those he considers beneath him is depicted as deplorable. Class and morality are evidently mutually exclusive, and through ‘ Pygmalion’ Shaw proves that there is essentially no excuse for being immoral; one’s class, or lack of, does not justify it.