

Pygmalion: example of feminist criticism in literature



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George Bernard Shaw makes Pygmalion an excellent example of feminist criticism in a piece of literature. Throughout the play, we see male dominance over the females. He depicted how being a lady during the Victorian era changed how you were treated, and women were to act a certain way—the stereotypical lady-like way.

In the play, men were dominant over Eliza. Thus, changing her and her way of living making her dependent on them. Although most readers see George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion as a critique of 18th-century class structure, rereading the play with a feminist lens allows readers to see that it is also about the perverse expectations and the conflicting and oppressive views about the role of women.

In Act V, Eliza voices Higgins hurt her because he wouldn't care for her after all she does for him. Higgins says that he "[thinks] a woman fetching a man's slippers is a disgusting sight...No use slaving for [him] and then saying [she wants] to be cared for: who cares for a slave?"(127) Offended, he asks how dare she carry slippers after he made a duchess out of her. In Higgins' head, A girl that collects someone else's slippers, or "slaves" away for another isn't regarded as a respectable girl. He believed that a girl worthy of his respect is quite simply: a duchess. Which is interesting considering, the lifestyle of a duchess. They are provided no quality education or taught to work and provide for themselves. Girls were expected to wear the most up to date fashion. They must talk correctly, walk correctly, and sip their tea correctly. All this hard work- for a man. And if she refuses, she will be denied acceptance from high society members. Higgins is not a stranger to a contradiction. He is disgusted by Liza fetching his slippers and yet molds her

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to fit into a high society where women marry off then fetch her husband's slippers- the exact same thing. To Higgins, that is the life a respectable girl lives.

Shaw's play was drawn from the myth of Pygmalion. These two narratives show how unrealistic and even unnatural the expectations that society often has for women are. Pygmalion's perfect woman can only be attained with an artificial construct. Similarly, the ideal noble lady of British society is only a role to play. Pygmalion shows how oppressive these unrealistic ideals of femininity can be: to attain these ideals, Eliza must be coached, disciplined, and taught. She must pretend to be someone other than who she is-like Clara. According to Clara, in the sequel, she had "to muster all instinct's that make her human to fit into the society she was born in"(146).

Towards the end, Eliza showed the ability to be independent. She is capable of finding some success on her own. The play ends with the roles reversed and the men needing Eliza. But ultimately, Eliza cannot escape the constraints of the oppressive Victorian society. She tells Higgins that she desires independence, but we never see her actually obtain her independence in the play. At the end of the play, Eliza must choose between living with Higgins, living with her father, or marrying Freddy. In all cases, her future will continue to remain under control of a man. Eliza is greatly transformed over the course of the play, but it would take even greater transformations of society itself for women to have real independence.