

The portrayal of victorian society and its values



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In Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Shaw attacks the relations between Victorian era classes by exposing their wretched treatment of the lower class, as seen in the flower girl, by the higher classes, upper and middle, iconified in Higgins and Mrs. Pearce, respectively. These characters' condescension towards Eliza, exhibited by Higgins' objectification and Mrs. Pearce's rejection, reflect their negative, biased, and condescending feelings towards Eliza, and thus, the lower class. Shaw critiques this by juxtaposing these ideals against Eliza's claim that she is just like any other gentlewoman of the upper class and deserves treatment as such, voicing Shaw's opinion that these prejudices against the poor are unfounded and persuading the audience to feel the same.

At the beginning of the scene, Shaw features a conversation between Higgins and Pearce about Eliza, the flower girl. Pearce tells Higgins that a young woman, Eliza, wants to speak with him, but she calls the girl "common", "queer", and her accent, "dreadful." Even though Mrs. Pearce lets Eliza in, there was obvious reluctance in doing so. Pearce's prejudiced jibes at Eliza, specifically about her appearance and wealth, exemplify the condescension towards the lower class through their negative connotations. On the other hand, Mrs. Pearce's use of the word dreadful could also have been meant to describe Pearce's own inability to interpret what Eliza was saying, considering the stark difference in dialect of the two. Pearce later goes on to doubt Eliza's financial standing by considering her, "a foolish, ignorant girl" for considering herself able to "afford to pay Mr. Higgins." Shaw portrays Pearce in this light in order to urge the audience, who most

likely have similar predispositions as Pearce, to abandon such prejudices and judge a person based on their qualities, not class.

Higgins, after Pearce leaves, furthers the degradation of Eliza before she even enters the scene, by completely objectifying her. Rather than seeing her as a person with thoughts and feelings, Higgins sees her as a tool to create another of his phonetic records, something to turn on “as often as you like.” Higgins does not see Eliza as an equal. Her class makes her so “low” that she is not even considered an individual but an object. Eliza is considered undesirable, and thus, should not be there. However, one could argue that Higgins is pressured by society to participate in the common practice of verbal invective against the lower class. He mostly likely knows no other way to interact with the lower class than this cruel one which has been modeled for him since birth. Thus, one could see Higgins actions as not the fault of himself, but the fault of societal expectations of the upper class and how these expectations force people to mold to them.

Higgins even goes so far as to say he has enough of the “Lisson Grove lingo”, meaning she is not a unique individual, but can be replaced by any other who speaks similarly, like the interchangeable parts of the Industrial Revolution. Higgins’ disrespect of Eliza is continued once she enters, when he furthers his objectification of her by saying, because she is of no use, she should be turned away. Higgins eventually goes so far as to call Eliza “baggage.” This disregard of Eliza and treatment iconifies the upper class disregard of the impoverished, even to the point of complete objectification of the class, that was so prevalent in Victorian Era society. Through further observation, Shaw uses Higgins as an attempt to show the cruelty of these

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practices in order to have the audience sympathize with the poor Eliza and encourage them, in turn, to sympathize with the poor and not merely objectify or ignore them.

Eliza, once on stage, voices her opinion, in effect, Shaw's opinion, on their treatment, Pearce's and Higgins', of her. She quite feistily states she will pay for her lessons, foiling the stereotype of the lower class always looking for a handout. She wishes for them to treat her like a lady, which she is, but everyone seems incredulous to the idea, reflecting the upper class view of lower classes being crude and uncultured. However, Eliza firmly states that she is "like any lady." Eliza is reflecting the idea that class does not reflect a person's character and should not. She voices the idea of Shaw that all are equal, no matter their class or creed. Shaw is attempting to persuade the readers to side with Eliza and believe the epithet that all deserve to be treated as are the upper class.

On the other hand, it is just as terrible of Eliza to be so quick to judge Higgins at the end of the passage, when she accuses him of being drunk. This accusation seems unfounded, and poses the idea that even the lower class, again exemplified through Eliza was also prejudiced. This may be Shaw continuing his attack of prejudices and stereotypes, believing that no one should have them, not even the lower class whom most prejudices are aimed towards. Eliza could also be a representation of the contradictions of the Victorian era. She in a way, contradicts herself, by wanting to be treated like an upper class woman, yet she is prejudiced of the upper class. This reflects the how many in the Victorian era, like today, held contradictory beliefs. This includes the idea of pitying the poor, but blaming them for their poverty and <https://assignbuster.com/the-portrayal-of-victorian-society-and-its-values/>

despite high intolerance for crime, many were involved in criminal activities, such as prostitution and domestic abuse. Shaw is critiquing the absurdity of these positions.

Shaw uses the objectification of Higgins, the condescension of Pearce, and the assertions of Eliza to communicate an important message to his readers that the society in which they live, Victorian society with its social hierarchies and prejudices is wrong and should be dismantled. He persuades the audience to do this by encouraging sympathy for Eliza and attacking both Higgins' and Pearce's treatment of her. Shaw wants the audience to reform themselves and judge people based on attributes, not class, a very egalitarian point of view.