

The didactic purpose of shaw's 'pygmalion'



Years before he became the greatest living writer of comedy, Shaw was an ardent social reformer. "My conscience", he once wrote, "is the genuine pulpit article; it annoys me to see people comfortable when they ought to be uncomfortable; and I insist on making them think..." Shaw's brand of socialism never won many converts, but his wit did shock people into thinking.

In 'Pygmalion' he finds a mouthpiece in the highly original character of Alfred Doolittle, a chimney sweep, who admits he is one of the "undeserving poor" and openly glories it. Just because he is undeserving, Doolittle demands that Professor Higgins pay him 5 pounds for using his daughter Eliza for experiments in phonetics. "I don't need less than a deserving man: I need more." For the suggestion, "Why don't you marry that missus of yours", Doolittle replies "I'm willing. It's me that suffers by it. I've no hold on her. I got to be agreeable to her...I'm a slave to that woman" Higgins is so amused by this paradoxical logic that he gives the undeserving Doolittle 5 pounds.

Shaw used detailed stage directions to retain a degree of control over the performance. For Shaw, unless a play has some "use", it is without value. There is an acknowledged didactic function. Shaw brought forward the idea of the "sugar-coated pill". Through the detailed stage directions, the focus is much better defined by Shaw. With Shaw, idea has primacy and then plot comes.

Pygmalion deals with some fascinating themes, not the least of which is female emancipation. Higgins himself admires independence but, in turning

Eliza into a model lady, he creates a creature unable to stand on her own. As a flower girl, Eliza had independence and a job, lowly as it was; as a lady, her options are considerably narrower.

Shaw brings forth the function of the environment. He shows that class-distinction is founded upon the varied environmental situations rather than lineage. In the beginning of the play, we see how Higgins engages himself to place any person from the manner of his speech. In Eliza's case, when her manner of speech with the Cockney accent is replaced by fine eloquence of a lady, her status is automatically raised.

The play Pygmalion also deals with the futility of social barriers. The very challenge that Higgins takes up to pass Eliza, an uneducated...as a duchess within six months makes this conception of social barriers baseless. Shaw mocks at this feeble social demarcation that can be easily overcome in such a short period of time. Eliza's ambitious nature and zest for life ultimately bring her success. With her perseverance, Eliza finally climbs the social ladder, suggesting the vulnerability of social distinction.

Moreover, Alfred Doolittle is a licentious man, enough to sell his daughter for a meagre amount of five pounds. Our conventional morality is shaken when he explains why his woman prefers to remain his mistress instead of becoming his wife. It is an outrageous comment on the very institution of marriage. Shaw brings out the mindset of the people of his times.

Shaw highlights some social issues that elucidate how unfair discriminations are meted out to poor people. Doolittle calls himself an "undeserving poor", a caustic remark upon his wretched condition. He is victimized by unfair

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means of the social system. Shaw denounces the social system that fails to encourage the moral and financial upliftment of the poor people. Instead, it degrades their poor condition, by putting a stigma of "undeserving" before them, thereby encouraging them to indulge in more wrongful acts. Shaw's enemy is Capitalism and Imperialism. The disparity of the acquisition of wealth becomes a target of Shaw's criticism.

The sudden acquisition of wealth raises the status of the Doolittles, however, they do not earn self-respect unlike Eliza. As a person, Alfred Doolittle is more irresponsible. He does not know how to spend all the money thus claiming that acquiring wealth to enter society has "ruined me".

Furthermore, the importance of phonetics and enunciation is highlighted in the play *Pygmalion*. It is one of the means through which the social barrier is eradicated. Eliza turns into an elegant, sophisticated woman by learning the nuances of pronunciation from Higgins. This emphasizes the significance of phonetics in social reformation.

Shaw began his career as an advocate of Fabian Socialism. As a socialist he believes in a classless society. The weakness of such class demarcation comes up as the target of Shaw's inimitable mockery. Both Eliza and Doolittle are victims of uneven distribution of wealth and both of them eventually transcend their class, however, their development does not occur simultaneously. The moral development of Eliza makes her distinct from the Doolittles. The vulnerability of class distinction constitutes the essential message of the play.