

Pygmalion and the dissolution of class barriers



**ASSIGN
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George Bernard Shaw's 'Pygmalion' is a play that is scathing in its attack on the pruderies, hypocrisies and inconsistencies of higher society in early 20th century London. Through the transformation of Eliza Doolittle, Shaw reveals to the audience that amongst the 'draggetailed guttersnipe[s]' of the lower class, there lies hidden an intelligence, honesty and tenacity that exceeds the virtues of the upper class, and that the way in which they are treated by their apparent social betters is unjustified. However, Shaw's castigation of the upper class is not simply restricted to the character of Eliza - through various characters in the play, Shaw creates a moral landscape that juxtaposes people at the top end of the social hierarchy, with those at the very lowest end. He challenges the bases of judgements made by the upper class (judgements based on trivial surface appearances, such as one's accent, one's social niceties and one's occupation), and questions the supposed inadequacies of Eliza's class. Ultimately, Shaw encourages the audience to look beyond the stifling class barriers of the period and embrace the basic human characteristics of goodness. The character of Eliza embodies this goodness, and the audience is therefore provoked to have disdain for the upper class who, in contrast, treat her so poorly. According to Shaw in his preface, great art can never be anything but didactic, and in 'Pygmalion' didacticism is truly forefront, as Shaw confronts his audience to consider whether this high society to which Eliza aspires, is actually worth aspiring to at all.

In the very first scene of the play, Eliza's protestations against the cursory judgements of her by the upper class reveal much about her character; 'I'm a good girl I am' - Eliza's catchphrase that is so central to her character, as

well as to Shaw's intentions, is introduced here. Shaw reveals to the audience, through this simple line, the level of self-respect Eliza has for herself. Furthermore, the tone of this line - that is, exclamatory, and filled with despair - evokes the intense feistiness and energy of Eliza that is perpetuated throughout the play. Shaw encourages the audience to see that Eliza cannot simply be pigeon-holed, like so many other beggars were, as an immoral, insignificant flake of a person. In the Edwardian era in which the play is set, members of the 'upper class' (that is, those born into wealth and social status due to a noble lineage) generally held a view that people like Eliza lacked any sense of morality, however with this simple line, Shaw creates in Eliza a character which destroys this mould. This is pivotal to Shaw's intentions in 'Pygmalion', demonstrating the inconsistencies that permeate the upper class - even though the members of high society considered themselves the paradigm of morality and virtue, they are ignorant to the immorality of their unjustifiable behavior towards people like Eliza, who evidently don't deserve to be treated with such disdain and contempt. Shaw is demonstrating to the audience that, contrary to common opinion, morality transcends class barriers, and is one of the earliest examples of Shaw condemning the inconsistent and questionably judgmental behavior of the upper class, as well as a society that seeks to lock people into certain personas based on class alone, without thorough consideration of their individual merits.

Despite the fact that many, if not all, of Eliza's admirable qualities are present in her initial character, these qualities are further showcased by Shaw in a confrontational scene between Higgins and Eliza after her

transformation is complete - a transformation which essentially uncovers more of Eliza's hidden virtues and brings them to fruition. Here, Eliza demonstrates a skillful grasp on wit, comparing Higgins' statement that he 'treat[s] a duchess as if she was a flower girl' to the behavior of her father, a comparison which would have been taken very unfavorably by Higgins, due to his and others' tendency to look down upon Doolittle's behavior for its lack of morality and decency. Not only is Shaw reinforcing here that laudable qualities, such as wittiness, can be present in anyone, regardless of social distinction, Eliza's comparison of Higgins to Doolittle demonstrates that the reverse is also true; despicable and condemnable qualities exist irrespective of class or social status, discrediting even further the idea that the class structure impacts in any way on the individual human condition.

When Eliza allows Pickering to call her by her first name, but politely requests that Higgins call her 'Miss Doolittle', Eliza maintains common courtesy and decorum, yet the grit and cheek which is so distinctive about her character, is still present. Shaw uses this comment by Eliza to satirize the prudent and restrained nature of high society - Eliza puts Higgins in his place through this slight impudence, however maintains the manners which were so treasured during the period. She demonstrates intelligence and control here; she knows that in order to gain power over Higgins and make him responsible for his actions, she must present it to him in the way to which he is accustomed (with grace and polish), and to resort to the wailing and desperation of her past language would be to succumb to Higgins' claims that she is not a lady at all. What she does however, is maintain the niceties to which Higgins is accustomed, but uses her own characteristic

boldness to gain Higgins' attention. Essentially, this is Shaw's attempt to discredit the woodenness of the upper class, using Eliza's language here as an example of how comments that verge on impertinence, can be used to one's own benefit, without compromising one's integrity or polish, as Eliza does in this scene. Fundamentally, Shaw uses the transformation of Eliza to showcase all of her estimable and admirable qualities, such as her biting wit, and the way in which she cleverly harnesses her spunky energy for her own advantage, creating a character to whom the reader aspires.

Whilst Shaw utilizes the transformation of Eliza to focus on the hidden merits of the lower class, this is not the only presence that the playwright uses to condemn the qualities of the upper class in 'Pygmalion'. Perhaps the most powerful device that Shaw uses for this end is the juxtaposition between the estimable character of Eliza, and certain members of high society, whose values portrayed as anything but estimable. The varying characters in the play create a moral landscape which positions Eliza, complete with all her virtue, vibrancy and goodness, at one end of the spectrum, and clearly places characters such as Higgins, from high society, at the very opposite pole. The contrast between these groups of characters could not be starker; Eliza is honest, straightforward, and moral, whereas Higgins, who in the words of his own mother, 'has no manners', and is a character who treats Eliza with such inferiority that it seems as if he views her as non-human, or like 'a pebble on the beach' (as Mrs Pearce puts it). Shaw uses the frequency with which Higgins talk about Eliza as if she is not present, such as when he says she's 'so deliciously low - so horribly dirty', to convey to the audience the immorality of Higgins' behaviour. Higgins later claims to treat

everyone equally, ('and I treat a duchess as if she was a flower girl') however the audience already knows this to be untrue from the manners which he employs with people such as Mrs Eynsford Hill throughout the play. This hypocrisy of Higgins serves to do more damage to the audience's perception of his character, and hence the high society to which he belongs. Given that the audience is privy to the unexpected nuances of Eliza's character, such as her self-respect and morality, Higgins' defamatory comments towards Eliza, such as his calling her a 'piece of baggage' are intended by Shaw to be uncomfortable for the audience, who are intentionally provoked to reflect upon their own behaviour with a new consideration for members of the poor such as Eliza. This juxtaposition is perhaps the salient vessel through which Shaw aims to condemn the values of high society, and discredit the idea that morality and class are somehow related. It is evident in Shaw's eyes that the two are mutually exclusive.

One character however - Freddy - stands out from amongst his social counterparts; instead of judging Eliza based on her speech and other external features, Freddy is thrilled and excited by the refreshing honesty and straightforwardness of Eliza. He finds her 'awfully funny', and contrasts with the other upper class characters in the play who shun Eliza based upon her outward appearances and background. Shaw uses the character of Freddy to endorse a societal freedom and the breaking down of class barriers; Freddy is depicted as a courageous visionary who can see beyond the lack of social niceties and conventions in Eliza's character, and respect her integral morality and energy which is so lacking in many of the people with whom he spends his time. Shaw offers the character of Freddy, who

breaks away from the social expectations of him, to pursue a life with a common flower girl, as an alternative to the superficial and immorally hypocritical life as a member of the upper class. In the sequel of the play, it is made distinctly clear that Freddy's intelligence pales in comparison to Eliza's brilliance, when Higgins declares that 'if [Freddy] tried to do any useful work some competent person would have the trouble of undoing it', and that Eliza would have 'an ideal errand boy' in Freddy. Shaw made this decision regarding Freddy's character for a number of reasons, however he intends Freddy's lack of smarts to make his courageous decision more accessible, creating an "if he can do it, then so can I" mentality among members of the audience. Shaw uses Freddy's lack of intelligence in an effort to engender angst, or perhaps even paranoia in the audience, that maybe they too, should be undergoing a similar conversion to Freddy, which is further evidence of Shaw's attempt to create a didactic work of theatre that aims to break down and dismantle class barriers.

Shaw's active presence as a socialist is strongly felt in 'Pygmalion' - the pruderies, hypocrisies and inconsistencies of high society are condemned in such an emphatic way that his evident egalitarian views are conveyed in a subtle, yet forceful manner, the concerns of Shaw being disguised beneath the satire and light-heartedness of the play's action. However, upon closer inspection, the models of Eliza and Freddy, revolutionary in their respective abilities to refute and reject preconceived notions around class, provide the soother to the undercurrent of societal anger that permeates throughout the play. Through the transformation of Eliza, as well as the juxtaposition between Eliza and people generally seen as her societal betters in terms of

morality and decency, Shaw imparts to the audience a secret and almost taboo knowledge; that class barriers are far weaker than they seem. He challenges members of the audience to consider, if they are part of the upper class, whether they are truly as virtuous as they think, and, if they are aspiring to be in the upper class, why exactly this is so. In this way, 'Pygmalion' is an utterly didactic work that seeks to challenge, and ultimately obliterate all class-related preconceptions and barriers.