
UNIT 2 *PYGMALION* : THEMES AND ISSUES

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will offer you perspectives on the themes in *Pygmalion* and the salient features of the major characters and their relationships.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Pygmalion is primarily a play about speech and phonetics, but related to it are Shaw's social concerns - class distinction, good manners and middle class morality. The "romance" of Higgins and Eliza does not culminate in matrimony but a complex network of man-woman relationships with Eliza marrying Freddy, and Higgins unwilling to get out of chronic bachelorhood engendered by his mother-fixation. In this unit, we shall first explore the theme of English speech and the related cluster of subjects in the play. Subsequently we shall engage various facets of man-woman relationship with special reference to the characters of Eliza and Higgins.

2.2 *PYGMALION* AS A PLAY ABOUT PHONETICS

Pygmalion is overtly a play about phonetics or English speech. Shaw says in his preface to the play. "The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. They spell it so abominably that no man can teach himself what it sounds like. It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him".¹ So in the play, he emphasizes the need to speak the language properly, and Higgins, the phonetician is the one who can teach people how to do so. Professor Higgins, as Shaw again points out in the Preface has "touches of Sweet" (p.193), a brilliant but unpleasant phonetician at Oxford. In Act I, Higgins is able to place all the bystanders simply on the basis of their accents. He tells Colonel Pickering "you can spot an Irish-man or a Yorkshire man by his brogue. I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets." (p.205). He denounces Eliza for her speech: "A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere -no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible: and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon." (P.206).

In fact the play is built around the professional life of Higgins as a phonetician, and its main action consists of the successful attempt of Higgins to convert Eliza, a flower girl into a duchess by giving her a new speech: "I shall make a duchess of this draggletailed guttersnipe." (p.215). and Eliza with her impeccable accent-acquired in a few months of "learning how to speak beautifully" (p.220)- does pass off as a duchess, affirming Shaw's undeniable view that speech is one way of dividing class from class and emphasizing class distinction. Higgins can similarly bridge this gulf in Alfred Doolittle's case: "if we were to take this man in hand for three months, he could choose a seat in the Cabinet and a popular pulpit in Wales." (p.230). He tells his mother, "But you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul." (P.248).

2.3 CLASS DISTINCTION, SNOBBERY, KINDS OF MANNERS, MIDDLE CLASS MORALITY, AND THE CHARACTER OF DOOLITTLE

Shaw also attacks snobbery in a more general way. In the opening scene itself, Eliza protest against social and economic snobbery by refusing to be cowed down by her social superiors. Her repeated protest "I'm a good girl, I am." Is to assert her dignity in the face of those, who, she (mistakenly) thinks, are trying to trample upon her. Nonetheless, she has her own brand of snobbery. When she rides in a taxi, she wants to show it to everyone. At Higgins's house she wants Mrs. Pearce to tell him that she came in a taxi. When the arrangements for Eliza's stay there are finalized and she is initiated in her new life, she says: "I should just like to take a taxi to the corner of Tottenham Court road and get out there and tell it to wait for me, just to put the girls in their place a bit. I wouldn't speak to them you know." Higgins rightly reprimands her: "you shouldn't cut your old friends now that you have risen in the world. That's what we call snobbery." (p.234).

Mrs. Pearce is so contemptuous of Eliza and her father because they belong to the working class. She tells Higgins about Eliza, "She's quite a common girl, Sir. Very Common indeed. I should have sent her away,..." (p.210). When Eliza says to him, "don't be silly," Mrs. Pickering rebukes her "you mustn't speak to the gentleman like that." (p.213). Later, as Doolittle leaves, "He takes off his hat to Mrs. Pearce, who disdains the salutation and goes out..." (p.234). Even the polite man, Pickering asks him to sit on the floor: "the floor is yours, Mr. Doolittle." (P.228).

It is on account of the conventions of the class system that Eynsford Hills have to endure a shabby existence in genteel poverty. Mrs. Hill has "the manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living without giving her a fine lady's income" (p.250). Freddy and Clara cannot have suitable jobs. Clara's situation "had prevented her from getting educated, because the only education she could have afforded was education with the Earls court green grocer's daughter. It had led her to seek the society of her mother's class: and that class simply would not have her, because she was much poorer than the green grocer." (p.228). Certain professions and jobs are below their social class, and when Clara does take up a position, it is in defiance of the class system.

Similarly, Eliza also faces the larger problem of education-what to do after it-in a sense, the problem of the end result of liberal education. She, like them, has not been provided a vocational education, and once she moves up the social ladder by successfully winning the bet for Higgins, she cannot go back to her work of selling flowers on the pavement. What can she do? Mrs. Higgins reiterates the problem that Mrs. Pearce had noticed earlier: "the problem of what is to be done with her

afterwards" (p.250). Eliza herself asks Higgins after her success: "What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? Whats to become of me?" (p.256).

After Eliza and Freddy get married and set up a flower shop-after much prevarication, they are unfit to run it. "Freddy, like all youths educated at cheap, pretentious, and thoroughly inefficient schools, knew a little Latin"...unfortunately, he knew nothing else:" (p 291-92). He did not have the slightest knowledge of accounts or business: "Colonel Pickering had to explain to him what a cheque book and a bank account meant" (p.292).

The play also highlights the fact that there are certain-things that the working class people are deprived of, which affect the quality of their lives. Thus Higgins observes: "a woman of that class looks a worn out drudge of fifty a year after she's married." (p.216). As Eliza points out, working class women do not "clean" themselves because bathing is no joy for them: "Now I know why ladies is so clean. Washing's a treat for them. Wish they saw what it is for the like of me!" (p.232) When she first comes to his house, Higgins exclaims, "she's so deliciously low-so horribly dirty"(p.215). Her transformation is partly one from a dirty slovenly "baggage" to a clean, well-groomed woman.

Related to class distinction is the question of manners and discrimination in our behaviour towards people of different classes and stations. Higgins treats Eliza like dirt. She appropriately tells him: "Well, if you was a gentleman, you might ask me to sit down," and Higgins responds by asking Pickering: "shall we ask this baggage to sit down, or shall we throw her out of the window?" (p.212). In fact, he wants to put her in the dustbin. Even after her grand success at the party at which people mistake her for a "Duchess", when he rails at her, he calls her a "guttersnipe." Surprisingly, he tells Pickering: "Here I am, a shy, diffident sort of man. Ive never been able to feel really grown up and tremendous like other chaps." (p.224).

Swearing is also a part of Higgins's bad manners. When he asks Mrs. Pearce "What the devil do you mean?" she responds: "[stolidly] That's what I mean, sir. You swear a great deal too much. I don't mind your damning and blasting, and what the devil and where the devil and who the devil." (p.223). His mother tells her that his language "would be quite proper - say on a canal barge" and Pickering supports her; "I haven't heard such language as yours since we used to review the volunteers in Hyde Park twenty years ago." (p.247).

In contrast the manners of colonel Pickering are uniformly pleasant. Eliza is deeply touched when he calls her "Miss Doolittle" and extends to her the courtesies normally reserved for ladies. She aptly remarks; "it was from you that I learnt really nice manners: and that is what makes me a lady, isn't it?" (p.269). She reiterates, "you thought and felt about me as if I were something better than a scullery - maid; though of course I know you would have been just the same to a scullery-maid if she had been let into the drawing room." (p.270).

The following discussion about manners not only sums up the contrast but also provides another important twist to it.

"HIGGINS...My manners are exactly the same as Colonel Pickering's.

LIZA. That's not true. He treats a flower girl as if she was a duchess.

HIGGINS. And I treat a duchess as if she was a flower girl."

He reiterates "the great secret Eliza, is not having bad manners or good manners or any other particular sort of manners, but having the same manner for all human souls." (p.274).

So Shaw extends the discussion to the larger issue of equality and social differences. Implied in Eliza's transformation is the premise that given the opportunities, anyone can cross the class barriers.

There is also an assumption that this social climbing is not always desirable as the working class life style is not invariably inferior to that of the middle class and the upper class. In fact, Doolittle implies that the "middle class morality" is inappropriate for the lower class poor: "what is middle class morality? Just an excuse for never giving me anything." (p.230). When he comes back transformed as a "respectable" man, he blames Higgins for his miserable plight: "Ruined me. Destroyed my happiness. Tied me up and delivered me into the hands of middle class morality." (p.263). He elaborates; "I was happy. I was free. I touched pretty nigh everybody for money when I wanted it, same as I touched you, Henry Higgins. Now I am worried: tied neck and heels; and everybody touches me for money." (p.264). Now he and Eliza's "step mother" are forced to marry each other. "Intimidated, Governor. Intimidated Middle class morality claims its victim." (p.272). He was never married to Eliza's mother because "that aint the natural way, colonel: it's only the middle class way." (p.272). He has lived with numerous women without getting married to any of them. None of Eliza's six "step-mothers" was married to him till he is forced by his new station to marry the last one.

He also attacks the so called morality of the affluent thriving on the family savings without doing any work: "Don't you be afraid that I'll save it and spare it and live idle on it. There won't be a penny of it left by Monday: I'll have to go to work same as if I'd never had it." (p.230-31).

Doolittle as a character is far from a stereotype and in many ways a very "Shavian" creation. He is the uniquely shavian character who has the capacity to subvert all our traditional ways of thinking and make all our conventional beliefs-especially our moral ideals-stand on their heads, giving us exactly the opposite of what we expect as he does with middle class morality. When he first enters the stage, he "seems equally free from fear and conscience." At the same time, he has a habit of giving vent to his feelings without reserve. His present pose is that of wounded honour and stern resolution." (p.225): when non-plussed by Higgins's response, he shows the full range of his "natural gift of rhetoric" as he says "I'm willing to tell you. I'm wanting to tell you. I'm waiting to tell you." (p.226). It is his eloquence that partly accounts for Higgins's approbation and his enduring popularity with the audience.

His family surname "Doolittle" provides a clue as much to his character as to his daughter Eliza's. If he does little by way of hard, constructive work, she can do little by way of earning her living after her transformation.

2.4 MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE PLAY; HIGGINGS'S MOTHER-FIXATION AND OEDIPUS COMPLEX: HIGGINS -ELIZA EQUATION; ELIZA, THE FIGHTER AND THE FEMINIST

The moral issues in the play include Shaw's views on man-woman relationship and the attitudes of several characters towards the opposite sex. As usual Shaw has his share of witticisms and paradoxical statements on the matter. When Pickering asks Higgins, "are you a man of good character where women are concerned?" he replies: "[moodily] Have you ever met a man of good character where women are concerned?" (p.221). Higgins is a confirmed bachelor who resists the erotic incursion of any woman in his life. He comments: "women upset everything. When you let

them into your life, you find that the woman is driving at one thing and you're driving at another.' (p.221). He elaborates, "I suppose the woman wants to live her own life; and the man wants to live his; and each tries to drag the other onto the wrong track." (p.221-22). In fact, he is totally indifferent to their sexual charm: "I'm seasoned. They might as well be blocks of wood. I might as well be a block of wood." (p.222). Shaw in his description states, "But as to Higgins, the only distinction, he makes between men and women is that when he is neither bullying nor exclaiming to the heavens against some feather weight cross, he coaxes women as a child coaxes its nurse, when it wants to get anything out of her." (p.211).

The clue to Higgins's bachelorhood lies in his mother-fixation. When Mrs. Higgins says, "Well, you never fall in love with anyone under forty-five. When will you discover that there are some rather nice-looking young women about?," her son replies, "Oh, I can't be bothered with young women. My idea of a lovable women is something as like you as possible." (p.237). It is this mother-fixation that prevents him from having a "normal" relationship with a woman. Shaw corroborates this: "when Higgins excused his indifference to young women on the ground that they had an irresistible rival in his mother, he gave the clue to his inveterate old-bachelorhood." (p.282-83). He adds: "If an imaginative boy has a sufficiently rich mother who has intelligence, personal grace, dignity of character without harshness, and a cultivated sense of the best art of her time to enable her to make her house beautiful, she sets a standard for him against which very few women can struggle, besides effecting for him a disengagement of his affections, his sense of beauty and his idealism from his specifically sexual impulses." (p.283).

This aspect of Higgins which the Freudians would call his "oedipus complex" also has parallels in Shaw's own life—a fact which Colin Wilson in his book, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*, corroborates. It has been well known that George Carr Shaw, the father of Bernard Shaw, hardly mattered in the family and the children had centered their lives round their mother Mrs. Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw. Colin Wilson writes: "Percy Smith has argued convincingly that he not only idolised his mother, but that all the women in his play from *Candida* on are mother figures."³ His first mistress was Jenny Patterson, a widow fifteen years his senior and a friend of his mother. In his wife, to quote Wilson "What Shaw wanted was a mother figure." At the age of forty one, in July 1897 says in his letter to Ellen Terry that he wants to marry "a reasonably healthy woman of about sixty" who "must be plain featured."⁴ It is also widely believed that Shaw's own marriage to Charlotte Payne Townshend who very much resembled Lucinda Elizabeth Gurley was never consummated. Whereas Shaw as a bachelor found sexual release through at least two women, Jenny Patterson and the actress Florence Farr (who was the "right age"), Higgins remained a confirmed bachelor.

Higgins's relationship with Eliza has engendered a variety of responses from critics, directors, viewers and readers. Maurice Valency, says in *The Cart and the Trumpet* that *Pygmalion* like *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Man and Superman* shows the tension between the man who is devoted to his work and the woman who is interested in emotional ties. Shaw adds a long afterword to the play to suggest that Eliza, instead of marrying Higgins, chooses Freddy and lives happily ever after with him. The film version, on the other hand, ends with Eliza's return to the Professor. Many readers also feel that Shaw is mistaken in separating her from Higgins. Is our playwright justified in his conclusion? Are Higgins and Eliza compatible?

We observe that Higgins is "Careless about himself and other people, including their feelings." (p.210), and Eliza is too sensitive and self-respecting to tolerate this attitude. She insists on being treated with respect. When she encounters Higgins for the first time and observes him taking notes, she incessantly asserts that she is a good girl, repeatedly saying "I'm a good girl, I am." In Act II, when she goes to Higgins's place, she has her "innocent vanity and consequential air" (p.211). Naturally she resents the brutal treatment she receives from Higgins and she never allows him to

walk over her. Her protest becomes quite pronounced after she wins his bet, and he responds to all her efforts by simply expressing his sense of relief that everything is over. She explodes by throwing her slippers at him and trying to scratch his face with her nails. She cannot accept the fact that she is merely a common ignorant girl to him and there cannot be any feeling between them.

Higgins cannot understand that she has violently retaliated because she is deeply hurt by his and Colonel Pickering's indifference to her. He tells her: "It is you who have hit me. You have wounded me to the heart" (p.259). Eliza has a sense of triumph and the power equation now changes with her acquiring a better status and never letting go her new position of strength. She is crystal clear: "I won't be passed over" (p.275). Surprisingly Higgins appeals to her emotions: "I shall miss you, Eliza" ... "I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance. I like than, rather." Eliza replies coolly: "Well, you have both of them on your gramophone and in your book of photographs. When you feel lonely without me, you can turn the machine on. It's got no feelings to hurt." (p.275).

At the same time, Higgins would not play the sentimental lover and Eliza does not want him to:-

"HIGGINS. In short, you want me to be as infatuated about you as Freddy? Is that it?

LIZA. No I don't. That's not the sort of feeling I want from you." (p.278).

She goes on to add: "I want a little kindness. I know I'm a common ignorant girl, and you a book-learned gentleman; but I'm not dirt under your feet." She reiterates: "I come-came - to care for you: not to want you to make love to me, and not forgetting the difference between us but more friendly like." (p.278). This, however, makes no impression on Higgins. He simply says "That's just how I feel. And how Pickering feels. Eliza: you're a fool." (p.278). They are not after all going to marry each other.

At the same time, Higgins is quite jealous of Freddy. When he objects to Freddy writing love letter to Eliza three times a day, he is being quite possessive of the girl. Tracy c. Davis traces another parallel in Shaw's life-his relationship with Mrs. Patrick Campbell: "He functioned as Higgins, the self-styled benefactor of Campbell/Eliza, thwarted by her preference for a younger, less intellectual man, Cornwallis-West/Freddy."⁵

Shaw is not altogether wrong in his epilogue: "Eliza's instinct tells her not to marry Higgins. It does not tell her to give him up." (p.282). He goes on to refer to "her resentment of Higgins's domineering superiority, and her mistrust of his coaxing cleverness in getting round her and evading her wrath when he had gone too far with his impetuous bullying." (284).

Most readers with their conventional ideas of man-woman relationship say that Freddy is too weak to attract the strong-willed Eliza and she would much rather have Higgins. Shaw, however feels; "Eliza has no use for the foolish romantic tradition that all women love to be mastered, if not actually bullied and beaten." (p.284). He further says: "the man or woman who feels strong enough for two, seeks for every other quality in partner than strength." (p.285). So Eliza is not thrown overboard by the strength of Higgins, and yet, Shaw concedes that "she has even secret mischievous moments in which she wishes she could get him alone, on a desert island, away from all ties and with nobody else in the world to consider, and just drag him off his pedestal and see him making love like any common man. We all have private imaginations of that sort. But when it comes to business, to the life that she really leads as distinguished from the life of dreams and fancies, she likes Freddy and she likes the Colonel; and she does not like Higgins and Mr. Doolittle. Galatea never

does quite like *Pygmalion*: his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable." (p.295).

Eliza-Higgins relationship also has overtones of an oedipal situation. When he tries to bully her on her first arrival at his place, she reacts by pointing out: "One would think you was my father." Higgins replies. "If I decide to teach you, I'll be worse than two fathers to you" (p.214). Much later, he tells her: "I'll adopt you as my daughter and settle money on you if you like. Or would you rather marry Pickering?" In response, Eliza explodes; "I wouldn't marry you if you asked me; and you're nearer my age than what he is." (p.277). There is a gap of at least twenty years between them and those readers/spectators who want Eliza to marry Higgins are aware of the possibility of the young girl falling for a father figure.

To an extent, Eliza also represents the Shavian Life Force and moderate kind of Feminism. We have already seen how assertive she is and how she refuses to be treated as "dirt under anyone's feet." She asserts: "I won't be called a baggage when I've offered to pay like anybody." (p.212). She is also impelled by the driving energy that leads life upwards. She has the will and the ambition to go up in the world and she learns things with an astonishing rapidity.

Eliza, moreover is not willing to accept the humble subservient position that a woman is normally assigned in the human society. As we observed earlier, Shaw denies the view that women love to be mastered and bullied, even beaten. Eliza prefers the weaker Freddy, who adores her and whom she can dominate to the masterful Higgins when it comes to marriage. On that fateful night after the party, once she refuses to carry Higgins's slippers and act as his personal secretary, his own attitude towards her changes. Now he encourages her to play the assertive role. He may not sound very convincing when he says: "I think a woman fetching a man's slippers is a disgusting sight: ... I think a good deal more of you for throwing them in my face... who cares for a slave?" (p.276). Nevertheless everything changes that night, and Eliza seldom reverts to the earlier situation. Later "he storms and bullies and derides: but she stands up to him so ruthlessly..." (p.294). So in a way she represents a feminist who would not play the subservient role to any man, let alone accept the position of a doormat.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we initiated our analysis of the themes in *Pygmalion* with a glance at Shaw's concern with English speech and phonetics, observing Higgins's abilities in phonetics and his transformation of a flower girl into a Duchess by creating a new speech for her. As we noticed, one's speech and accent are indicators of one's class. Subsequently we engaged Shaw's critique of snobbery, and the snobbish variation in our manners for people of different classes. He also finds faults with other manifestations of class-consciousness such as non-vocational liberal education for the upper class and those upper class conventions that prevent one from earning one's living.

In our study of man-woman relationship, we observed how Higgins's mother fixation, which comes close to Oedipus complex, prevents him from getting erotically involved with any young woman and thus accounts for his lack of interest in Eliza. Moreover, Eliza cannot accept his rough treatment of her and marries Freddie who is much nicer. We also saw how Eliza's determination to fight for her rights against Higgins, the male bully can suggest the feminist angle in her make up.

References

1. George Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays with Prefaces* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1962), I 191.

All the quotations from the play are from this edition (Volume I), and subsequently page numbers are given in parentheses.

2. Colin Wilson writes: "Lee caused something of a scandal among his upper class pupils in London when he tried to pass off his housemaid as one of them- an incident that sounds like the origin of *Pygmalion*."

See

Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment (1969; London: Macmillan, 1981) 09.

3. *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment* 28.

4. As quoted in Colin Wilson, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment* 127. The quotation from Wilson himself is on the same page.

5. *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1994) 93.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. What according to Shaw are the social implications of different accents and modes of English speech?
2. Can Higgins effect a transformation in Doolittle similar to the one he has brought about in Eliza?
3. How does Shaw denounce social snobbery and class distinctions?
4. What are the views of Shaw on the relevance of liberal education and its practical utility?
5. How do the Eynsford Hills suffer on account of their superior birth i.e. their upper class background?
6. Do you approve of the manners of Henry Higgins? Do you feel that because he is exceptionally talented, he has the right to ride roughshod over other people's feelings?
7. Is Doolittle an attractive character? Are you in substantial agreement with his critique of middle class morality?
8. Give arguments for and against the view that Higgins is a case of Oedipus - complex.
9. Who in your opinion should marry Eliza? Higgins or Freddy? Justify your answer.
10. In Eliza- Higgins conflicts, who has your sympathy and why?
11. Is Eliza's assertiveness ridiculous, or does it strike a chord in the reader?