
UNIT 3 DRAMATIC STRUCTURE AND MINGLING OF GENRES

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with two crucial aspects of the "forum" of the play: its dramatic structure and the mingling of the genres of comedy, romance and novel.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Pygmalion, which dramatises a Greek myth has an apparently unconventional form but certain structural principles can be perceived here such as a "thematic" division of the play into five acts and their neat sequencing, and comparison and contrast of parallel characters and events. The preface is more relevant to *Pygmalion* than the typical Shavian preface, but the epilogue is to a great extent an imposition on the play and contrary to the rules of dramatic composition. The play has the framework of a romance but it is interspersed with unromantic elements. At the same time, it uses several comic conventions and introduces novelistic element. In this unit, we shall initially examine the structure of the play and then explore how Shaw combines features of the conventional romance with certain comic conventions and a few typically fictional devices.

3.2 THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF *PYGMALION*

Pygmalion is a Shavian reworking of the myth of *Pygmalion* and Galatea. In the original myth, *Pygmalion*, the king of Cyprus, also a sculptor created the ivory statue of a lovely woman which was so beautiful that he fell in love with her. At his request, Aphrodite, the Goddess of love and beauty transformed the statue into an actual woman, Galatea by breathing life into her. The two got married and lived happily ever after. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Professor Higgins similarly "creates" his own Galatea as he transforms Eliza, a common, ignorant, slovenly flower girl into a marvellous duchess by creating a new speech for her and with the help of Pickering and Mrs. Pearce giving her new manners and a new life style. So she is his creation - the new Eliza is the Galatea that *Pygmalion* has sculpted. However in Shaw's version, *Pygmalion* does not fall in love with her and she marries someone else - the typical Shavian twist. Shaw, as we shall see later, has the habit of giving us the reverse of what we expect. In unit II, we observed at length Shaw's reasons for Higgins not marrying Eliza. Nevertheless the parallel with the myth makes the play more resonant by introducing another frame of reference.

Shaw has used the five act structure common to English drama from the renaissance to the Romantic period to dramatize his version of the myth. There are no subdivisions of the Acts into scenes and each Act marks a stage in Eliza's transformation. In Act I, Higgins observes in Eliza's presence that by giving her a new speech he can convert her into a Duchess and this creates the desire in her to transform herself. So with Eliza approaching Higgins in Act II, the process is initiated. He takes Eliza to his mother, Mrs. Higgins in the third act to observe how she interacts with others in polite society - a test case. The fourth act is the culmination of the process and its immediate fall out: Eliza is seen with Higgins and Pickering after the successful party. Finally in the last act, Eliza, who had "bolted", is retraced at Mrs. Higgin's place where she works out new terms and conditions with Higgins and Pickering about her future.

The play has certain structural patterns. Thus the scenery alternates from a location outside Higgins' house to its interior. We move from Covent Garden to his laboratory in Wimpole Street to Mrs. Higgins's drawing room in Chelsea, back to the laboratory and finally again to Mrs. Higgins's room, thus constantly relating the work in phonetics to the larger world. Again within each Act, there is a pattern of arrivals and departures except for the fourth act which is set indoors late in the evening and naturally therefore cannot involve visitors. In each act, usually the characters at the beginning stay till the end, thus imparting unity and continuity to the scene even as the others come and go. Shaw also intermingles the two three characters' intense interactions of Acts II and IV set at Higgin's house with the more social group scenes of Acts I and III providing us with the larger picture of society. There is also a careful time arrangement with Acts I and II in continuation, showing the beginning of the process of transformation, Act III coming a little later to indicate its middle and Acts IV and V which show the end of the process again in continuation.

The characters are also neatly arranged in parallel to highlight their distinctive features. Thus Higgins and Pickering constitute the central pair of the plot. They are both phoneticians, both confirmed bachelors, both rich gentlemen interested in experimenting on Eliza - her possible transformation into a "duchess". However, as we have seen whereas Higgins is rude and unbearable, Pickering is polite and gentlemanly. Higgins is inconsiderate and rough, whereas Pickering is kind and generous. Higgins is also, as we have seen a parallel to and contrasted with Freddy. Between these two possible husbands for Eliza, Higgins, a bully and a tyrant is contrasted with Freddy, a "softy" and a weakling. Moreover, Higgins's indifference to her is opposed to Freddy's loving adoration for her. Furthermore, Higgins is at the pinnacle of his profession, whereas Freddy fails to even earn his living.

Their mothers also are studies in contrast. Mrs. Eynsford Hill is basically a "soft" person who tolerates her daughter Clara's rude and ungracious behaviour almost as a helpless onlooker. She appreciates her son Freddy but is unable to do anything for him. Essentially she is an ineffective mother who cannot give a sense of direction to her children's lives. Mrs. Higgins, who has an independent life of her own, lives away from her sons, partly because they are grown up and settled. It is interesting that although Henry Higgins mentions to Doolittle that he has a brother who is a clergy man, his name never crops up at his mother's nor is he ever seen there. Mrs. Higgins is unfailingly critical of her son Henry's ill manners but she has failed to impart to him proper manners and to make a real "gentleman" of him. Her dominating personality and her son's adoration of her has only resulted in his remaining a bachelor, as we have seen in an earlier unit. Both these mothers also serve as foils to the third parent in the play i.e. Alfred Doolittle. There is no love lost between the father and the daughter. To Doolittle, his daughter Eliza is immaterial: he is utterly indifferent to her, and he only uses his relationship to her to "touch" people for money.

The only siblings presented on the stage are also opposites of each other. Whereas Clara is rude, unbearable and ill-mannered, Freddy is soft, polite and pleasant. Clara

is looking for a matrimonial prospect, but Freddy falls in love with Eliza at first sight without weighing and considering the pros and cons of marrying her.

Both Higgins and Pickering are contrasted with Mrs. Pearce, the other inmate of the house. The housekeeper, who is prim, proper and snobbish, disapproves of Henry Higgins's unkempt behaviour and unconventional ways. She is opposed to social equality and has a "practical" way of looking at the whole experiment on Eliza, unlike the dreamers Higgins and Pickering.

Eliza herself is contrasted with her father. She has the ambition to rise socially and to improve her economic status unlike Doolittle who resents being catapulted into the class of a "gentleman" against his wishes. He enjoys his working class situation, habits and mores unlike Eliza who finds them degrading.

In fact, in the play, there is a structural parallel between the two transformations and also the reactions of the persons transformed in the process. In a larger sense, the implication is that social climbing is not exceptional as it occurs here in more than one case-one woman and one man-one young woman and one middle aged man. However, it may not be desirable in every case.

The play has a significant absentee character in the form of Eliza's "step-mother" - a lady who never appears on the stage but who is mentioned every time Doolittle comes or every time Eliza talks of her life with her "parents". Making her a character in the play, would have meant introducing a sub-plot and lengthening the already long five act play, making it more diffuse. Mrs. Doolittle could also have brought her own point of view to the play and either increased or reduced the sympathy for Eliza, depending, of course, on the way in which Shaw conceived her character. Her being an absentee character preserves her mystery and the audience's curiosity about it. At the same time, one cannot do without all the references to Mrs Doolittle, which do make us aware of the larger world and broaden the social references and range of the play.

Shaw has also deleted scenes from an earlier draft. In one of the editions, there is a garden party scene where we meet several interesting social lions, public figures and an expert in phonetics. Shaw has omitted this scene from the later edition of the plays. What has Shaw gained in the process, and what has he lost? Obviously the gain is, first of all, in economy. Secondly, he shows Eliza in "social" scene may be unnecessary. Moreover, Eliza's transformation may be difficult to show on the stage and is better reported. It is also interesting that Shaw does not dramatize the actual lessons. Perhaps that has been done to prevent tedious scenes which may get quite dull and technical for an audience of non-specialists.

Our play is incomplete without the preface and the epilogue. In general, a preface explains the meaning of a work of art, or points out the origin and the sources of the play. Often it comments on the reception of the play by the audience and the critics. It also provides the details needed to appreciate the play fully. However, a Shavian play frequently pursues a line of argument that is quite tangential to the play. Nevertheless, here Shaw is careful enough to take up in the Preface issues which are developed in the play. Thus he begins with comments on English speech, then he dilates on the career of Henry Sweet, who is partly a model of Higgins. Subsequently, he makes a statement about *Pygmalion* that leads to his philosophy of playwriting. "It is so intensely and deliberately didactic and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the head of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else".¹ Finally he points out that transformations like Eliza's are not impossible in real life. So the preface, which performs the traditional roles expected of it and contains Shaw's credo, is carefully related to what happens in the play.

The epilogue obviously is aimed at convincing us that Eliza should not marry Higgins. In the process, it also narrates what happened subsequently to not only Eliza and Freddy but also Clara. In our discussion of man-woman relationship in the play in the earlier unit, we have already observed to what an extent, Shaw is justified in his view that Eliza should marry Freddy rather than Higgins. A point which should be made here is that a play usually does not have an epilogue of this kind. A dramatist must convey through the dialogues what he has to say. Obviously, Shaw feels that he has failed to do so through the five acts and consequently he has to write the epilogue to make his point. Moreover, the epilogue of an earlier, say an eighteenth century English play like *The School for Scandal* can be spoken to the audience by an actor or an actress which is impossible in *Pygmalion*. So clearly only the reader and not the audience can benefit from the epilogue. In this sense, it is a structural flaw in the play.

3.3 THE GENRE OF THE PLAY: ELEMENTS OF ROMANCE, COMEDY AND NOVEL

The form of the play is partly governed by Shaw calling it a "romance in five acts". Shaw begins his epilogue by saying "The rest of the story need not be shown in action, and indeed, would hardly need telling if our imaginations were not so enfeebled by the ready-made and reach-me-downs of the ragshop in which Romance keeps its stock of 'happy endings' to misfit all stories. Now, the history of Eliza Doolittle, though called a romance because the transfiguration it records seems exceedingly improbable is common enough." (p.281). The statement does not really negate what we concluded just now that the epilogue is a "structural flaw" in the play, but it does support the view that several other elements in the play can be better appreciated in the light of the conventions of Romance, although it does not have the traditional happy ending. As Colin Wilson wrote, *Pygmalion* is perhaps his frankest use of romanticism - disguised as anti-romanticism.² We naturally have at the heart of the story the transfiguration of Eliza and the parallel change in her father. Interestingly each of them reacts with great shock at observing the change in the appearance of the other. Doolittle mistakes his daughter for a "lady" to whom he shows deference, and Eliza is completely taken by surprise and utters those sounds which she thought she had left behind her after her education began. The element of romance and fairy tale - Eliza's transformation providing a somewhat ironical parallel to that of Cinderella imparts to the story elements of coincidence. Thus it is a coincidence that Eliza, Higgins, Pickering, Mrs. Eynsford Hill and her two children meet at the Covent Garden under the portico of St. Paul's Church on a summer evening on which it is raining heavily. It is also a coincidence that Eliza meets Mrs. Eynsford Hill, Clara and Freddy at Mrs. Higgins's at home. It is another coincidence that Doolittle visits Eliza and Higgins precisely on the days on which she starts her "education" and on which she "bolts" after winning the bet for Higgins but being ignored and neglected by him.

Lightning and thunder orchestrate Freddy's first meeting with Eliza, again in the manner of a romance. As he collides with her, "A blinding flash of lightning followed instantly by a rattling peal of thunder, orchestrates the incident." (p.198).

There is a magical element also in Higgins placing everyone in his or her "locality" and accurately construing the person's background by listening to a few sentences spoken by him or her. He appears a wizard to these people. In fact, it further contributes to the very dramatic beginning of the play, created by "..." (p.197), thus torrents of heavy summer rain, cab whistles blowing frantically in all directions. Pedestrians running for shelter adding to the sensational element of romance, all reinforcing the view that we get here an ironic parallel to the story of Cinderella - the poor girl with a vicious "step-mother" and an indifferent father suddenly acquiring wealth and marrying a Prince.

The miraculous conversions in the play are also related to the use of comic conventions. As Northrop Frye mentions in his essay on comedy, "Mythos of Spring", unlikely conversions miraculous transformations and providential assistance are inseparable from comedy.³ so as to bring about the expected happy ending. However, there is a twist here as the sudden enrichment of Eliza or her father does not bring about the desired effect. As we have seen in unit 2, Doolittle is genuinely unhappy about his new social status and the responsibilities it entails. Similarly Eliza does not acquire the wealth or the social status of a duchess or even a rich commoner.

Shaw also makes use of the convention of comic reversal. Thus Doolittle is introduced as an eminent dustman. Totally amoral by conventional standards, he is declared by Higgins to a rich American to be "the most original moralist at present in England" (p.263). People believe that a mistress feels joyous when her lover marries her but Eliza's "Step-mother" i.e. Doolittle's "live-in mistress" is extremely miserable at the prospect of marrying him. Doolittle says of her: "she's been very low, thinking of the happy days that are no more" (p.273). Earlier, he had confirmed this unusual power equation by saying: "I'm a slave to that woman governor just because I'm not her lawful husband" (p.231). Similarly when Doolittle comes to Higgins to blackmail him about Eliza, it is Higgins who bullies him rather than Doolittle bullying Higgins. In fact Doolittle, much against the conventional expectations refuses to take Eliza back. So there is the typical Shavian comic inversion: we get the reverse of what we expect. Thus Doolittle, when talking to Higgins, says: "I'll have to learn to speak middle class language from you, instead of speaking proper English." (p.264). Similarly when Mrs. Pearce trying to prevent Higgins from doing anything unusual to Eliza, tells Pickering: "I do hope sir, you wont encourage him to do anything foolish," Higgins responds: "What is life but a series of inspired follies? The difficulty is to find them to do. Never lose a chance: it doesn't come every day" (p.215). Similarly Eliza tells Higgins and Pickering "I don't want to talk grammar. I want to talk like a lady" (218). Soon Mrs. Pearce says "she should think of the future" and Higgins responds: "At her age! Nonsense! Time enough to think of the future when you haven't any future to think of ." (219) In the same scene, when Pickering tells Higgins: "she must understand thoroughly what she's doing," he disagrees and rhetorically asks: "do any of us understand what we are doing? If we did, would we ever do it?" (p.220) In a sense, each one of these statements contains a grain of truth, but essentially all of them fit into the larger pattern of comic reversals.⁴ Ironically, however, Shaw even reverses the typical comic ending- the hero does not marry the heroine. The Shavian twist to the ending, nevertheless, harks back to another comic convention that of the triumph of youth. Freddy the young man marries Eliza rather than Higgins or an older man marrying her. In a loose sense, the play also provides a variation of the theme of the comic foreigner. In a conventional comedy the foreigner is comic partly because of his strange accent and grammar. Shaw by carefully recreating different accents and ungrammatical structures in Act I and showing them in a comic light invites laughter that arises from an insight into the nature of English speech and grammar.

The comic element in the play is mainly verbal but it also includes the comedy of situation. Thus in Act I, humour arises from Eliza's misunderstanding that Higgins is a policeman who is faking notes because he is out to arrest her on charges of making indecent advances to men to solicit them as customers or clients. Similarly in Act II, Eliza's washing rather badly: its mousy color can hardly be natural. She wears a shoddy black coat that reaches nearly to her knees and is shaped to the waist. She has a brown skirt with a coarse apron. Her boots are much the worse for wear. She is no doubt as clean as she can afford to be, but compared to the ladies she is very dirty. Her features are no worse than thiers, but their condition leves something to be desired; and she needs the services of a dentist] (pp. 198-99). It is true that in the modern period, many dramatists describe the scene, the setting and the appearance of

characters at length, for example Ibsen in plays like *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler*. However, Shaw probes deeper in his own voice and analyses characters in the stage descriptions, something quite rare in drama. Thus the following description of Higgins is unusual for a play, especially an earlier play :

"He is of the energetic, scientific type, heartily even violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject, and careless about himself and other people, including their feelings. He is, in fact, but for his years and size, rather like a very impetuous baby taking notice eagerly and loudly and requiring almost as much watching to keep him out of unintended mischief. His manner varies from genial bullying when he is in a good humour to stormy petulance when anything goes wrong; but he is so entirely frank and void of malice that he remains likeable even in his least reasonable moments." (pp. 209-10)

Shaw even examines the thoughts of Higgins: "hearing in it the voice of God, rebuking him for his pharisaic want of charity to the poor girl" (p.207) Finally we observe the long epilogue which is not characteristic of a play but closer to a part of a novel.

Thus Shaw has combined in *Pygmalion* the elements of comedy, romance and novel and naturally created a work whose structure cannot follow the conventional symmetry and neatness of a "pure" genre.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we initially took cognisance of how Shaw's play has a parallel with the myth of Pygmalion: Higgins is Pygmalion and Eliza is his creation Galatea though with an altered ending. The myth is couched here in a five act structure with each act marking a stage in Eliza's "transformation". One organisational scheme is the alternation of scenery. We also observed how time is handled here according to a plan, and there are certain structural patterns in the play. Moreover, the plot is based on a contrast of parallel characters such as Higgins and Pickering, Higgins and Freddy, Mrs. Eynsford Hill and Mrs. Higgins and Mr. Doolittle, Clara and Freddy, Higgins and Pickering and Mrs. Pearce, Eliza and her father. The play also has a significant absentee character in Eliza's step-mother. Shaw wrote more than one draft of the play, and on the whole, the changes in the last draft were for the better. The preface to the play, unlike the typical Shavian preface is related to the play, but the epilogue seems to be imposed on it.

The genre of the play includes the element of romance in Eliza's "magical" transformation, the parallel to cinderella story, the presence of coincidences and a form of "pathetic fallacy" - nature orchestrating the human mood. On the other hand, the comic conventions of comic reversal and the comic foreigner are combined with the unconventional ending. The verbal comedy is interspersed with the comedy of situation. Finally the play also introduces novelistic techniques such as extended descriptions of characters, the absence of a list of dramatis personae, and detailed narration in the writer's own voice at the end that is in the epilogue.

References

1. George Bernard Shaw *Complete Plays with Prefaces* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1962) Vol I 194. All the other references to the text are from this edition and page numbers are indicated in parentheses.
2. Colin Wilson, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*. (1969; London: Macmillan, 1981).

3. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957).
4. Peter Kemp writes in his review of Michael Holroyd's biography *Bernard Shaw Volume I: The Search for Love 1856-1898*: "to cope with an upbringing in which everything seemed topsy-turvy, he adopted paradox as panacea." See *The Listener*, 15 September 1988, p.29.

3.5 QUESTIONS

1. Does Shaw's use of myth contribute to the enrichment of *Pygmalion*? Justify your answer.
2. How do the five acts of the play mark different stages of its plot?
3. What does Shaw achieve through his change of scenery in each act of *Pygmalion*?
4. Write an essay on the contrast of characters in the play?
5. Was Shaw justified in dropping scenes like the garden party one from *Pygmalion*? Would you have liked to see the party on the stage?
6. What impression have you formed of Eliza's "Step mother"? Answer in detail.
7. Are you in substantial agreement with what Shaw says in the Epilogue? Justify your answer.
8. Do the comic conventions in *Pygmalion* take away from the authenticity of the characters and the situations?
9. Was Shaw a romantic? Is the element of romance in the play in harmony with the "ideology" of Bernard Shaw?
10. Does Shaw's habit of describing and analysing characters and events in his own words go against the grain of the play by imposing something alien on the flow of events?