

The Superficiality of the Bourgeois in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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ABSTRACT

George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* presents the social conflict and class struggle between the two main classes in society: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Shaw suggests throughout the play that the bourgeois exploit members of the proletariat and treat them as worthless not because they are less intellectual or immoral, but because of their economic position. This paper opposes the idea that Shaw is a misogynist because he focuses on the relationship between the upper class phonetician, Higgins, and the flower girl, Eliza, and presents Higgins as morally bankrupt, who treats all members of the lower classes in the same disrespectful manner he treats Eliza. The poor girl, Eliza, and the dustman, Alfred Doolittle, reveal the superficiality and moral bankruptcy of middle class society after they arise in social standing. The play increases the consciousness of the lower classes through suggesting that the bourgeoisie should acknowledge their humanity and significant role in society.

Keywords: Bourgeoisie, proletariat, English, superficiality, exploitation.

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1912) represents a modern version of the original tale of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* written in AD 8. The Pygmalion myth in Ovid's version recounts the story of a sculptor, who creates beautiful statue of the ideal woman, Galatea, with whom he falls in love. In Shaw's play, *Pygmalion* is an upper class phonetician, Henry Higgins, who makes a wager with Colonel Pickering, a professor of Indian dialects, to transform the modern-day Galatea, Eliza Doolittle, a poor Cockney flower girl into an elegant and genteel lady through teaching her how to speak proper English. Throughout the process of transformation, the character of Higgins reveals the social ills of the English bourgeois society that appears to be morally bankrupt and careless to acknowledge the humanity of the lower class, represented through the characters of Eliza and her father, Alfred Doolittle. Shaw seems to be highly critical throughout his play of judging people by their appearance and describes the struggle between the two classes in society. Karl Marx points out, "society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (2000, 246). This hostility between classes can be clearly viewed in Shaw's *Pygmalion* where Eliza and Doolittle show dissatisfaction with the new lifestyle of the bourgeois after their social advancement, through the refinement of speech and inheritance, respectively. The fact that the play presents Higgins as a haughty man, who disrespects Eliza, does not make him a misogynist, but rather a morally bankrupt upper class phonetician, who feels superior to members of the lower class regardless of their gender. This paper exposes the social ills of the English bourgeois society through emphasizing the conflict between classes in Shaw's play.

Shaw's *Pygmalion* represents a play on society, in which there are two unequal classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, in conflict with each other. Members of the bourgeoisie, like Higgins and Pickering, are presented as intellectually and financially superior, and therefore treat members of the proletariat: the poor flower girl and Doolittle as inferior creatures. Higgins decides to create a duchess out of Eliza in a short time through teaching her how to speak like a lady:

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Higgins: You see this creature with kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. (2002, 8)¹

As member of the upper class, Higgins suggests that the lower class does not deserve admiration unless they learn to speak properly and wear fine clothes. Therefore, the first thing that Higgins does after accepting the bet against Pickering to create a lady out of Eliza is to order her old clothes to be burned:

Higgins (*storming on*): Take all her clothes off and burn them ... Wrap her up in brown paper till they come.

Liza: You're no gentleman, you're not, to talk of such things. I'm a good girl, I am; and I know what the like of you are, I do. (16)

The fact that Higgins dehumanizes and degrades Eliza because of her clothes reflects the shallowness of the bourgeoisie that judges people according to their appearance and manners. Higgins takes advantage of the position of Eliza as a poor girl to have dominance over her as Ellen Gainor argues that Shaw "associates power to command (politically or socially) with language" (1991, 217). Therefore, the superficiality of Higgins can be seen in claiming superiority over the lower classes because he speaks proper English language. Hongwei Chen points out that "the role that Shaw essentially sets for Higgins is one of the elite of the society, a man of the great tradition of science, language and poetry" (2011, 337). This represents a pretext for Higgins to constantly undermine the lower classes in the play and treat them as worthless.

As representative of Fabian Socialism and his dream of classless society, Shaw seems to be highly critical of the bourgeois and their exploitation of the lower classes. The morality of the bourgeoisie seems to be questionable when Higgins and Pickering discuss the inferiority of Eliza:

Pickering (in good-humoured remonstrance): does it occur to you that the girl has some feelings?

Higgins (looking critically at her): Oh, no, I don't think so. Not any feeling that we need bother about. (18)

The fact that the insensitive Higgins accepts to educate Eliza and create a new identity for her as a duchess represents an attempt to emphasize his "intellectual superiority" (C. Hongwei, 2011, 337) over his creation rather than advancing her social status to be equal to him. Higgins never changes his treatment of Eliza after her transformation, but rather continues to treat her in the same arrogant and disrespectful manner. Julie Wosk reads the bachelors, Higgins and Pickering, as "masterful technicians or magicians who can successfully produce an illusion of the real" (2015, 29), and therefore have complete control over their artwork through controlling the feelings and behaviors of Eliza.

Shaw seems to present throughout his play a scathing contempt of the values of upper class society and criticizes the idea that the rich are superior by virtue of their birth. Higgins disrespects the street-girl Eliza because she belongs to the lower class not that she is morally bankrupt or uneducated. Therefore, Eliza proves that class barriers can be eliminated through education and retains her strong character after the constant attempts of her mentor, Higgins, to subjugate her.

Eliza refuses to be treated as an object and inferior to Higgins through asserting her identity and character. She does not hesitate to defend herself against the constant insults of Higgins because she feels that she is financially independent and should be treated with respect regardless of her class or background. Eliza protests when Higgins takes notes about her, "he's no right to take away my character. My character is the same to me as any lady's" (7) and continues to defend herself throughout the play, "I got my feelings same as anyone else" (18). This implies that Shaw

¹ All quotations from the primary text are to the same edition. See full documentation in references.

attempts to depict members of the lower classes as having real feelings, unlike the bourgeois who seem to be heartless and unfeeling. Therefore, Eliza rejects to be treated as a “slave” or “colonized” as Tracy Davis misinterprets the play by reading the relationship between Higgins and Eliza as one of “master and slave, and colonizer and colonized” (1998, 225). Shaw seems to scorn the superficiality of the bourgeois, who criticize Eliza for her appearance and speech, while at the same time overlook her personality and intellectuality. Marx reads the proletariat as a rebellious class that struggles against the exploitation of the upper class, “of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class” (2000, 253). As a workingwoman, Eliza calls Higgins “bully” (69) because of his constant attempts to subjugate her and emphasizes her independent character from the very beginning by offering to pay for her lessons and clothes.

Despite the fact that some critics read the play from a feminist perspective by emphasizing the idea that Shaw presents man as superior to woman, the play highlights the gap between classes in society by exposing the social ills of Edwardian England and that the lower classes are worthy of respect. Nowhere does Shaw attempt throughout his play to degrade woman or to state that woman is less intellectual than man as Chen Lihua claims, “from the very beginning of the play, we can see the unequal relationship between man and woman: Man is superior, woman is inferior” (2006, 41), but rather emphasizes the idea that everybody deserves respect regardless of their gender or class. Wosk also states, “men have long been fascinated by the idea of creating a simulated woman that miraculously comes alive, a beautiful facsimile female who is the answer to all their dreams and desires” (2015, 9). Whereas these writers focus on the relationship between Higgins and Eliza, they overlook the fact that the play challenges our conventional ideals about middle class morality and increases the consciousness of lower classes. Therefore, it would be important to examine the relationship between Higgins and other characters like the dustman, Alfred Doolittle, to better understand the superficiality of the bourgeois and the fact that they treat all members of the lower classes in the same contemptuous manner. In his diatribe when he gets asked by Higgins if he got any morals, Alfred Doolittle, harshly criticizes middle class morality as a pretext to exploit the poor,

What is middle class morality? Just an excuse for never giving me anything. Therefore, I ask you, as two gentlemen, not to play that game on me. I’m playing straight with you. I ain’t pretending to be deserving. I’m undeserving; and I mean to go on being undeserving. I like it; and that’s the truth ... (28)

The rhetorical speech of Doolittle shows the self-awareness of the lower classes about their position in society and that the upper class does not treat them as human beings, and thereby ignore their role in society. In fact, Higgins treats Doolittle in the same impolite and bullying manner he treats Eliza as he himself states, “the question is not whether I treat you rudely, but whether you ever heard me treat anyone else better” (67). This refutes the belief of those who attempt to read Higgins as a misogynist as Minodora Simion argues that “Higgins’ misogyny precludes any successful romantic relationship with a woman” (2014, 88), and presents him as a morally bankrupt middle class man who treats all people of lower classes in the same disrespectful manner. Therefore, it would be erroneous to describe Higgins as a misogynist because he disrespects Eliza. Higgins does not show hatred of woman, but rather feels superior to all members of the lower classes regardless of their gender.

Shaw seems to be critical of the bourgeoisie in Edwardian England that achieves success by exploiting the lower classes and never appreciating their hard work. In the play, Pickering considers the transformation of Eliza as “an immense success” (49) for her mentor, Higgins, who never praises Eliza for her effort and treats her as “a possibility, a creation, an artwork, and a result of her master’s aesthetic mind” (Salama, 2000, 228). Marx states that “every victory so obtained is a victory for the bourgeoisie” (2000, 252); however, Eliza, as a member of the proletariat, challenges the general belief of her society who never acknowledges the existence of the lower classes by exposing the superficiality and moral corruption of middle class society. Eliza succeeds in making society recognize her intellectuality and identity through refusing to be treated as a “live doll” (43) by the seemingly immature bachelors.

Shaw emphasizes the idea that proper speech and education represent important factors for people to arise in social standing and abolish the barriers between the different classes of society. However, the improper speeches of Higgins throughout the play lead to question his competence to be an educator. Eliza criticizes Higgins for teaching her bad words, “you see it was so very difficult for me with the example of Professor Higgins always before me. I was brought up to be just like him, unable to control myself, and using bad language on the slightest provocation” (63). Eliza seems to be skeptical about Higgins’ capability to teach her manners through the bullying language he uses and refuses to be dependent on him. This refutes the belief of critics who claim that Eliza learns manners from Higgins and succeeds in achieving independence. Gibbs argues that the play “was a play not about the growth of love between master and pupil, but about the pupil’s regaining, through struggle, her independent identity” (1983, 332-333). The oppression that Eliza receives at the hands of Higgins makes her better understand her identity and increase her self-confidence and respect. Despite the fact that Higgins succeeds in creating “a new social identity for Eliza” (Mugglestone, 1993, 379), he fails in controlling her feelings or choices about life.

Shaw presents Eliza from the beginning as an independent and thoughtful poor girl who supports her own life by selling flowers not by selling herself. This means that Eliza does not gain independence after her experience with the bourgeois society, but rather asserts her identity as a free woman who demands respect from others from the first meeting with Higgins. Eliza challenges the structure of her society that seems to be based upon the economic position of the characters where the rich represent authority and the poor placed at the bottom of society and persecuted by the bourgeoisie. Shaw exposes the hypocritical life of the bourgeoisie through the experience of the poor flower girl with members of that society. Higgins reveals the uncultured life of the bourgeoisie when he speaks to the guests of his mother, “you see, we’re all savages, more or less. We’re supposed to be civilized and cultured” (37). Therefore, Eliza feels that she endangers her independence through her interaction with the uncivilized Higgins and that she has become prisoner of the superficial life of the upper class. Eliza accuses Higgins that he has made her lose independence when she says, “Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up? I’m a slave now, for all my fine clothes” (69). This implies that Eliza seems to be dissatisfied with the superficial life of middle class society and prefers to walk out after changing her clothes.

The social advancement of the lowly Doolittle into a middle class man after inheriting three thousand pounds from a rich American, who was founding moral reform societies, gives him the opportunity to see the social ills of society that judges people by their appearance and the amount of wealth they have. Doolittle tells Higgins that he has lost happiness and freedom after his transformation into a bourgeois and describes his new life as following,

Now they [doctors] find out that I’m not a healthy man and can’t live unless they look after me twice a day. In the house I’m not let do a hand’s turn for myself: somebody else must do it and touch me for it. A year ago I hadn’t a relative in the world except two or three that wouldn’t speak to me. Now I’ve fifty, and not a decent week’s wages among the lot of them. I have to live for others and not for myself: that’s middle class morality. (58)

Doolittle has only gained respect from others after changing his appearance and wearing new clothes and that society ignores morality and ethics. Characters in the play do not get respected because of their moral value, but only after arising in social standing. This reflects the fragility of class barriers that can be eliminated by means of wealth and the way people speak language.

Conclusion

Shaw’s play presents the conflict between the two unequal classes in society, the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The proletariat in the play, represented through the characters of the poor Eliza and Doolittle, challenges the structure of society that seems to be based on the economic position of people, while at the same time ignores manners and ethics.

Members of the proletariat are treated in disrespectful manner and considered as worthless by the bourgeois not because they are less intellectual or immoral, but because they are wage earners. The attempt of the upper class phonetician, Higgins, to educate the poor Eliza and advance her social status through teaching her to speak proper English represents an attempt to emphasize his superiority as an educator rather than raising her social position to be equal to him. Higgins never treats Eliza as his equal even after her transformation and this reflects the shallowness of the bourgeois, who judge people according to their appearance and speech. The fact that Higgins disrespects Eliza does not make him a misogynist because he treats all members of the lower class in the same manner, and therefore Shaw depicts Higgins as morally bankrupt, who needs to acknowledge the humanity of others regardless of their class or gender. Shaw suggests throughout his play that the view of society should change toward members of the lower classes and that society should acknowledge the intellectuality and significance of the different members of society.

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سطحية البرجوازيون في مسرحية جورج برنارد شو (بيجماليون)

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ملخص

تقدم مسرحية جورج برنارد شو (بيجماليون) الصراع الاجتماعي والطبقي بين الطبقتين الرئيسيتين في المجتمع: البرجوازية والبروليتاريا، ويقترح (شو) من خلال المسرحية أن البرجوازيين يستغلوا أعضاء البروليتاريا ويعاملوهم بوصفهم أشخاص دون قيمة ليس لأنهم أقل فكرياً أو غير أخلاقيين، ولكن بسبب وضعهم الاقتصادي، ويعارض هذا البحث فكرة أن (شو) كاره للنساء بسبب تركيزه على العلاقة بين الأرستقراطي والعالم في الصوتيات (هيجينز وفتاة الورود إيليزا) ويقدم (هيجينز) كمفلس أخلاقياً يعامل جميع أفراد الطبقات الاجتماعية الدنيا بنفس الأسلوب المهين الذي يعامل فيه إيليزا، وتكشف الفتاة الفقيرة إيليزا والرجل الزبال ألفريد دوليتل السطحية والإفلاس الأخلاقي لمجتمع الطبقة الوسطى بعد أن ترتفع مكانتهم الاجتماعية، وتزيد المسرحية وعي الطبقات الفقيرة من خلال اقتراح أنه يجب على البرجوازية أن تعترف بإنسانية والدور المهم لهذه الطبقات في المجتمع.

الكلمات الدالة: البرجوازية، البروليتاريا، إنجليزي، سطحية، استغلال.

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