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Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion***

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* depicts a young flower girl's linguistic and sartorial transformation into a fake duchess under the tutelage of a well-off phonetician. Eliza Doolittle's and Henry Higgins's clashing personalities and humorous misunderstandings however point to wider societal forces – that of gender and class. The circumstances of their meeting and their initial interactions serve as clear illustrations of their disparate levels of education, sophistication and social capital. Eliza Doolittle's position as a young working-class woman makes her uniquely vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of middle-class men, and while Shaw does not frame Higgins as predatory, he nevertheless emphasizes Eliza's anxieties and worries. Even though Higgins's clear lack of interest or ill-intent enables the readers to laugh at Eliza's fear for her virtue, as her transformation progresses, the untenability of her new social position becomes glaringly obvious. Higgins may have corrected Eliza's speech and provided her with fashionable clothes, but he has no interest in concerning himself with her future, now that she is too genteel to work as a flower girl, but too poor to truly ascend to a higher class. This lack of consideration for Eliza's prospects can be interpreted as a sign of Higgins's uncaring character, but is also a symptom of wider societal obstacles facing women trying to find their place in the world. Eliza manages to triumph and carve a space for herself by integrating her two identities, in the end thriving as an amalgam of the duchess Higgins presented her as and the flower girl she once was.

KEYWORDS

***Pygmalion*, G. B. Shaw, gender, class**

In the preface to his play *Pygmalion* (titled "A Professor of Phonetics") George Bernard Shaw writes at length about the recent history and contemporary state of phonetics, as well as his ties to various phoneticians, concluding that his play is very successful and yet "so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic" (6). However, in the decades since the work was first staged, many critics have pointed out that even if *Pygmalion* is a didactic play, what it is trying to impress on the viewers is hardly the intricacies of phonetics. For instance, Milton Crane claims that "[v]irtually nowhere in *Pygmalion* do the characters discuss phonetics, despite Shaw's specific statement that phonetics is the subject of the play" (882). Louis Crompton also advocates this view, characterizing "Preface to *Pygmalion*" as "somewhat misleading" (73) and insisting that "for all the shoptalk about phonology, it is possible with a little analysis to see that it is really manners and not speech patterns that underlie the character contrasts in *Pygmalion*, accents being, so to speak, merely their outer clothing" (74). Indeed, one could go so far as to claim that if accents are "merely the outer clothing" of manners, then even manners themselves are only the external manifestation of deeper societal forces: that of class and gender. These underlying thematic concerns are perhaps best encapsulated in the play's two main characters, Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins, as their tumultuous relationship highlights the different privileges (or lack thereof) they either already have (in the case of Higgins) or wish to gain access to (Eliza). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to use Eliza's transformation from flower girl to artificial duchess as a starting point for a discussion of Shaw's approach to gender and class in *Pygmalion*.

From the first act of the play, Shaw establishes Eliza and Higgins as polar opposites (L. Chen 41), with Higgins clearly established as the one with more power and social capital, as well as more common sense, if not politeness and good manners (Crompton 76). While many of the members of the assembled crowd stand out in their own ways (for example, even when represented only with the moniker "The Daughter", Clara Eynsford Hill stands out right from the onset as a brilliant parody of bourgeois crassness), Eliza's behaviour functions in direct contrast to Higgins's calm and commanding manner. For instance, after she manages to extract three halfpence from Colonel Pickering (at that point known only as "The Gentleman"), Eliza has the following reaction to a bystander's warning:

THE BYSTANDER. [*to the girl*] You be careful: give him a flower for it. There's a bloke here behind taking down every blessed word you're saying. [*All turn to the man who is taking notes*].

THE FLOWER GIRL. [*springing up terrified*] I ain't done nothing wrong by speaking to the gentleman. I've a right to sell flowers if I keep off the kerb. [*Hysterically*] I'm a respectable girl: so help me, I never spoke to him except to ask him to

buy a flower off me. [*General hubbub, mostly sympathetic to the flower girl, but deprecating her excessive sensibility. Cries of Don't start hollerin. Who's hurting you? Nobody's going to touch you. What's the good of fussing? Steady on. Easy, easy, etc., come from the elderly staid spectators, who pat her comfortingly. Less patient ones bid her shut her head, or ask her roughly what is wrong with her. ...*] Oh, sir, don't let him charge me. You dunno what it means to me. They'll take away my character and drive me on the streets for speaking to gentlemen. They—

THE NOTE TAKER. [*coming forward on her right, the rest crowding after him*] There, there, there, there! Who's hurting you, you silly girl? What do you take me for? (Shaw 11)

Her panicked reaction seems out of proportion with the gravity of the situation. Indeed, a similar occurrence is repeated again in Act Two, when Eliza first comes into Higgins's home in order to purchase elocution lessons, and Higgins decides she ought to become his live-in experiment:

HIGGINS. [*storming on*] Take all her clothes off and burn them. Ring up Whiteley or somebody for new ones. 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.

HIGGINS. We want none of your Lisson Grove prudery here, young woman. You've got to learn to behave like a duchess. Take her away, Mrs. Pearce. If she gives you any trouble wallop her.

LIZA. [*springing up and running between Pickering and Mrs. Pearce for protection*] No! I'll call the police, I will. (Shaw 24)

These moments of Eliza's hysterical fear are seemingly played for comedy, and to point to the fact that, at this stage of the play, she has very little awareness as to what is going on around her. However, there is a sinister undertone to them, as Eliza's worries mirror the threats many working-class women faced at the time. Derek John McGovern insists on the fact that *Pygmalion* showcases not only Shaw's socialist leanings, but also his feminist attitudes, as it insists on the image of "working-class women as especially downtrodden" (73, emphasis in the original text). Eliza's protestations about being "a good girl" and "having her character taken" therefore appear over-exaggerated in the context of her dealings with Higgins and Pickering (who show no signs of bad intentions or even the slightest sexual interest in her), but echo broader concerns. In her essay "Parodying the £5 Virgin", Celia Marshik writes extensively on the way Shaw references and undermines the contemporary discourse of sexual purity. When analysing Higgins's offer to Eliza to come live with him and Pickering while he trains her to sound like a duchess,

Marshik urges the readers to look beneath the surface of the situation and its great comedic timing. Rather, we are asked to see Higgins's offer as it might have appeared to an inexperienced working-class girl who has been brought up on fears of sexual exploitation by rich men.

If Higgins dismisses Eliza's fears, *Pygmalion* continues to play with the unstable opposition between reformers and sexual predators. Higgins's proposal to 'take [Eliza] out of the gutter and dress [her] beautifully and make a lady of [her]' mimics the kind of offer a rake would make to a potential mistress. ... In a society where sex is a working-class woman's most valuable commodity, a middle-class man's philanthropic interest in an Eliza Doolittle is vexed by her sexual availability and vulnerability. (Marshik 328)

Here it is crucial to observe the added level of anxiety class lends to the already problematic idea of women's sexual purity, as it is the intersection of these two social categories that elicits ideas of possible violation and exploitation. Even though Eliza's father is openly stated to be prone to changing sexual partners (along with other vices, such as drinking and extorting money), he is not depicted as a potential threat to the women he encounters. Rather, he is presented as a stereotype of the "undeserving poor" (Shaw 37). As Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja states, "Eliza's dustman father is poor, dirty, a drunkard, generally unwilling to engage in any honest work (he attempts to pimp Eliza to Higgins for a five-pound note). The name "Doolittle" itself connotes the laziness attributed ... to the poor" (121). While his stereotyped faults are given a humorous subversion through his later inheritance and unwilling entry into the bourgeoisie, Shaw never adds seduction to his list of sins. Rather, in keeping with the contemporary debates on the dangers threatening working-class women's purity, the role of potential predator is allotted (if in an extremely comedic way) to Higgins.

All this is not to suggest that Shaw presents women's sexuality and their economic position as fraught with difficulties *only* if they are working-class, and *only* if they are threatened (or afraid of being threatened) by lecherous middle-class men. On the contrary, while Eliza's initial uneasiness with Hastings and Pickering is quickly dismissed as a result of her "Lisson Grove prudery" (Shaw 24), the potential problems stemming from her new position as a penniless "duchess" are the driving force behind the dramatic conflict of the play. Although mostly taking place in Acts IV and V, Eliza's altercation with Higgins is hinted at in Act III, when they visit his mother for her at-home day. After they successfully pass Eliza off as a lady in front of the Eynsford Hills, Higgins and Pickering are berated by Mrs. Higgins for failing to consider "the problem of what is to be done with [Eliza] afterwards" (Shaw 55):

HIGGINS. I don't see anything in that. She can go her own way, with all the advantages I have given her.

MRS. HIGGINS. The advantages of that poor woman who was here just now! The manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living without giving her a fine lady's income! Is that what you mean?

PICKERING. [*indulgently, being rather bored*] Oh, that will be all right, Mrs. Higgins. [*He rises to go*].

HIGGINS. [*rising also*] We'll find her some light employment. (Shaw 55-56)

Even though they deny the accusation of being "a pretty pair of babies, playing with [their] live doll" (Shaw 54), Higgins and Pickering genuinely do not seem to even contemplate the fact that by "transforming" her into a lady, they have irreversibly changed Eliza's life (and, as Mrs. Higgins implies, not necessarily for the better).

This idea of a social, linguistic, and sartorial transformation executed so fortuitously and easily (for, as Higgins and Pickering cannot help but brag to Mrs. Higgins, Eliza is *such* an accomplished pupil) inevitably diverts attention away from the play's titular literary palimpsest and calls to mind the story of Cinderella. For instance, Norbert F. O'Donnell writes of Eliza's "Cinderella-like transformation" which "[provides] the chief dramatic impact of *Pygmalion*" (7). But instead of a fairy godmother, there are two middle-aged, middle-class bachelors – "teaching Eliza, dressing Eliza, inventing new Elizas" (Shaw 54) – all the while never really considering her future after she has ceased to be a source of entertainment and pleasure for them. That is why the resolution of the play begins with Eliza's altercation with Higgins in Act IV. As Charles A. Berst points out when describing the specific setting in the beginning of Act IV, "Shaw evokes a fairy-tale association as the clock on Higgins's mantelpiece strikes twelve... Just as the ball is over at midnight for Cinderella, so it is for Eliza." (qtd. in McGovern 81-82). As they begin quarrelling in earnest, Eliza even throws Higgins's slippers at him, as a sign of complete disavowal of the mere possibility of a fairy-tale ending (McGovern 82).

Fairy-tales, after all, usually require a prince – and Higgins is in no way a suitable candidate for the role. The play provides the reader with the following description of his character:

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 humor 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. (Shaw 19)

Not only are "his behaviour and language are often in conflict with the politeness norms set by [his] class" (Do and Nguyen 40), but Higgins is also "a double character ... spiritually a dominant giant, but emotionally and psychologically a spoilt child" (H. Chen 340). Even if his rudeness and immaturity did not constitute an obstacle for the match – for he is, after all, egalitarian in his verbal abuse, treating a duchess as he would a flower girl (Shaw 77) – there are other valid concerns. Crompton, for instance, reminds the reader of something the play made clear from the onset – "Higgins lacks not only the personal tenderness Eliza craves but even the tact necessary to avoid hurting her repeatedly" (80). This lack of care is partially due to his personal idiosyncrasies, which leave him looking far worse off when compared to a genuinely amiable character, such as his close friend Colonel Pickering. However, one might claim that what is expressed through Higgins's callousness is not simply a particular man's insensitivity, but the deeper, structural connectedness of money, class and gender as obstacles on Eliza's path to independent selfhood.

After Eliza, Higgins and Pickering have come home from the ambassador's garden party in Act IV and the men have congratulated themselves (but, significantly, not Eliza) on their success, Eliza confronts Higgins about his lack of tact and care towards her, making him aware of her very realistic existential fears ("LIZA. [*pulling herself together in desperation*] What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?" (Shaw 61)). Where Eliza's qualms about Higgins's potential nefarious intentions were treated as comic relief in the earlier acts, her worries about her future are presented as completely reasonable. As Mugglestone explains,

in effect, once Higgins's bet is completed, Eliza belongs nowhere; no longer possessing her 'kerbstone English' she is ill-equipped to return to the gutter, and though possessing in abundance the social markers of a 'lady', she lacks the financial means to give them social reality. (383)

Higgins, however, does not really have an answer for her, instead only making her feel worse with his tactless disregard of the gravity of her predicament:

HIGGINS. [*enlightened, but not at all impressed*] Oh, that's what's worrying you, is it? [*He thrusts his hands into his pockets, and walks about in his usual manner, rattling the contents of his pockets, as if condescending to a trivial subject out of pure kindness*]. I shouldn't bother about it if I were you. I should imagine you won't have much difficulty in settling yourself, somewhere or other, though I hadn't quite realized that you were going away. [*She looks quickly at him: he does not look at her, but examines the dessert stand on the piano and decides that he will eat an apple*]. You might marry, you know. [*He bites a large piece out of the apple, and munches it noisily*]. You see, Eliza, all men are not confirmed old bachelors like me and the Colonel. Most men are the marrying sort (poor devils!); and you're not bad-looking; it's quite a pleasure to look at you sometimes—not now, of course,

because you're crying and looking as ugly as the very devil; but when you're all right and quite yourself, you're what I should call attractive. That is, to the people in the marrying line, you understand. You go to bed and have a good nice rest; and then get up and look at yourself in the glass; and you won't feel so cheap.

Eliza again looks at him, speechless, and does not stir.

The look is quite lost on him: he eats his apple with a dreamy expression of happiness, as it is quite a good one.

HIGGINS. [*a genial afterthought occurring to him*] I daresay my mother could find some chap or other who would do very well—

LIZA. We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court Road.

HIGGINS. [*waking up*] What do you mean?

LIZA. I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish you'd left me where you found me. (Shaw 61)

If the idea that a middle-class man would have singled her out to be seduced and defiled while she was grubby, wailing flower girl was presented as ridiculous, the notion of a beautiful, accomplished Eliza being expected to trade herself for financial security is portrayed as far grimmer, for being all the more realistic. Higgins, "rattling the contents of his pockets, as if condescending to a trivial subject out of pure kindness" (Shaw 61), serves to highlight many of the frustrating aspects of Eliza's dire situation. He has money and security, while she has none; he is in the position to condescend to her existential struggle as if it were a trivial subject, while she must decide whether to give in to the social system that would have her sell all her hard-learned new skills (and, needless to say, her virginity) to the highest bidder. "The notion of Eliza as tradeable property" (McGovern 74) does not even strike Higgins as something pernicious, because it is simply the way things have always been. He is aware that "middle-class marriage is a *bargain* which enables husbands and wives to exact reluctant favors from one another" (O'Donnell 8, emphasis mine). The reader is reminded of Eliza's father proselytizing against "middle class morality" (Shaw 37) while trying to sell Eliza for 5 pounds – Alfred Doolittle is attempting to do what countless fathers have done, only without the social graces afforded by a middle-class education and mindset. This is why Eliza immediately sees Higgins's suggestion for what it is: the same paternalistic posturing her father attempted two acts ago, now given higher stakes (marriage instead of life as a mistress) by a loftier man. This is also why, after her father has unexpectedly gotten wealthy in Act V, she wishes her old life back:

LIZA. Oh! if I only COULD go back to my flower basket! I should be independent of both you and father and all the world! Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up? I'm a slave now, for all my fine clothes. (Shaw 79)

She is a slave because she cannot decide her own fate, and she cannot decide her own fate because she cannot work for a living. Rather, she is expected to live off the benevolence of either a husband, her father, or one of her benefactors, "to become a commodity among wealthier men" (Bohman-Kalaja 126). In the words of Robert Harvey,

Eliza, having freed herself from the dialect chains that kept her in the gutter, finds herself shackled again by a new variation of the same middle-class morality: a respectable lady doesn't work for a living – she marries for her means of support. (1237)

Shaw's socialist feminist attitudes (McGovern 7), however, ensure that *Pygmalion* neither celebrates her former life in the slums, in which she had no education or power (Pirnajmuddin and Arani 148), nor depict her new status as aspirational. Rather, she is presented as between a rock and a hard place – if she is now better off for not having to fend for herself in a precarious economic position with little protections, her feelings of self-reliance and independence have been completely nullified by the social expectations of bourgeois womanhood. O'Donnell explicitly links the predicament Eliza has found herself in with Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, drawing a parallel between Eliza's secretarial services and eagerness to please with Nora's "'repertory of 'tricks' - dancing, dressing up, making Torvald comfortable" (8). Although Shaw is less explicit about it than Ibsen, O'Donnell firmly believes that "his story of the metamorphoses of Eliza cannot be fully understood unless one realizes that her final escape is from a 'doll's house' which she herself attempts to build" (8).

The protagonists' final confrontation in Act V compounds all of these thematic problems and makes them crystalize into a coherent image: that of Eliza finally managing to stand her ground. As Li-hua Chen sardonically points out, "the play is not only the creation of a woman for man's preference, but also the creation of a soul for man's admiration and respect" (42). By the end of the final act, Eliza has realized that she is just as competent, if not more so, than Higgins, and this in turn makes her former teacher finally appreciate her.

LIZA Aha! Now I know how to deal with you. What a fool I was not to think of it before! You can't take away the knowledge you gave me. You said I had a finer ear than you. And I can be civil and kind to people, which is more than you can. Aha! That's done you, Henry Higgins, it has. Now I don't care that [*snapping her fingers*] for your bullying and your big talk. I'll advertize it in the papers that your duchess is only a flower girl that you taught, and that she'll teach anybody to be a duchess just the same in six months for a thousand guineas. Oh, when I think of myself

crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself.

HIGGINS. [*wondering at her*] You damned impudent slut, you! But it's better than snivelling; better than fetching slippers and finding spectacles, isn't it? [Rising] By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have. I like you like this.

LIZA. Yes: you turn round and make up to me now that I'm not afraid of you, and can do without you.

HIGGINS. Of course I do, you little fool. Five minutes ago you were like a millstone round my neck. Now you're a tower of strength: a consort battleship. You and I and Pickering will be three old bachelors together instead of only two men and a silly girl. (Shaw 82)

Even as he observes "Eliza's self-consciousness and linguistic competence [become] the sources of her power" (Pirnajmuddin and Arani 150), Higgins still struggles to understand what it is that Eliza wants. Throughout their argument in the final two acts, what she had been demanding was not only his respect, but his affection – for him to see her as she is, both a flower girl and a duchess, and still appreciate her. Higgins's highest compliment, however, is illustrative of just how much he does not understand her. No longer carelessly proposing to marry her off to secure her future, he now suggests she should stay with him and Pickering, so the three of them can be "three old bachelors together instead of only two men and a silly girl" (Shaw 82). This cannot appease Eliza, as it merely trades one category society has put her in by another. Born a working-class woman and educated in middle-class mannerisms and habits, Higgins would now bestow another, by far most superior life on her: that of a leisurely gentleman. As Vicki Kennell points out, it is precisely these one-sided formations of identity that Shaw is denouncing in *Pygmalion*:

The central core of Shaw's *Pygmalion* project is this tension between the fiction of reality and the fiction of the fictive. As far as Higgins is concerned, Eliza's 'reality' is merely her voice – initially 'guttersnipe,' eventually 'duchess' – a diametrically opposed duality. Yet Shaw ensures that readers see the error of this viewpoint by having the socially accomplished Eliza revert to guttersnipe speech in moments of stress or excitement. ... The duchess 'self' is thus only one of the assorted collections of stories that individuals, such as Eliza, can tell about themselves, or that others can tell about them. Eliza's 'reality' is Shaw's postscript - marriage to Freddy, flower shop, and all. Her "fiction" involves the entire collection of personae she has inhabited, whether or not they occupied legitimate social space. Thus Shaw asserts the primacy of both modes in locating a 'real self,' collapsing the artificial dichotomy in order to include both external and internal factors in the piecing together of an individual identity. (76-77)

By locating Eliza's "reality" in the Epilogue, Kennell emphasises that Eliza *becomes* Eliza only when she decisively stops being her Pygmalion's Galatea. This is also why, conversely, Harvey insists on the play's original ending (and believes that "resorting to [the Epilogue] for an explanation does violence to the artistic integrity of the work" (1237)), as "[t]he actions of a truly free person cannot be predicted – at least, in dramatic terms. It is, then, a most fitting ending that Shaw picked: we do not know what Eliza will do because she is free to do as she wishes." (1238) If we opt to disregard Harvey's insistence on only analysing the play, we find that the Epilogue only confirms what the final act had hinted at – that Eliza finds her independence and happiness not by choosing either of her two previous identities, but by combining them. As Lynda Mugglestone stresses, "[t]he solution is of course in terms of Eliza's original social ideal, the 'lady in the flower shop', a role uniting her new social abilities with those more pragmatic ones gained earlier beneath the auspices of Covent Garden" (384).

Connecting *Pygmalion* with the notion of "passing" – the ability of a member of a social group to be perceived and treated as if they belong to another, often more privileged group (Kalei Kanuha 27-29) – Bohman-Kalaja points to how Shaw launches

a critique of the idea that passing as a means of accessing social power is an end in itself. Instead, although his characters seem to be successful, through them Shaw calls for a dismantling of the categories out of which social identities are constructed and on which 'passing' is predicated. His vision is much more radical than a challenging of categories by showing their penetrability. There is, after all, a difference between deciding how to best win at a game, and calling the entire game into question. (111)

Eliza Doolittle has, by the end of the play, arguably won the game: once a lowly flower girl, she has been lifted into a life of comfort and now only has an advantageous marriage (or agreement to, for instance, become Colonel Pickering's legal ward) standing between her and a successful rags-to-riches story. But, by having Eliza want something else from life – not just upward social mobility, but respect, affection, and personal fulfilment – Shaw subverts the notion of "passing" as a simple solution to the underlying problems posed by gender inequality in a class society. Rather, he insists on Eliza choosing an amalgam of her previously conceived options in life (working, but as a lower-middle-class woman; married, but to a man who is devoted to her and does not see her as a project to be successfully completed), thus showing how "character and personality can be constructed and reconstructed and how such reconstructions are themselves potentially *authentic*" (Bohman-Kalaja 111, emphasis in the original).

Although it is perhaps most often interpreted in terms of its status as a "socialist parable and social comedy" (Mugglestone 374), *Pygmalion* also offers many valuable insights into the intersecting social pressures of gender and class.

An analysis of the play which favours Eliza's path from working-class economic precarity and fears of sexual exploitation to her successful (but, significantly, not fulfilling) "passing" as a duchess highlights the different struggles she faced while belonging to different classes. While she was a hapless flower girl, Eliza had neither the skills nor the connections to achieve upward social mobility, but she did have a sense of independence, gained from her ability to take part in the labour market. After she gained access to the comforts of a middle-class lifestyle, she was able to acquire education and refinement, but lost the opportunity to earn for a living, as middle-class womanhood allowed her to commodify only her hand in marriage. These underlying issues of the play are personified in Higgins, as his lack of understanding for Eliza's needs symbolizes the wider societal implications of being a woman with no money or power in an uncaring patriarchal society. Their arguments throughout the final two acts and her decision to leave him therefore represent Eliza successfully finding a path to independent selfhood – one in which she can recognize and utilize all her capabilities to decide on the life *she* wants to lead.

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