

**Metamorphosis and  
Social Distinction in Bernard  
Shaw's Pygmalion**

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Throughout most of civilization, people have been divided into social classes. In a lot of different especially capitalist cultures there is an upper class which is rich, powerful and the most authoritative one. In the 19th century England, there was a high aristocratic society that distinguished itself from the rest of English society, consisting of the elegantly dressed bourgeois class sharply contrasting the poor peasant class. Then there was a middle class, less comfortably off than the upper class, and definitely less powerful, but respected nonetheless. At the bottom there is the lower working class making up the majority of people, rarely having the requirements of life and never considered by other classes no matter how long or hard they worked on improving their circumstances.

Pygmalion illustrates the difference and tension between the upper and lower class in the Victorian period. A basic belief of the period was that a person is born into a class and that no one can move from one class to another. (Ganz: 1983, 45) Shaw, on the contrary, believes that personality is not defined by birth. Instead, he thinks that man can achieve social change if he really believes in himself. As to the play, the barriers between classes are not natural and can be broken down. The play looks at middle class morality and upper-class superficiality, and reflects the social ills of nineteenth century England, and attests that all people are worthy of respect and dignity. To achieve this purpose, Bernard Shaw brilliantly chooses the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea.

In analyzing Pygmalion, one cannot fully evaluate the social criticism and conflict without understanding the play's background, characters and themes. The theme is based on the legend behind the play's title and Shaw's commentary on social status. Pygmalion, the mythical king of Cyprus, had many problems when dating women. He always seemed to accept dates from the wrong women. Some were vulgar, others were selfish; he was revolted by the faults nature had placed in these women. It left him feeling very disheartened. He eventually came to scorn the female gender so much that he decided he would never marry any maiden. For comfort and consolation, he turned to the arts, finding his talent in sculpture. Using exquisite skills, he carved a statue out of ivory that was so resplendent and delicate that no maiden could be compared with its beauty. This statue was the perfect resemblance of a living maiden. His art was so good that it caught him in his own web of deceit.

Pygmalion fell in love with his creation and often laid his hand upon the ivory statue as if to reassure himself it was not living. He named the ivory maiden Galatea (/gælðti:ð/) and he caressed her, gave her presents and decorated her body with fine clothing and jewels. He even laid her on his royal bed at night to sleep, calling her his wife. At the festival of Aphrodite\*, which was celebrated with great relish throughout all of Cyprus, the lonely Pygmalion lamented his situation. When the time came for him to play his part in the processional, Pygmalion stood by the altar and meekly prayed: “If you gods can give all things, may I have as my wife, I pray...” (Ovid: 1998, X), he did not dare say “the ivory maiden” but instead said: “one like the ivory maiden.” Aphrodite, who also attended the festival, heard his appeal and she also knew that he meant he wanted his statue to be his wife, so she granted his wish. After the day’s festivities, Pygmalion returned home and kissed Galatea as was his custom. At the warmth of her kiss, he started as if stung by a hornet. The arms that were ivory now felt soft to his touch and when he softly pressed her neck the veins throbbed with life. Humbly raising her eyes, the maiden saw Pygmalion and the light of day simultaneously. Aphrodite blessed the happiness and union of this couple with a child. Pygmalion and Galatea named the child Paphos, for which the city is known until this day. (Ovid: 1998, X)

In this Greek myth, Pygmalion creates an ideal woman, made out of ivory. Although he never expects her to become real he still treats her like his wife and takes great care of her. Eventually his wish is granted and she is brought to life. The ideal woman, in his eyes, is now his wife. Pygmalion creates and forms this woman, showing that if man wants something bad enough and loves it as much as he loves his statue, he can make it happen. It is a metamorphose from stone into a human being, from a lower level to an upper level.

This legend has many parallels with Shaw’s play. Professor Higgins is an expert in his field, just as the sculptor Pygmalion was in his. Higgins also holds the same view of women demonstrating this when he says, “I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a nuisance.” (Act II, 35) The final analogy is that both men turn uncarved stone into something beautiful using their talents. Unfortunately, Shaw does not allow the happy ending of the legend to occur in his play as sentimental people would hope.

Rather after Higgins has molded her into his special creation, she develops her own defiant self that is totally independent from her creator. This illustrates Shaw's dislike of overdone romantic plays with unrealistic endings.

In Shaw's Pygmalion, Eliza Doolittle is a disheveled cockney flower seller\* who is lucky enough to catch the eye of a Professor Henry Higgins who gives her an offer she can not refuse. Higgins is a well known phonetic expert who studies "...the science of speech..." (Act I, 15), but awkward and rude in the area of social graces. This character is the direct protagonist of Eliza and yet the observer oftentimes can identify with him as well. Even his own mother comments undesirably when she says, "You offend all my friends: they stop coming whenever they meet you." (Act III, 52) His eccentricities and brusque attitude are almost presented as comical. He is very unconcerned about other's feelings and desires but that does not necessarily mean he is centered on himself. Rather he feels he is serving the human race at large and that anyone in the way of that is not worth his time. He brutally criticizes Eliza's hateful 'boo-hooing' and crude pronunciations of words. To the snobby, intolerant Higgins inarticulateness and ignorance concerning proper dialect and language produces a 'verbal class distinction' that functions as an external indicator of what class in society one may belong to. 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 (Act III, 64)

He cannot understand why some English men and women do not take the time to learn how to speak proper English.

Higgins makes the offer to Eliza to stay with him for six months and he would teach her how to speak articulately enough to pass in the most exclusive social gathering, the Embassy Ball, without anyone being aware of her Cockney origins, which is no small task. He says that she will become a proper aristocratic lady who speaks proper English. Once Eliza and Professor Higgins begin 'business,' they practice the skills and pronunciations of the proper use of English. Everyday they repeatedly practice Eliza's grammar, dialects, and speech patterns with a recording device that enables Eliza to learn from her own mistakes. In just weeks

there are dramatic differences in Eliza's speech patterns that are apparent by listening to their recording lessons. Not only has her English improved, but her manners and etiquette have improved as well, due to the help of Professor Higgins.

Months later, Eliza has been transformed into 'one of them,' a member of the exclusive bourgeois class in England, able to 'pass' at any social event she chooses, which is no easy accomplishment. Thanks to Professor Higgins, Eliza can mingle with the 'snobs' of the elite class, and no one has any idea where she is originally from. Higgins has not only traversed the 'phonetic stream,' transforming one polar opposite dialect into another, but he has simultaneously developed affection for his star pupil. The six months have passed quickly, and it is time for Eliza to leave. Eliza is a fresh new woman, and is capable of playing off the aristocratic role, to live a sophisticated and proper life of her own. In fact, she wins the heart of a fine gentleman, Freddy, and is planning a marriage with him. Higgins is surprised, although he does not show it, and continues to act as if he is not bothered at all by this development. In his mind though, he is remembering how accustomed he has grown to her face, which he will soon miss. The two say their 'good-byes,' and Higgins returns home to find himself listening to the first recordings of Eliza. Shortly thereafter Eliza returns back to Higgins home and surprises him with the truth of her true feelings for him. She finally admits to herself that she has grown to love both him and his lifestyle, and that Freddy is not her true love.

Professor Higgins has unknowingly 'molded' Eliza into his ideal woman, and although Pygmalion did not actually teach and transform his statue into his ideal woman, his undying hope for an ideal intellectual mate to suit the physical beauty he created brought together divine intervention with divine creation and formed his ideal woman, in his eyes. This is very obvious with Shaw who often makes his characters start out in almost absolute spiritual and intellectual opposition to "a figure possessing superhuman clarity of perception and strength of purpose, whom they never really understand, but who in a series of educational confrontations lifts them to higher levels of self-consciousness and realism in their awareness of the world around them." (Whitman: 1977, 208) Again, this is evidence that anything is possible, if man really devotes his mind to it. Although Professor Higgins is rude and snobby, he still holds a strong belief in his ideal and it takes a lot of devotion to take an unmolded

human being and bring qualities out in her that no one ever thought such qualities were there.

Eliza is the primary protagonist that arrests the audience's attention and sympathy. Her character is portrayed as diligent, hard-working, and inherently intelligent. She is a young woman thrust out into the working world by her equally unwealthy father. Although Eliza's appearance and actions are quite rough at the beginning, she does improve and allow her own natural beauty to shine through. This is evidenced when her father says after Higgins has taken her in, "I never thought she would clean up as good looking as that (Act II, 46). Apparently, Eliza impresses the other characters with her transformations.

Eliza's spirit is as much a part of her as her outward appearance. Instead of cowering under Higgins biting comments and fiery temper she matches his with one equally as caustic. Her intelligence also helps her survive in the world, both the aristocracy and the slums. She shows a true perseverance and loyalty to both her lessons and her teacher. Eliza most likely gains most of her emotional appeal by her unfailing innocence and thirst for knowledge.

The conflict of Pygmalion is basically the undertaking of teaching Eliza to rise in society. The motives held by each of the characters differ but the desired outcome is the same. This conflict is probably the most obvious humor in the play for two reasons. One, the audience can relate to the use of slang and improper English in their own speech causing Eliza's mistakes to be funny. Secondly, is the use Eliza makes of her new found knowledge at Mrs. Higgins' house. While there, Eliza is trained to stick to two topics, that of health and the weather. Although Eliza has mastered perfect enunciation by this point her subject matter and word choice are not exactly refined.

The question is raised, what separates the classes really, if clothing and the way of speaking can do so much for how someone is perceived. Throughout the play, ladies and gentlemen are constantly recognized for who they are through different features such as how they are dressed, their manners, how they speak, morality or their money. It is however noticeable that a combination of all factors is rarely to be found. For instance, it has been seen that though Henry Higgins is well dressed, well spoken and with money, he has manners that could not be characterized as genteel. Alfred Doolittle (after acquiring some money) is well dressed,

has some form of manners and could be classified as rich, yet he is not well spoken. Nevertheless, when the maid opens the door to him she immediately perceives that he is a gentleman.

The Parlor-Maid: Mr. Henry, a gentleman wants to see you very particular. He's been sent on from Wimpole Street.

Higgins: Oh, bother! I can't see anyone now. Who is it?

The Parlor-Maid: A Mr. Doolittle, Sir.

Pickering: Doolittle! Do you mean the dustman?

The Parlor-Maid: Dustman! Oh no, sir: a gentleman.

(Act V, 84-85)

Alfred Doolittle arrives at Wimpole St, in the second act, and does not even recognize his own daughter, Eliza, just because she has been washed and elegantly dressed.

Alfred: Beg Pardon, miss.

Eliza: Garn! Don't you know your own daughter?

Alfred: Bly me! Its Eliza! (Act II, 46)

This demonstrates that the working class was not used to washing and dressing up, which was customary for the upper class. The dissimilarity in the appearance of the upper class from the working class was so sensational that even someone who was your own flesh and blood could be naturally mistaken. This trend of depicting appearances goes right through language as well. Language is a very important part of any society, whether it should be or not, is another question.\* It is one of those appearance features through which one can judge or evaluate others. To Shaw, language as part of education is not a matter of appearance, "it is that the artist who adores mankind as his highest subject always comes back to the reality beneath the clothes." (Shaw: 1986, 137) Language is a powerful thing; it can make you a duchess or a flower girl, a bum or a high society gentleman or at least appear to be. G. E. Brown says that the readers realize that Bernard Shaw "is trying to show in this play that it is only lack of education and opportunity that cause many of Elizas of this world to remain flower girls." (Brown: 1970, 94) Eliza tells Mr. Pickering, trying to find an answer for the question of what distinguishes ladies and gentlemen from flower girls and dustmen, by saying,

You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will. (Act V, 83)

Pygmalion also looks at middle class morality through the characterization of Mr. Doolittle, Eliza's father. The spiritual philosophy of Mr. Alfred Doolittle is one of the most remarkable yet comic beliefs presented in Shaw's drama. Due to Shaw's emphasis on social class as a prominent theme, it seems appropriate that the most profound statements come from the most surprising source. Shaw enjoys weaving his own personal convictions throughout all of his work vicariously and wittily, Pygmalion being no exception. Mr. Doolittle is a common dustman, a lethargic man who spends his time drinking alcohol at the local pub. He is not too proud to beg for money, even from Eliza. He is representative of the social class of the undeserving poor, which, means that he is not entitled to receive financial support from the government, since he is physically able to work. Further on, in Act V, Mr. Doolittle appears at the house of Professor Higgins, and angrily accuses Higgins of making him into a middle-class gentleman against his will. "Done to me! Ruined me. Destroyed my happiness. Tied me up and delivered me into the hands of middle class morality." (Act V, 86) Doolittle maintains that he is looking out for his daughter when he is actually attempting to blackmail Professor Higgins. Moreover, he lives with a woman to whom he is not married. Mr. Higgins has said that Alfred Doolittle was the most original moralist in present day England. He has written a note to Mr. Wannafeller, a rich American and told him that. Wannafeller died and left Dolittle a share worth a thousand dollars a year on condition that he should lecture for his Wannafeller Moral reform World League possibly up to 6 times a year. Doolittle is forced into the middle class, and thus he must adhere to middle-class morality. This means he is expected go to church, marry his live-in girlfriend, give up alcohol, refrain from picking up women, and give money to his impecunious relatives. He feels now that extra responsibilities have been put on his shoulder. He could have turned

down the offer but was intimidated. As a result he needs Higgins to teach him to speak proper English. He does not like it at all and blames Higgins for it.

Evidently, Doolittle feels that if he has only a small sum of money he is not required to be responsible for its investment, therefore making it possible for him to squander it on alcohol. Because he is not treated as the “deserving poor” who receive charity, he believes that he has no obligation to be wise with the small amount of money he does have. While some drunks or slothful impoverished people become bitter over this, Doolittle actually prefers this lifestyle as an excuse to be irresponsible and lazy.

Concerning the social distinction in the play, Higgins’ social behavior and conduct with Eliza are revealed with aristocratic touches. He still looks at her as his “experiment”. Higgins believes that how you treat someone is not important, as long as you treat everyone equally.

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: in short, behaving as if you were in Heaven, where there are no third-class carriages, and one soul is as good as another. (Act V, 98)

Higgins presents this theory to Eliza, in hope of justifying his treatment of her. This theory would be fine IF Higgins himself lived by it. Henry Higgins, however, lives by a variety of variations of this philosophy. It is easily seen how Higgins follows this theory. He is consistently rude towards Eliza, Mrs. Pearce, and his mother. His manner is the same to each of them, in accordance to his philosophy. The Higgins we see at the parties and in good times with Pickering is well mannered. This apparent discrepancy between Higgins’ actions and beliefs may not exist, depending on the interpretation of this theory. There are two possible translations of Higgins’ philosophy. It can be viewed as treating everyone the same all the time or treating everyone equally at a particular time. It is obvious that Higgins does not treat everyone equally all the time, as witnessed by his actions when he is in one of his states (as Mrs. Higgins’ parlor maid calls it). (Act V, 83) The Higgins that we see in Mrs. Higgins’ parlor is not the same Higgins we see at the parties. When in ‘the state’ Henry Higgins wanders aimlessly around the parlor, irrationally moving from chair to chair, highly unlike the calm Professor

Higgins we see at the ball. Higgins does not believe that a person should have the same manner towards everyone all the time, but that a person should treat everyone equally at a given time (or in a certain situation). When he is in 'one of those states' his manner is the same towards everyone; he is equally rude and disrespectful to all. Yet when minding his manners, as he does at the parties, he can be a gentleman. If the second meaning of Higgins' theory, that he treats everyone equally at a particular time, is taken as his philosophy, there is one major flaw. Higgins never respects Eliza, no matter who is around.

Eliza confronts Higgins' social distinction towards her by telling him that, "He [Pickering] treats a flower girl as duchess." Higgins, replying to Eliza, "And I treat a duchess as a flower girl." (Act V, 97) In an attempt to justify this, Higgins adds, "The question is not whether I treat you rudely, but whether you ever heard me treat anyone else better." (Act V, 98) Eliza does not answer this question but the spectator knows that Higgins has treated others better than Eliza. At the parties, for example, Higgins is a gentleman to the hosts and other guest, but still treats Eliza as his experiment. Higgins could never see the 'new' modified Eliza. He only saw the dirty flower girl that had become his 'experiment.' Much like an author never sees a work as finished; Higgins could not view Eliza lady or duchess. Since Higgins knew where Eliza came from it was difficult for him to make her parts fit together as a masterpiece that he respected.

As Eliza becomes more cultured, Higgins uses more vulgar and more damaging language to all the other characters in the play. For instance, Eliza asks Higgins to call her Miss Doolittle as Colonel Pickering usually does,

Pickering: Well, this is really very nice of you, Miss Doolittle.

Liza: I should like you to call me Eliza, now if you would.

Pickering: Thank you. Eliza, of course.

Liza: And I should like Professor Higgins to call me Miss Doolittle.

Higgins: I'll see you damned first. (Act V, 94)

These outbursts are part of his nature and are presented to the spectators from the very beginning of the play. In his first process of teaching Eliza Higgins alternates between making fun of the poor girl and threatening her with a broomstick beating, which only causes her to howl and holler,

upsetting Higgins' civilized company to a considerable degree. "Somebody is going to touch you, with a broomstick, if you don't stop snivelling. Sit down." (Act II, 25) In Act IV of the play, Higgins and Eliza are talking about how the bet was over and what their futures were going to be, now that his experiment was over. Higgins shows some of his lack of caring.

Liza: [crushed by superior strength and weight] What's to become of me? What's to become of me?

Higgins: How the devil do I know what's to become of you? What does it matter what becomes of you?

Liza: You don't care. I know you don't care. You wouldn't care if I was dead. I'm nothing to you—not so much as them slippers. (Act IV, 75)

Eliza seems to be truly hurt by this remark. One finds this to be an extremely rude and viscous thing to say. Higgins is a grown man and he should have respect for other people's feelings, especially Eliza. Higgins relationship with his mother is also a kind of awkward and unique at the same time. He treats her in different ways throughout his conversations with her. He acts like a little kid in some ways.

Mrs. Higgins: Do you know what you would do if you really loved me, Henry?

Higgins: Oh bother! What? Marry, I suppose.

Mrs. Higgins: No. stop fidgeting and take your hands out of your pockets. [ With a gesture of despair, he obeys and sits down again] That's a good boy. (Act III, 53)

He likes to shock her with some of his mind games. He got quite a rise out of her in Act III when he was talking to her about Eliza.

Mrs. Higgins: You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll.

Higgins: Playing! The hardest job I ever tackled: make no mistake about that, mother. (Act III, 63)

So as it can be seen from Higgins' response, he has lost his high class manners and is much more shrewd and ill-tempered than what he seems, thus showing that a person of a high social class cannot always act as a person of a higher class should, or would, under normal circumstances.\*

Nevertheless, Higgins and Eliza represent a stark difference in backgrounds and intelligence, but behave with a remarkable likeness. Eliza, in becoming such a person of high class, is disheartened by how Higgins still treats her poorly. He is locked into this mindset because of his social class, which is the basis of Shaw's criticism.

Pygmalion looks at the superficiality of upper class society, a society in which social status is determined by the language that one speaks, one's manners, and the clothes one wears. Pygmalion addresses the social ills in England at the turn of the century. Victorian England was characterized by extreme class division and limited social mobility. Language separated the elite from the lower class. In Pygmalion, Eliza's dialect inhibits her from procuring a job in a flower shop; Pygmalion is about the universal truth that all people are worthy of respect and dignity, from the wealthy nobleman to the beggar on the street corner. The difference between a common flower girl and a duchess, apart from appearance and demeanor, is the way she is treated. Treat the flower girl as if she were a duchess, worthy of respect and decency, and she will become a better person as a result.

Shaw questions the defining criteria of what constitutes a gentleman through the character of Higgins. It is obvious that Higgins' manners are not much better than those of the Covent Garden flower girl.\* In fact Higgins comes off much worse because of the fact that he has had all the civilizing benefits of wealth and education yet he is rude to the point of being rough and ill-mannered, is given to frequent inflammatory outbursts, and possesses abominable table manners. The fact that such an ill-mannered person is accepted by society as a "gentleman" provides Shaw with an opportunity to expose the shallowness, triviality and hypocrisy of such a society. Shaw thus critiques a society that views wealth and the ability to speak correctly as the constitutive criteria of a prescriptive gentleman. As a result, Eliza is forced into the metamorphosis from a common flower girl into a lady.

Shaw uses the conflict between Eliza and Higgins to express his own thoughts on the diversity of people. He likes to set these characters on two different sides of a spectrum and develop how they relate. Although the play has a resolution, it is not exactly a story book happy ending. Higgins and Eliza continue on their respective paths of complete opposites but not in the same way as before. Whereas previously, the

thing separating them was social class, at the end of the drama, the largest gulf is primarily between their goals in life. Higgins' intent is to better the world through himself, and Eliza's purpose is to better herself through the world.

In short, Eliza and Alfred Doolittle, originally living in bad conditions, represent the working class. What happens to Eliza and her father expresses Shaw's belief that people are able to improve their lives through their own efforts, but they have to consider that their character might change as well. Doolittle shows how difficult it can be to change one's whole personality. Once he becomes wealthy, he adapts to the conventions of the upper class and fears the lower class. Instead of this development, one should develop one's own personal, flexible code of behavior.\*

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## ملخص البحث

يتناول البحث دراسة لافكار برنارد شو للطبقية في المجتمع الفكتوري في انجلترا حيث يقوم هذا المجتمع على الطبقات الارستقراطية المتنفذة والوسطى والفقيرة. كان الايمان انذاك راسخا في عدمية الانتقال الطبقي من الادنى الى الاعلى بسبب الفوارق الطبقيية من مال وجاه وثقافة وماشبهه. يثبت برنارد شو ان هذه الفوارق هي نسبية ويمكن التغلب عليها لاسيما الثقافة وطرق التعبير اللغوي. يتبنى العالم اللغوي هجنز فتاة فقيرة تباع الورد في الشوارع فيصقلها صقلا حضاريا في مختبره وبعد 6 أشهر تخرج لنا هذه الفتاة سيدة مجتمع من الدرجة الاولى شكلا وجوهرا. تقوم فكرة المسرحية على اسطورة قديمة تحكي قصة ملك اسمه بجمالون ضاق ذراعا من النساء فصنع لنفسه تمثال امرأة جميلة وذات يوم حولتها افروديت الى مخلوق حي رائع فتزوجها بجمالون وانجب منها. فكما تحولت الحجارة الى حياة، تحولت اليزا الى سيدة من الطراز الارستقراطي.