

Satire in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the assumptions of social superiority and inferiority that underlie the class system. George Bernard Shaw demonstrates how speech and etiquette preserve class distinctions. Shaw satirizes the middle class morality, the shallowness of society and the role of women in the society in this play *Pygmalion* through his satire. The present paper makes a study on the above concepts and present them in detail with an analytical perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Satire is the use of humor or exaggeration in order to show how foolish or wicked are some people's behavior or ideas. George Bernard Shaw is one of the most prolific writers. He is the only person in existence to ever win both a noble prize in literature and an Oscar.. He was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1856. He writes 60 plays. As a socialist, G. B. Shaw was actually displeased with what he perceived as the flaws of the British class system of his time, for by taking the lowest class person and using the rune of classic myth of *Pygmalion* as his title.

He wrote in the play's preface, "It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him." *Pygmalion* "therefore tries to illustrate the arbitrariness of basing a person's worth on his or her pronunciation. *Pygmalion*, a skilled sculptor, once created such a beautiful statue of a young lady, that he fell in love with it. He asked to the God to transform it in a real woman and he saw his will realized. So

Pygmalion has become the symbol of someone who shapes another person creating his/her own personality. In this play the main problem is that of “manipulating the individual”, a sad habit typical of Victorian and British Class system.

SATIRISM OF SHAW

Shaw satirizes the superficiality of the British upper class, who readily accept the beautifully transformed Cockney flower peddler, Eliza Doolittle when she leaves to sound like a lady. By using elements such as humor, irony and exaggeration. The author satires the orders to ridicule or bring light to a matter or individual in society.

The whole play is satire, in order to emphasize the flaws in social classes, Shaw takes the stereotypical poor citizen of British society being Eliza’s character and uses her as a mouth piece for his message. Her transformation and easy acceptance into the wealthy class displays the vanity of society. All it took was not a change in personality and morals but of accent and appearance to create what society perceives as a ‘lady’.

Shaw uses satire to ridicule the short comings of people or institutions in an attempt to bring about change. The tone of the satire in *Pygmalion* is somewhere between savage and gentle. Its target is society itself, the class structure; the attitudes of the upper, middle and working classes; and the ways in which the language they use affect the members of these classes.

Shaw attacks the false values and the posturing of the upper classes but also the “middle class morality” which is as hypocritical as its upper class counterpart. Among his main targets are the Eynsford Hills, who at least initially, prefer the pretension of “genteel poverty” to the not so harsh realities of a middle class existence. At the ambassador’s reception, the brief scene at the end of Act – III the playwright again mocks at the upper class suggesting that its fatuous members are easily duped by the superficial. Eliza’s dress, deportment and accent. The charlatan Nepommuck whose living is predicated on the snobbery of the upper classes, is singled out for particularly merciless mockery.

MIDDLE CLASS MORALITY

In Shaw’s view “middle class morality” is every bit as hypocritical as its upper class counterpart. Thus the middle class does not escape Shaw’s satire. When the playwright successfully catapults into the middle class a man of such questionable character as Alfred

Doolittle, he demonstrates his disdain for hypocrisy no matter what class the hypocrite belongs to. Finally Shaw uses satire to point out the irrationality of the conventional view of romantic love and marriage. This is especially evident in the Epilogue. Where the playwright in discussing the folly of a stock happy ending, gently ridicules each of the play's characters.

Where Pygmalion sculpts a wife that fits his needs. Higgins virtually recreates Eliza, turning her into an upper class member of society. The vanity and superficiality of British society is further depicted as Eliza is so easily accepted into the upper echelon of society, because she was considered upper class not for her character or personality, but rather for her appearance and manner of speech.

SHALLOWNESS OF SOCIETY

Ultimately, Shaw's goal of satirizing *Pygmalion* was to portray the shallowness of society which based on their social graces, how they dressed or how they acted.

The setting of Shaw's play is in London. Soon after the turn of the century, a time when many people of the upper class could no longer sustain their lavish lifestyles. Some of them did their best to keep up appearances. Because they could afford to educate their children only by sending them to schools that middle class children also attended. They often deprived them of a secondary education altogether. As a result such children grew up to be qualified only for work they considered beneath their dignity.

Life for people of the urban working class, like Eliza was filled with hardships. Many lived in slums without heat and hot water and had to put coins in a meter to get electric light. Even those who completed the nine years a government supported elementary schooling still spoke the cockney dialect that kept them in their places.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

With its ending too Shaw clearly satirizes the British society particularly the role of women in society as his very independent character leaves Dr. Higgins, who has virtually recreated her. She explains this rejection by saying that to Dr. Higgins she will always be a flower girl. But Eliza contends, being a lady depends more upon internal behavior and goodness than upon speech and social class. As she departs from Dr. Higgins she says

"Its not because you paid for my dresses... But it was you that I learned really nice manners' and that is what makes one a lady isn't it?"

"you took the money for the girl; and you have no right to take her as well."

(Act 5, pg. 117)

The purpose of a satire into use of humor is to convey and criticize the stupidity of the human race in *Pygmalion*. Charles Bernard Shaw criticizes the upper class. Higgins acts as though he is the most proper man, with the correct grace; however, Mrs. Pearce exposes the truth. Mrs. Pearce tells Eliza that Higgins will often come to breakfast in his nightgown and will use the table cloth as a napkin. This is obviously not respectful, prim behavior and it criticizes the hypocrisy of the upper class.

Shaw's goal of satirizing *Pygmalion* was to portray the shallowness of society, which based a person's merit or worth simply based on their social graces, how they dressed or how they acted. Having successfully made one transformation, Eliza considers the possibility of another transformation as an independent person. This idea too is in sharp contrast to the fixed social strata of British society with Eliza's character, Shaw satirizes the British concept of social graces as being the measure of a person's worth. It is a satire on the upper class and the role of women.

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