

A Feminist Interpretation of Eliza Doolittle's Self-Growth in *Pygmalion*

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Abstract: George Bernard Shaw is the greatest British playwright after Shakespeare, and he is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925. He is good at humor and satire, and his works focus on the urgent social issues of that time, often with realistic characteristics. *Pygmalion* is one of Shaw's representative plays and is also one of his most popular works. This play, adapted from Greek mythology, tells the story of the heroine Eliza, who changes from a flower girl to a "duchess" after a series of transformations by Professor Higgins, a phonetics expert. During this process, Eliza's self-awareness continuously awakens, and ultimately she chooses to leave Higgins to pursue her own life. From a Feminist perspective, this article interprets Eliza's process of self-growth, exploring the social background of the Victorian era and Shaw's feminist thoughts.

Keywords: *Pygmalion*; George Bernard Shaw; Feminism; self-growth; Eliza

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1. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw, born in 1856, is regarded as a very renowned and influential dramatist in modern British. In 1925, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his works characterized by idealism and humanitarianism. He is good at using wit and satire, and he critiques many kinds of social inequalities. Besides, he is an active socialist and also a proponent of Fabian socialism. He used to participate in various political events in London.

Shaw believes that the progress of society is the result of the "life force", and women are the carriers of this "life force". The "life force" creates men through women, thereby advancing "life" to a higher level^[1]. In his works, Shaw pays great attention to women's rights and status. Therefore, he is considered as a feminist. In *Man and Superman*, Sasha is depicted as a wealthy, independent and open-minded woman who is eager to gain personal happiness and freedom, refusing to be constrained by traditional concepts of marriage and family. In *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Catherine is very smart, witty and brave. She engages in a battle of wits with Caesar, demonstrating women's talent and influence in the fields of politics and diplomacy. And in *Pygmalion*, Eliza transforms from a flower girl into a "duchess" through education and her own efforts. However, what she pursues is not merely the change of speech or appearance, but equality and respect on a soul level.

The myth of *Pygmalion* comes from Book 10 of Ovid's "Metamorphoses". *Pygmalion* was a well-known sculptor who decided to remain celibate for life. Once he carved a statue of a maiden and then he found himself inexplicably in love with his creation. After that, he prayed to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to endow the statue with life. Finally, his wish came true, and he got married with his creation. Based on this myth, Shaw wrote down one of his classical play, *Pygmalion*. Even now, this work continues to be adapted and remains highly appealing to numerous audiences.

At the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, British society was undergoing tremendous changes. The Industrial Revolution had led to an increasingly wide gap between the rich and the poor in cities. However, traditional social class stratification remained very rigid. And pronunciation, attire, and manners were still considered indicative of an individual's social status. The play *Pygmalion* tells the story of a phonetist named Higgins who makes a bet with Colonel Pickering that he can transform a flower girl into a duchess within six months. He changes Eliza's appearance and demeanor, teaching her the standard pronunciation possessed by the upper class. Eventually, Eliza shines brilliantly at a banquet. However, during this process, her self-awareness keeps awakening. After realizing that she has not been treated equally and with respect, she chooses to leave. In this work, Shaw employs a unique style of humor to satirize and ridicule social phenomena. It addresses many important themes of that time, including the discrimination and prejudice against the lower classes by the upper class, the hypocrisy of

the upper class, the growth and awakening of women, and so on.

2.Feminism and Shaw's Feminist Thoughts

The origins of Western feminist literature can be traced back to the medieval and Renaissance periods^[2]. However, it was not until the 19th century that Western Feminist literature truly came into its own. Influenced by the French Revolution, a feminist movement advocating for education, political, legal, and economic rights for women began in the Western world from the 1830s onwards. By the 1960s, this movement reached its zenith^[2]. It was during this period that the Feminist criticism, as a direct product of the Western feminist movement permeating into the cultural and literary domains, emerged. This new approach prompted a reevaluation of many classic works and provided a fresh perspective for their analysis and interpretation. The publication of *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett in 1969 marks the birth of Feminist criticism. And other key figures including Sandra Gilbert, Elaine Showalter, etc.

Feminism posits that Western civilization is male-centric and controlled by men, while women are relegated to a subordinate status. Consequently, it critiques male literature, challenges patriarchal culture, and seeks to correct the long-distorted image of women in literary works. According to Feminism, traditions of female literature and consciousness of women within literature should be explored and valued. In the course of its development, Feminist criticism has transformed and absorbed various other critical theories, such as Neo-Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction, and New Historicism.

Although a male writer, Bernard Shaw also expresses his support for feminism in his works. He argues that women should not be confined to domestic roles. Just as not all men are obliged to serve in the military, not all women should automatically be expected to do household chores^[1]. Women are central to his concept of “creative evolution”^[1]. In many of his works, we can see his idea of “life force”, which he uses to depict numerous female characters. A prime example is Eliza in the play *Pygmalion*. She is always brave, confident, and determined to change herself. Through her journey of self-growth, we can discern Shaw's deep Feminist thoughts.

3.Introduction to the Female Character Eliza Doolittle

Eliza Doolittle is the heroine of the play *Pygmalion*. She comes from an impoverished family in London and has never received a proper education, making a living by selling flowers. Living on the fringes of society, her manners and speech are tinged with the earthy essence of the common people, and she speaks in a strong Cockney accent. From the moment she appears on stage, she gives the audience this impression. In Act One, while selling flowers on the street, after being knocked down, the first sentence she says is, “Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah?^[3]”

Despite her humble origins, Eliza has never lost interest in life or the courage to change her circumstances. Therefore, when she meets Professor Higgins, a phonetics expert, and Colonel Pickering, she decides to transform herself through speech training, hoping to secure a job in a flower shop in the future. Eliza is very intelligent and has a strong learning ability; she quickly masters correct pronunciation, refined conversation, and noble demeanor. However, as the play progresses, she gradually discovers her self-worth. She desires respect and wants to pursue her independence and happiness through her own efforts. Consequently, she ultimately decides to leave Professor Higgins.

Eliza's father is the complete opposite of Eliza in character. He is content with his position at the bottom of society and lacks ambition. Mr. Doolittle shows little care for his daughter. After Eliza resolves to learn English, he approaches Professor Higgins and asks for five pounds. He says, “... and if you want the girl, I'm not so set on having her back home again but what I might be open to an arrangement. Regarded in the light of a young woman, she's a fine handsome girl^[3].” He doesn't believe his daughter is determined to change and will achieve independence; instead, he thinks she can rely on her appearance to depend on rich men. He still holds traditional gender views. It is evident that Shaw aims to challenge this kind of thinking in the play. In his view, women should step out of the household and into society, and the prerequisite for doing so is to receive a better education, thereby

gaining the ability to think independently and discern the true nature of society. By enhancing women's economic status, their social status can also be elevated^[4]. The characterization of Eliza is precisely for this purpose. During the process of receiving speech education, her narrow-minded concepts gradually change. Her improvement is not only external but also comes from within her soul. She sees the flaws in society and the limitations of her own class, and she finds her future direction.

4.The Awakening of Eliza's Self-Consciousness

Eliza's journey of self-growth is accompanied by a continuous awakening of her self-awareness, which can be divided into three stages.

Firstly, in the first two acts of the play, Eliza speaks coarsely and wears tattered clothes, lacking social status and her own voice. Additionally, from a perspective of the social background, many women at that time did not receive proper education and still had to rely on men for survival. Therefore, Eliza is positioned at the dual margins of both class and gender. In Act Two, Eliza says: "I want to be a lady in a flower shop instead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road^[3]." She desires to change her poor situation but can only passively submit to Higgins and Pickering's transformation plan. For Higgins, she is merely a tool for his wager. In Act Three, Higgins says to his mother, "Inventing new Elizas^[3]." When Mrs. Higgins asks about Eliza's future, he appears completely unconcerned. He merely views Eliza as his creation, reshaping her language, attire, and demeanor through the power of knowledge, turning her into a "perfect work" that conforms to upper-class aesthetics. At this stage, Eliza chooses to temporarily compromise for the sake of survival; her self-awareness has not yet awakened, and she still lacks cognition of herself.

After successfully masquerading as a noble lady at the dance, Eliza falls into a profound identity crisis. During this stage, she begins to feel confused and angry, and her self-awareness starts to emerge, which is reflected in the play. In Act Four, while Higgins is reveling in his so-called "success", "Eliza looks at him darkly; then leaves the room^[3]." She starts to think that her transformation is merely the result of two men's game, while her own independent personality has always been ignored. At this moment, Higgins doesn't notice Eliza's emotional change at all. He says, "If I hadn't backed myself to do it I should have chucked the whole thing up two months ago. It was a silly notion: the whole thing has been a bore^[3]." Higgins attributes everything to his own efforts, completely overlooking Eliza's personal sacrifices. He positions himself as the creator, while Eliza becomes a commodified woman. She is given the outward appearance of a "lady", but has never been granted the corresponding care and respect.

The third stage of Eliza's awakening of self-awareness is marked by her throwing a slipper at Higgins. This action symbolizes her complete rebellion against Higgins and her desire for dignity and independence. After an emotional outburst, Eliza shouts at Higgins, "What's to become of me? What's to become of me?"^[3]. However, Higgins' response is to suggest that Eliza change her future through marriage. This answer reveals Higgins' inherent thinking as a man enjoying a higher status and highlights the predicament faced by women during the Victorian era, where they could only achieve social mobility through marriage. Unlike traditional women, Eliza does not choose this path. She ultimately leaves Higgins and starts pursuing her own career as a language teacher. Her departure challenges the gender norm of the "Angel in the House". As Virginia Woolf expresses in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), women can only break free from dependent identities by controlling their material base. From a flower girl to a "lady", Eliza always pursues economic independence, ultimately reconstructing her subjectivity and achieving her liberation.

5.Analysis of the Ending of *Pygmalion*

Shaw has presented an ambiguous ending in *Pygmalion*. This ending dispels the traditional romantic narrative and also deconstructs the backward values of Greek mythology.

Shaw has written in the afterword of *Pygmalion*,

“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 their lazy dependence on the ready-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 of the transfiguration it records seems exceedingly improbable, is common enough.”^[3]

Shaw deliberately blurs Eliza’s emotional affiliation, endowing her with individual agency. Eliza has the power to choose her own future; she refuses to be a “masterpiece” of Higgins’ intellectual and linguistic abilities and also does not fully embrace Freddy’s romantic fantasies. It breaks away from the conventional marital conclusion and rebels against the pervasive social values of the Victorian era, proving that women can lead better lives without having to depend on men. At the same time, women should also fight for the right to education and achieve their own liberation. In many male authors’ works, women are always tied to marriage. For example, in Shakespeare’s classical comedy *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), even the excellent female character Portia, who is full of wisdom and courage, is ultimately bound by love. It can be said that the play *Pygmalion* subverts the traditional romantic endings of dramas and profoundly reflects Shaw’s feminist views.

Furthermore, in the original myth, the sculptor Pygmalion regarded Galatea as a perfect sexual object. He sought the help of the god to transform her into a wife who would be submissive to him and fulfill his love desires. In this ending, men are in dominant positions, while women are objectified and can only be men’s possessions and appendages, unable to have their own independent personality. However, in Shaw’s play, Eliza refuses to become an artwork left by Higgins’ side. After discovering that she cannot receive the respect and attention she deserves, she chooses to leave, proclaiming her spiritual and material independence. This act of rebellion against the authority of the “creator” is essentially a critique of the traditional values which advocate that men should be in the center.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the play *Pygmalion* tells the story of the heroine Eliza’s self-growth. In the end, she not only achieves a transformation in her speech, appearance and manners, but also an awakening of her self-awareness. This process of awakening can be divided into three stages. In the first stage, her self-awareness is suppressed by some other factors, such as her desire to change her situation. In the second stage, she begins to feel confused about her own subjective status and starts to let out her anger. In the last stage, she chooses to leave and relies on her own financial independence to realize her self-worth. It can be said that this work profoundly reflects Shaw’s Feminist thoughts. He pays attention to the social problems of the Victorian era, satirizes the hypocrisy of the upper class, and supports women in seeking educational opportunities and fighting for their own rights.

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