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## The Irony Of Social Class In Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion

The following paper takes a look at Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion and the social criticism that it contains. To begin with, Pygmalion was written in 1912. This was the end of the "Victorian" era in England. This is a story about a culture that is transitioning into a new state. Next, the story is briefly summarized before a deeper conduct of its twists and turns is carried out.

Eliza Dolittle (the main character) is a common woman (not of high standing in society); she sells flowers. By accident, she meets Henry Higgins, who is a famous linguist. Higgins and Pickering make a bet. Higgins bets the latter that in 6 months he will make Dolittle into a respected society woman, and he does succeed. However, at the end of the day, the reader is left wondering whether this is her or his victory. We should not forget that the teacher is always as important as the student. Ultimately Dolittle is accepted as a woman of high standing. However, after the party is over, no one is really sure where all of this should take her in the end.

In the book, Dolittle is trying to get rid of her overt frankness and excess simplicity in terms of manners. Being who she is, she is independent. She earns money. She can be herself. Truly be herself. Though she is "dirty" (her clothes and her surroundings), still, she has so many privileges that women in high standing do not have. In fact, Mrs. Higgins and the housekeeper are the two women who recognize and acknowledge what Dolittle is to lose if she gives up her position in society. One could actually think, "Giving up? But what is she giving up?" In the plot it is evident that she gives up so many things, simply because women who have a high position in that society are either housewives or widows. They are not independent, they are too attached to the male figures in their lives.

This is what often happens in life. We strive toward things that, in the end, turn out to be different than what we expected them to be. For Dolittle, this is just the case. While this might sound rather strange, when Dolittle enters the higher circle, she clearly understands that a woman of such high standing has no other choice but to "sell" herself to a good party, becoming a wife. Basically, this social position robs her of all freedom. For Dolittle this compromise is too big. The author goes a long way in comparing the various social classes of 20th century society. He looks at all of the hidden compromises and incongruences that might otherwise stay unnoticed.

Pygmalion emphasizes that speech alone can define one's social standing. In the book, Higgins says that he created Eliza ("this thing") "out of squashed cabbage leaves" (Shaw). Aside from speech, the play emphasizes how one is treated determines his/her social class. Pickering treats Dolittle with respect, as if she were a lady, when he meets her. Thus, he marks her as somewhat above the class that she occupies in the beginning of the story. The story also refers to the middle class. In particular, it shows how people who belonged to the middle class differed from those in the lower and higher classes. There is the pushy and lacking personal containment Clara. She is pretentious in her manners. Thus, we can see in the story that the lower, middle, and higher classes really differ in terms of their manners, behavior, and lifestyles. At the end of the story, the submissive Eliza Dolittle is no longer there. Therefore, one can see how topics of social class, feminism, and gender equality intertwine. In the play, Higgins is the

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“leader” or “master” of the situation the whole time. However, toward the end of the play, we see how Eliza is making her first steps toward attaining greater psychological equality with him. She is no longer willing to be an object that he manipulates, teaches, and instructs. She has a voice and she wants to use it. Shaw’s play shows that one’s social standing is not something natural. It is not a caste that cannot be entered. Through various characters (Dolittle and some others) Shaw demonstrates that it is possible to enter another (a higher) class. We can learn manners and learning these manners has the potential to move us up the social ladder. In the Fifth Act, Pickering says that Eliza actually fulfilled her role better than most ladies who were born into this high social status. This way, he underscores that status is not fate. It is happening in and of its own.

Education is one of the topics that is explored profusely in this play. Shaw stresses that one’s education has the power to determine where one will be located on the socioeconomic ladder. However, still, the play points to the “dependent” position that most women are in, where their education is only bound to determine the kind of husband that they can get for themselves. The more educated a woman, the more intelligent, the more likely she is to marry someone of a high social standing. This education focuses on manners, speech, and behavior. We should also keep in mind that Shaw was a socialist. Thus, he wrote about matters that according to him were of social importance. The situation with Dolittle shows the reader that it is possible to enter another social class if one learns to adhere to the rules that prevail among those people. However, there are inevitable compromises that one cannot shy away from. For Eliza this means becoming more reserved but also more determined. Together with new manners she obtains a voice that prior was hushed.

Shaw was aware of the fact that workers were largely exploited by the higher classes. Thus, his play can be interpreted as a manifesto of sorts that demonstrates that one can leave the confines of social restrictions/boundaries. This play shows the situation that prevailed in British society during a time when the capitalist order reached its “full height.” To sum up, the various characters that are a part of this story represent a certain segment of society based on socioeconomic standing. These are stereotypical representations of what a person from a given social class might do, how they might act, etc. These are Shaw’s perceptions that are most likely representative of the time in which he lived.

Ultimately this play somewhat ironizes the very concept of class and social standing. It stresses that all things are flexible, even those which seem rigid. Social class mobility is much easier than it seems. However, there are consequences that come with this mobility, which are equally highlighted by Shaw in this play.