

A Feminist Perspective to *Pygmalion*

UNE PERSPECTIVE FEMINISTE SUR PYGMALION

Chen Lihua¹

Abstract: *Pygmalion* is the representative play by the famous British playwright Bernard Shaw. Up to now, there have been many academic discussions on it from different perspectives. This paper intends to analyze the play from the feminist perspective. From this perspective, we can clearly find that the play is no doubt the creation of woman, either the creation of a duchess from a flower girl, or the creation of a woman from a duchess, in which man is God, the father, and the creator, whereas woman is in the position of a child, a pupil, being corrected, educated and remade by man. The woman character in it is seen only as an object for experiment. Through detailed analysis, the paper exposes how woman figure being pre-patterned, and the position of woman in society being forced to the lowest.

Key words: Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, Feminist Perspective

Résumé: *Pygmalion* est la pièce représentative du célèbre dramaturge anglais Bernard Shaw. Jusqu'à aujourd'hui, il y a eu beaucoup de discussions académiques sur cette pièce dans de différentes perspectives. Cet essai tente de l'analyser dans la perspective féministe. Ainsi, nous trouvons clairement que cette pièce est sans doute la création de la femme, création d'une duchesse à partir d'une fille, ou création d'une femme à partir d'une dechesse, au cours de laquelle l'homme-le père et le créateur- est Dieu, mais la femme est dans la position d'un enfant, un élève qui est corrigée et éduquée par l'homme. La femme est considérée seulement comme un objet d'expérimentation. A la suite de l'analyse en détail, l'essai expose comment la figure de femme est prémodélée et la position sociale de la femme est réduite au plus bas niveau.

Mots-Clés: George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, perspective féministe

In 1912 Bernard Shaw wrote *Pygmalion*, the title of which refers to the myth of the sculptor Pygmalion who created and then fell in love with a beautiful statue and whose love enabled the marble to become a live woman, Galatea. Shaw's basic plot line is that of an equally creative language professor, Mr. Higgins, who turns a gutter snipe flower girl into a woman able to pose as a duchess.

Pygmalion became very popular all over the European world as soon as it was brought to stage. In spite of the author's strong objection, the ending was interpreted romantically by the actors and the audience. The audience have reasons to feel very much pleased with the romantic and happy ending because the play is obviously based upon another popular myth--- the story of Cinderella. In that fairy tale the poor but virtuous girl is transformed for one night at a ball, meets her Prince Charming and thus turns out to be a princess in truth. *Pygmalion*, however, has brought this romantic transformation into a more practical and possible one. The ending, as might be accepted by the audience, that Eliza marrying Higgins and settling down to fetch his slippers for him, makes the audience (or the male audience, more probably) feel so satisfied that they

must feel they have found the order of the world again.

The plot of the play is no doubt the creation of woman, either the creation of a duchess from a flower girl, or the creation of a woman from a duchess, in which man is God, the father, and the creator, whereas woman is in the position of a child, being corrected and remade by man. From the very beginning of the play, we can see the unequal relationship between man and woman: Man is superior, woman is inferior. In Act 1, when the two protagonists first appear, we can easily find the difference: the male character, the language professor, is an upper-class gentleman, whereas the flower girl is only a "creature" with visible and distinguishing marks of the lower class society. What is more, through the language professor, Shaw expresses his own value of morality and through the lessons Higgins teaches, Shaw intends to teach with his own brand of didacticism. One of these is found in Higgins' first speech to the whining Eliza:

"A woman who utters depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere— no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and

¹ English Dept. Central China Normal University, China.

*Received 2 February 2006 ; accepted 10 March 2006

the Bible, and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon." (Act I: 206)

Thus from this insulting speech, we get to realize that the social reformation is based upon the phonetic reformation of women, despite the fact that the language professor himself always speaks very brutal and nasty language all through the play.

Another thing the plot is closely concerned is growing up. Since Eliza is regarded as the child and pupil, thus under the guidance and teaching of Higgins, she not only learns phonetics and manners, but also learns to find out her own "spark of divine fire." So 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. The Pygmalion in this play is a life-giver as well as a soul-giver. In the play we are led to see that Eliza evolves from confusion, ignorance, and illusion to coherence, knowledge and reality under the help and guidance of the male professor. Higgins is described as the greatest teacher in the world, capable not only of educating the flower girl to be a duchess but giving the duchess a freedom and an emotional independence greater even than he himself possesses. What is more interesting and ridiculous is that the purpose for this creation is to make the woman a satisfied wife for man, especially for the upper class man, such as "the Governor-General of India" or "the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland," or "somebody who wants a deputy-queen."

With the creation of woman as its theme, the woman figure is certainly pre-patterned, and the position of woman in society is no doubt the lowest. The woman character is seen only as an object for experiment. In the language professor's eyes, she is only a "creature," "a baggage," one of the "squashed cabbage leaves of covert garden" and a "damned impudent slut." She is everything but an equal human being to man. Higgins even ignores her gender. In Act 2, when Eliza comes for elocution lessons and Higgins orders his housemaid to "take all her clothes off," everyone in the play and out of the play suspects whether his intention is sexual or intellectual. As a matter of even worse fact, he doesn't even take her as a human being at all. He takes Nietzsche's saying "when you go to women, take your whip with you" for granted. Though he does not resort to physical abuse of Eliza, except for a moment in the last act when he completely loses control of himself as a result of her taunts, he nevertheless does bully Eliza in every other way, ordering her about in a very brusque manner without the slightest concern for her feelings and uttering threats of physical violence which in the early stages of their acquaintance she takes quite seriously. The typical example is in Act 2's interview. Higgins' attitude to Eliza is very rude and abusive. He orders her "peremptorily" to sit down, and when she does not do so immediately, he repeats the order, "thundering" it at her. When she interrupts his speculations about the price she has offered for the lessons, he barks out, "hold your

tongue," and when as a consequence of those speculations and of his rudeness, she begins to cry, he threatens, "somebody is going to touch you, with a broomstick, if you don't stop sniveling." Immediately upon deciding to undertake the challenge to transform her into a duchess, he begins to issue orders to his housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, about giving her a bath, disinfecting her, and burning all her clothes without consulting Eliza at all, just as though she has nothing to say in the matter, and as Eliza begins to protest, he tells Mrs. Pearce, "If she gives you any trouble, wallop her." This brutal manner of Higgins to Eliza continues to the end of the play and is appreciated by the author as the most efficient way to create a woman in six months. Even after Eliza's transformation, after she can speak perfect English and behave like a duchess, the men's contempt for her is no less. In Act 5, when the men cannot find Eliza and they set the police to look for her, Mrs. Higgins said: "What right have you to go to the police and give the girl's name as if she were a thief, or a lost umbrella, or something?" (Act 5:261) But unfortunately that's just the position of woman in the man-dominating society. She is nobody but something, especially when she comes from the bottom of the society.

The two main characters are described as a sharp contrast to each other. The man is learned, and the woman is ignorant; the man is intelligent, and the woman is stupid; the man is reasonable, and the woman is emotional, etc. But after reading the play, I cannot but come to the conclusion that the male protagonist is simply a misogynist, as we can see in Act 2 from his conversation with Pickering:

Pickering: Excuse the straight question, Higgins. Are you a man of good character where women are concerned?

Higgins: [moodily] Have you ever met a man of good character where women are concerned?

Pickering: Yes, very frequently.

Higgins: [dogmatically, lifting himself on his hands to the level of the piano, and sitting on it with a bounce] Well, I haven't. I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance. I find that the moment I let myself make friends with a woman, I become selfish and tyrannical. Women upset everything. When you let them into your life, you find that the woman is driving at one thing and you drive at another. (Act 2: 221)

Higgins respects and loves no woman except his mother. This Oedipus complex makes his misogyny even worse. He doesn't want to marry any woman, not even his "creation" Eliza, because he wishes to keep being her creator and controller. However, his superiority is constantly challenged by Eliza's wisdom and he feels very much irritated when he starts to see that Eliza has a great many ideas that he cannot have put into her head since he does not himself possess them or

even understand them, such as Eliza's talking of her real education starts from Pickering's calling her Miss Doolittle the day she first met them. Only when Eliza realizes and declares that she has some knowledge which Higgins does not possess and will never possess, the knowledge of how to be kind and civil to people, and that she will make an even better and more successful teacher than he does, Higgins has to yield to take Eliza as his equal.

Higgins is by nature celibate and self-centered. Just as Eliza accuses him in the beginning act: " Oh, you've no feeling heart in you, you don't care for nothing but yourself. " His statement that he treats all people the same, as in heaven, where there are no third-class carriages, sounds impressive at first. But it seems less noble on the second thought that it provides him with a convenient excuse both for his brutality towards Eliza and his self-indulgence in a lack of manners. He treats everyone the same, but this is hardly admirable when he behaves as though he were the aristocrat and they all flower girls. He simply has no respect for human dignity and feelings.

From the play, we can also find that although Higgins is described as a father, a creator, he is actually more like a child than Eliza. His ruthlessness, his naive understanding of society and his obsession with the creation of empty social forms, his addiction to his mother, his coaxing women " as a child coaxes its nurse ", all these only show that he is " rather like a very impetuous baby " as Shaw himself describes. Therefore, despite his forcefulness and his " Miltonic " mind, his effort to create Eliza turns to be " a child playing at being a parent, a boy who has somehow become the father of a mechanical toy ." (Arthur Ganz)

Compared with Higgins, the character of Eliza, despite the comic description of her ignorance and lack of manner, is much more human than her mentor. She is naïve and innocent. She understands her situation very well. Although she has a father who only knows how to get some money for a drink and another father who tries to create her into a duchess, she is clear that neither of them really concerns about her. She is manifestly incapable of expressing herself or of conceptualizing her state other than in simplistic alternatives, and in turn, her feelings have shallow definition because she has neither the language in which to express them nor the perspective or experience to objectify them. Thus terror, rebelliousness, dismay, and indignation are all vented by a howl, " Ah - ah - oh - ow - ow - ow - oo ! " through which she may reflect different emotions by intonation. She also struggles very hard to be independent in her life, economically and spiritually. She doesn't quite understand the society she lives in. She takes a taxi serving as her golden coach, an ostrich-feather hat and a shoddy coat serving as the garb of a fine lady. Her concepts of gentility are founded in the ignorance of her class, and they cling to easily observable surface elements --- manners, money and speech. She believes that by changing her accent she can change her social

position. Therefore she succumbs to Higgins' brutality and works with him very hard to learn phonetics and manners until at last she realizes that she is still a flower girl no matter how perfect she speaks English. She has her own concept of life and morality. She supports her own life by selling flowers, not selling herself. She demands respect and equality from others. She is never frightened by Higgins whenever he threatens her. As we can see when she speaks her mind out directly to Higgins: " You're a great bully, you are. I won't stay here if I don't like. I won't let nobody wallop me. I never asked to go to Bucknam Palace, I didn't. I was never in trouble with the police, not me. I'm a good girl... " (Act 2: 221)

Eliza's awakening of self-existence and self-respect comes from the oppression and contempt she receives. Act 4 is the beginning of her awakening. After experiencing the dark night of her soul, the despair of her isolation, the absence of meaning and the perplexity of becoming a slave to her accent, as her father, Mr Doolittle feels that he has become a slave to his unexpected income, she comes to a self-realization. She throws the slippers at Higgins, shouting: " Because I wanted to smash your face. I'd like to kill you, you selfish brute. Why didn't you leave me where you picked me out of --- in the gutter? You thank God it's all over, and that now you can throw me back again, do you? " " What's to become of me? What's to become of me? " (Act 4:256) She realizes neither her own irresponsible father, nor her father of creation really cares her: " You don't care. I know you don't care. You wouldn't care if I was dead. I'm nothing to you --- no so much as them slippers. " (Act 4: 255) She also realizes that " the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated. " She begins to rebel and demands for equality and respect: " I want a little kindness. I know I'm a common ignorant girl, and you a book-learned gentleman; but I'm not dirt under your feet. " (Act 5: 278) She further more, demands not only kindness, but also independence.

Liza: [rising determinedly] I'll let you see whether I'm dependent on you. If you can preach, I can teach. I'll go and be a teacher.

Higgins: [rising in a fury] What'll you teach, in heaven's name?

Liza: What you taught me. I'll teach phonetics.

Higgins: Ha! ha! ha!

Liza: I'll offer myself as an assistant to Professor Nepean.

Higgins: [rising in a fury] What! That impostor? That humbug? That toadying ignorances? Teach him my methods? My discoveries! You take one step in his direction and I'll wring your neck. [He lays hands on her] Do you hear?

Liza: [defiantly non-resistant] Wring away. What do I care? I knew you'd strike me some day. [He lets her go, stamping with rage at having forgotten himself, and

recoils so hastily that he stumbles back into his seat on the ottoman] Aha!

Now I know how to deal with you. What a fool I was not to think of it before!

You cant 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! Thats done you, Henry Higgins, it has...(Act 5:279)

This part is the climax of the play. It reveals the maturity of Eliza and how she succeeds in forcing Higgins to treat her as his equal through her own efforts.

The scene in the beginning of the play at the portico of St. Paul's Church is a brilliant introduction to the play because in that small area and within that short space of time, Shaw has paraded for the inspection of his audience a small cross-section of English society. From the description, we can see that Eliza occupies one of the lowest grades in that society, facing the powerful and mysterious force of authority and the uncomprehending police all alone by herself. Though there are still present some sympathetic bystanders prepared to protect her, such as the character Colonel Pickering, yet he is also a symbol of the force and authority of that society, only with some charity and humanity. Freddy and his mother and sister are the representatives of ineffectual gentility, while Higgins is the power of the intellect — capable and wise. What is noticeable is that the structure of society is totally based

upon the economic position of the characters. The rich represents the force of power and authority, whereas the poor is laid down at the bottom of society, being bullied and contemplated by the upper class people. The description of the setting and the action, the darkness, the after-theater confusion, and Eliza's pathetic scramble for pennies are dramatic essential to provide a brief glimpse of the flower-girl's world. We understand that Eliza's economical and social position accounts for her improper pronunciation of English language and improper manner. A flower girl can never afford a language professor if there is not such a coincidence. How can we expect a poor flower girl who has to strive for a few coins to support her simplest living to behave like a duchess? In the description of the scene, we can clearly sense the violent force of society against the poor flower girl: the darkness of the night, the rain, and the confusion of the scene reflect on multiple levels—physical, social, intellectual and spiritual. Hers is a world of chaos, and she is swept along by it, oblivious to the suggestive portents of the lighting and the church bells, which reminds Higgins of the voice of God.

Act 4 is generally considered as the birth of Eliza's soul, the awakening from her illusion to the realization of what she really wants. The scene is midnight, the darkest period of the night. It suggests the miserable period of confusion and hard struggle of Eliza. However since midnight comes, the daybreak is not far. Eliza is sure to get rid of the darkness and meet a bright tomorrow of independence and happiness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carr, Pat M. with Haytone Illustrations. (1984). *Bernard Shaw*. Frederick Ungan Publishing Co. New York. Chelsea House Publishers. *Modern Critical Interpretations , George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion*. a Division of Main Line Book Co,1988.
- Shaw, Bernard Six Plays*. Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1941.

THE AUTHOR

Chen Lihua,English Dept.Central China Normal University. Wuhan, Hubei, 430079, P. R. China.