



George Bernard Shaw as a Social Reformer: A Quick Look through Pygmalion

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The title of the play *Pygmalion* (1913) suggests the theme of the play to be love, but in Shaw's representation of the theme, the play involves a wider purview of social relations and social conditions affecting emotional partnership of two individuals. A phonetician creates a perfect model of his linguistic signs out of a phonetically raw and socially subaltern girl who falls in love with him. Thus, what to him is just an experiment turns out to be the most demanding human heart. Shaw seems to be at a loss as to the final result of the tangle. He, therefore, leaves the ending ambiguous. By nature Shaw was a tireless crusader for social justice and righteousness; he was a propagandist for the intellectual enlightenment of the people. He was a zealous missionary and social reform was his mission. He tried to liberate his age from, "Humbug, mental sloth, social apathy, superstition, sentimentalism, collective selfishness, and all the static ideas which have not been consciously subjected to the tests of real life and honest thought." In *Pygmalion* Shaw has focused on the problem of education. To educate is to give new life to those who receive the education. This problem is presented through the medium of a lesser theme which is national one confined to the English. Another problem presented in the play is the predicament of Alfie Doolittle. The dramatist highlighted particularly his problem. In Greek mythology, *Pygmalion* was a king of Cyprus who fell in love with a statue of *Aphrodite*. But *Ovid*, the Roman poet (43 B.C.-A.D.18), invents a more sophisticated version in his *Metamorphoses*. According to him, *Pygmalion* was a sculptor, a worker in marble, bronze, and ivory. He was exclusively devoted to his art. He had an image of beauty in his mind and no woman could come up to it in the world. He, therefore, worked over his statue from morning to evening in search of a loveliness beyond his powers of expression. In fact, the statues of *Pygmalion* were always far more beautiful than real human beings, and each statue was more nearly perfect than the last. Still in each new statue, *Pygmalion* felt something lacking. While his admirers stood entranced before his statues, he never cared to look on them. But was wholeheartedly absorbed in his next attempt. Finally, in his quest for ideal beauty, he began to work on an ivory statue of a girl who satisfied him in every way. Even before this statue was finished, he

would lay the chisel and stare at his work for an hour or so. Tracing in his mind the beauty that had as yet only partly unfolded itself. By the time, the ivory statue was completed, Pygmalion could think of nothing else. In his very dreams, the girl in the statue hawed him and seemed to wake up for, him and come alive. The mere contemplation of the finished statue filled him with exquisite pleasure. He would sit gazing at the maiden, whom he had given the name Galatea. Often he imagined that he saw her move and asked himself what a joy it would be if she were actually living. In this obsession with the beauty of his dreams, Pygmalion wore out and became pale and exhausted. After long labour and careful patient working, the statue was actually finished. The legend has it that half the night Pygmalion gazed at the beautiful image: then with a hopeless sigh he went to bed, haunted as ever by his dreams. Then came the day of the festival of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty. Pygmalion had always felt a special devotion for this goddess because he, by his very nature, was a seeker after beauty. He had, therefore, never failed to give Aphrodite the honour that was due to her. To put it more truly, he had lived all his life in the worship of the goddess. As custom had it, the devotees of Aphrodite offered her many splendid gifts. This time when Pygmalion approached the altar, he prayed earnestly and saw the fire that burned there leap suddenly in flame. This excitement stirred him and he came back to his statue though without knowing as to what he would encounter on his return. His Galatea was as he had left her. He looked at her longingly once more, and as on several former occasions, he seemed to see her move. On a sudden impulse, he approached Galatea and held her in his arms. Certainly by the animating grace of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, the statue was really moving. He felt the hard ivory grow soft and warm like wax in his clasp. He saw the lips grow red and the cheeks blush faintly pink. Then Galatea opened her eyes and looked at Pygmalion. The red lips parted slightly and as their creator kissed them, they pressed against his own. Pygmalion's dream became a perfect reality, when Galatea stepped down from her pedestal into his arms as a flesh and blood girl. In course of time, the two were happily married. The next day Pygmalion went with his lady love Galatea to pray at Aphrodite's shrine. The beloved thanked the goddess for the gift of love, the lover expressed gratitude that his dreams and prayers had been fully answered and his lifelong devotion to the goddess of beauty had been rewarded in a most befitting manner. Bernard Shaw has mixed the Pygmalion myth with the Cinderella fairy tale. After the death of his wife, a rich merchant married a woman with two fair but evil daughters. The child of the first marriage was set to do all the work and to sleep among the ashes. One day the king gave a grand ball. The step sisters dressed and set off but Cinderella was left behind weeping. However, a white bird brought her a lovely dress and Cinderella went to the ball where she at once won the prince's heart. As she rushed back to her home, she dropped her slipper and the prince vowed he would wed the maid who owned it. One step-sister cut off her toe, the other her heel to make it fit, but the prince was not deceived, and he ultimately married Cinderella. In Shaw's play, Higgins is Pygmalion and Galatea is Eliza Doolittle, an uneducated girl who sells flowers in a London Street. Professor Higgins keeps the flower girl for six months in his laboratory. She is well trained and becomes a perfect, refined lady of London. The experiment of Higgins has succeeded and Eliza Doolittle can pass for a duchess. Thus Higgins is the creator of

a new Eliza, but he does not marry his creation, as Pygmalion does in the Greek legend. Thus Shaw has not followed the Greek legend. Eliza Doolittle is the creation of Professor Higgins. But when she becomes a refined and cultured lady, she shows no inclination to marry Professor Higgins. The Professor also does not like to marry her. He neglects her after the experiment is over. Eliza Doolittle then leaves the place as a free woman. Professor Higgins is quite unsentimental and unromantic in his approach to Eliza Doolittle. He has lived a life of a scholar and his approach to sex is quite different. Mrs. Higgins, his mother, has influenced the life of his son so much that he does not love any other woman except his own mother. Of this strange behaviour of Professor Higgins, Bernard Shaw says-"If an imaginative boy has a sufficiently rich mother who has intelligence, personal grace, dignity of character without harshness, and a cultivated sense of the best art of her time to enable her to make her house beautified, she sets a standard for him against which very few women can struggle, besides effecting for him a disengagement of his affections, his sense of beauty, and his idealism, from his specifically sexual impulses." It is Oedipus complex which comes in the way of Higgins' marriage with Eliza, his Galatea, and his own creation. According to Shaw's philosophy, Eliza-Galatea could not have married Higgins who is old; the Life Force would prompt her to marry Freddy who is much younger, and is likely to make a better father to her children, in the conflict between genius (Higgins) and Life Force (working through Eliza) genius is defeated, and obeying the dictates of the Life Force, Eliza turns to Freddy and marries him. Thus Shaw has made the Pygmalion legend the basis of his play, but he has considerably deviated from it and modified it to suit his purposes. He has also mixed it up with the Cinderella fairy-tale. The name Cinderella has not come to stand for any girl who achieves happiness and success after leading a miserable life. Like Cinderella, in the fairy-tale of that name, Eliza leads a wretched life for a longtime. Her step-mother does not love her and her father compels her to earn her own living as she is old enough to do so. Hence we find her to be a poverty-stricken girl selling flowers at the corner of Covent Garden. But then suddenly a change comes in her life. She is 'created' into a cultured lady who can easily pass off as a Duchess, and is then loved by Freddy, a handsome Youngman, who monies her, and with whom she leads a happy life. He is the prince of the Cinderella story who enters the life of Eliza, marries her, and makes her happy and comfortable. Bernard Shaw has called the play Pygmalion, and added a sub-title to it, 'Y Romance'. As is well known, Shaw was an anti-romantic and in one play after another he has punctured age-old romantic notions. Thus in his *Arms and the Man*, he has shattered the romantic notions of love and war, and in his *Man and Superman* he has shown that it is the woman, and not the man, who is the courter and the chaser. It is the woman who chases her man relentlessly and ultimately marries him. Beauty and sex appeal of a woman are shown to be traps to capture the man who is likely to make a suitable father and husband. Thus Shaw is an anti-romantic, an iconoclast, and this is true of the present play also. No doubt, the transformation of a shabby, dirty and cockney speaking flower girl into a fascinating lady, fit enough to pass for a Duchess even in the garden party of an ambassador, is romantic enough, in the sense that such creations are not usual but Pygmalion cannot be regarded as a romance, because in it the heroine Eliza, does not marry Higgins the hero. The

transformation of Eliza is romantic enough, but the play does not have the conventional ending of a romance, for the hero and the heroine are not in love and are not happily married at the end. Rather, the heroine throws the slippers of the hero into his face, and goes out of his house in anger. Higgins' interest in Eliza is merely scientific and it comes to an end as soon as he has achieved success in his experiment. He is cold and scientific and not at all a lover. However, sexual love is an essential element in a romance and this element of romance is provided by the Freddy-Eliza love-story. Freddy falls deeply in love with Eliza when he meets her at the house of Mrs. Higgins. He is simply fascinated by her and from that day onwards he begins to haunt Wimpole Street where Eliza lives in Higgins' house. Freddy keeps looking at Eliza's room every night until the lights go out, when he says: "Good night, darling, darling, darling." Freddy thus becomes a love-lorn man.

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