

The Central Theme of Education in Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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The Central Theme of Education

The contribution on Bernard Shaw to the modern English drama is significant. He discusses a serious problem of the contemporary society as intensely as he can. Therefore the readers call his plays 'Comedies of Purpose'

In writing plays, Shaw had the deliberate object of converting the society to his views and ideas. He had no other incentive to write plays.

G.K. Chesterton says:

Bernard Shaw has much affinity to Plato in his instinctive elevation of temper, his courageous pursuit of ideas as far as they will go; his civic idealism, and also, it must be confessed, in his dislike of poets and a touch of delicate inhumanity

(George Bernard Shaw: 53)

Education is enlightenment. Like a rainbow, it unfurls many hues, right from child development up to higher education. It also hovers into remedial programmes for backward students. It is an artistic science and a scientific art. It is not reading books but understanding. It is the art of imparting knowledge, not thrusting knowledge, into the unwilling throat.

In *Pygmalion*, education is used as a tool for emancipating working class individuals. Eliza gets uprooted and has to give up personal feature. Language is linked up with identity and finds a new identity through education.

Eliza's transformation demonstrates that social distinctions such as accents, age, class barriers can be overcome by language training. It becomes questionable however if language reveals or forms one's character. Eliza's outcry at the end of the play denies the idea. Yet she understands herself that better education is connected with social progress. Eliza's problems show that language alone provides a superficial transformation. She lacks education to become fully integrated. By this Shaw illustrates the impossibility of moving classes in those days.

Pygmalion is a complex work of art with a number of themes. But its central theme is the education of Eliza Doolittle. She rises from ignorance and darkness to spiritual light through successive stages of despair, self-realization, illumination and social identity.

Eliza Doolittle is introduced in the play as an illiterate ignorant girl selling flowers in Convent Garden. She speaks the kind of Cockney which only the native Londoners can understand. At this stage, she is crude, ill-mannered and saucy.

Eliza requests a gentleman to buy flowers from her. But the gentleman gives her three pence and moves away from her without taking any flowers. A bystander advises her to give some flowers to the gentleman who has given her money. He says that a person is watching her from a distance and taking notes, and he might be a detective. She might be arrested for soliciting customers in the street. At this, the flower-girl is both frightened and irritated. She remarks that she is a poor girl who earns her living honestly and means no harm. She only spoke to the gentleman to buy some flowers from her and uttered no other word.

She says:

I aint done nothing wrong by speaking to the gentleman.
I've a right to sell flowers if I keep off the kerb. I am a respectable
girl: so help me, I never spoke to him except to ask him to buy a
flower off me

(Pygmalion: pp 10-11)

The note-taker takes notes through her speech. He reads, reproducing her pronunciation exactly. He says, "Cheer ap, keptin; n'baw ya flahr orf a pore gel". (Pygmalion: 12)

Eliza protests that she cannot be arrested and driven on the streets for speaking to a gentleman. She defends herself saying that she is like any other moral woman. She says:

He's no right to take away my character. My character is the same
to me as any lady's

(Pygmalion: 14)

Colonel Pickering who is also a student of Phonetics, has come to London all the way from India to meet Professor Higgins. He meets Higgins during his encounter with Eliza; he expresses his happiness over meeting him. He stays in Higgins' house. Colonel Pickering is proud of the fact that he can pronounce as many as twenty four distinct vowel sounds but he is much surprised to find that Professor Higgins can distinguish among as many as one hundred and thirty distinct vowel sounds.

Now Eliza worries herself but still she is ambitious. She wants to rise high in life, at least to become a salesgirl in a flower-shop.

The very next day, Eliza calls on Prof. Higgins and expresses her desire to take lessons in Phonetics. But Higgins thinks, she has come there as an object of his experiment. So he dismisses her saying that he has already recorded what he wanted of her dialect. Then Eliza tells him that she has come there to take lessons on pronunciation from him. She finds fault with him for not having offered her a seat. She says that she is prepared to pay him like any other lady. Higgins accepts her as his student. But he tells her that he is a strict disciplinarian. He remarks "If I decide to teach you, I'll be worse than two fathers to you" (Pygmalion: 25)

Higgins says to her first she must talk grammar. This is an easy way to improve her pronunciation. She tells Higgins, "I don't want to talk grammar. I want to talk like a lady in a flower-shop" (Pygmalion: 29). Higgins decides to transform the shabby flower-girl into a fashionable lady.

The process of education seems difficult to Eliza in the beginning. First, she has to be scrubbed, cleaned and dressed decently. Eliza feels shy and even frightened to take a bath naked. But Mrs. Pearce, the house keeper of Prof. Higgins manages to make her decent physically.

To Mrs. Pearce, Higgins replies that his job is only to teach Eliza Phonetics and make her a fashionable lady. When the job is over, they can throw her back into the gutter. Till then it is her job to take care of herself. Since Eliza has courage, talents and determination, she faces the ordeal boldly. As her education proceeds, she realizes that the difference in a flower-girl is not how she behaves but how she is treated. Higgins continues to treat her as a low-class flower-girl.

In the third Act of the play, Eliza's progress in her education is tested. She is dressed like a lady, behaves like a lady and all are impressed. Eliza of Act III is quite different from the flower girl of Act I but her education is not yet complete. Her small talk betrays her social background. She has not yet learnt what a lady should talk in a social gathering. She talks about matters which easily betray her low origin, though her language is almost flawless.

Higgins teaches her to pronounce English correctly and also to dress elegantly and cultivate fine manners. He has done all this over a long period of time and the girl has caused him a lot of trouble. Prof. Higgins has thrown a bet to Pickering that he would turn Eliza off into a Duchess in six months. He started the experiment a few months before and she is getting on very quickly. Higgins is hopeful of winning the bet. Eliza is learning almost a new language. While telling his mother about Eliza's quickness in learning, Higgins remarks:

She has a quick ear; and she's been easier to teach than my middle-class pupils because she's had to learn a complete new language. She talks English almost as you talk French

(Pygmalion: 53)

After a few months, Higgins invites Eliza to Mrs. Higgins' home to check how she conducts herself and what impression she leaves on his mother's friends from the fashionable society. He has advised Eliza to keep strictly to two statements only – 'Fine day' and 'How do you do'. In his mother's house, Mrs. Higgins tells Higgins that Eliza is a triumph of his art and also of the art of her dress-maker but every sentence that Eliza uttered had given her away.

Higgins continues to give Eliza lessons in Phonetics. After six months, Eliza is taken to the party of an ambassador. Now she is able to pass off not merely as a Duchess, but as a princess with royal blood in her veins. All are deceived by her lady-like manners and deportment.

During the course of her education in Phonetics, her soul has been awakened and she has progressed from spiritual darkness to light. The hidden possibilities of her soul have been fully developed. She is completely transformed spiritually, and that is the real education. She now seeks social identity. Her soul has been awakened and she is aware of the problem that now faces her. She cannot return to her old position. Nor she belongs to the middle class society. She is filled with despair. She must belong and such belongingness for social happiness.

Eliza begins to seek for emotional fulfillment. After the Ambassador party, Higgins does not treat her as a Duchess. So Eliza decides not to stay in Higgins' house even a moment longer.

Professor Higgins has completed his experiment and she is no longer of any use to him. She asks him in a fit of anger,

What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What to become of me?

(Pygmalion: 76)

As A.C. Ward points out,

Eliza's cry is more poignant than she knew, for it has been echoed by many who have been educated art of their class only to be set adrift.

(Men and Books: 92)

Being a common ignorant girl, Eliza has to be very careful in her place. Nor can she mingle with a fashionable society. She requests Higgins to tell her what belongs to her and what does not belong to her. She leaves Higgins' house before Higgins and Pickering gets up from bed the next morning.

Higgins is in difficulty because he does not know what appointment he has and what things he needs, for Eliza looked after these matters. He depended upon her and now he feels helpless,

But I can't find anything. I don't know what appointment I've got.
I'm.....

(Pygmalion: 84)

There is much difference between Higgins and Pickering in their attitude towards Eliza. Prof. Higgins has taught her language and fine matters but that is his profession. But he always treats her as a flower-girl. But from the very beginning, Pickering treats Eliza like a lady and it is from him she has learned real manners, attitude and conduct of a lady. It is this which has changed her completely that she can no longer be a flower-girl. She tells Pickering:

The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because o always treat me as a lady and always will

(Pygmalion PP: 93-94)

While Pickering is much alarmed at her decision to leave them, Prof. Higgins exclaims angrily, "Let her go. Let her find out how she can go on without us. She will relapse into the gutter in three weeks without me at her elbow"

(Pygmalion: 94)

Eliza, the modern Cinderella has suffered terribly at the hands of her stepmother, her father, Higgins and even Mrs. Pearce, the house keeper. But her soul has not been crushed. She does not lose her vitality and spirit. Some fairy godmother as in the Cinderella story comes to her rescue and everything is set right. As she comes out of the house of Higgins at midnight, she meets Freddy a romantic young man, passionately in love with her. When Eliza is determined to marry Freddy, Higgins does not welcome the idea, because according to him, Freddy is a fool. But Eliza opposes his idea.

If he's weak and poor and wants me, may be he'd make me
happier than my betters that bully me and don't want me.

(Pygmalion: 101)

Eliza marries Freddy and sets up a flower shop with the help of Colonel Pickering. The work hard, learn book-keeping, accountancy and type-writing.

Thus Eliza undergoes a course of education in the play. In the process, she is not only made a lady, her soul is also awakened. She has acquired self-confidence and that search for identity and belongingness which was the most serious problem that confronted her after Higgins' experiment had been successfully completed.

Conclusion

Shaw's personality is a unique combination of the gay and serious. He is regarded as the father of theatre ideas in England. His plays are sermons on social follies and vices.

Shaw is one of the most successful delineators of characters. The characters of both Higgins and Eliza are memorable. Both these characters have been endowed with life by the dramatist. The habit of swearing, losing his temper at the slightest provocation, his consciousness of himself as a Professor of Phonetics, his love for his mother and his devotion to his profession make Higgins a living personality whom the readers love as well admire. Eliza too has been convincingly drawn, first as an ignorant, illiterate flower girl and then a fine lady who she becomes. The transformed Eliza surprises the readers by the proficiency which she has acquired in speaking English and in behaving like a born princess.

Eliza's education has made her a lady, and so she cannot go back to her former environment and sell flowers as she used to do. She has been cut off from her earlier environment. She has become a lady and has lost her earlier identity. Eliza is confronted with the problem of loss of identity and alienation. She must search for belongingness in the new social environment to which she has been raised by her education. She has been alienated from her earlier social environment and now her quest is for identity and belongingness in the higher social environment to which she has been raised.

Eliza's individual assertiveness is unquenchable and the play gives an insight into social generalities by reflecting a vitalist philosophy more than a socialist one. Not every flower girl can become a lady; only with the appropriate drive and talents can do so.

In her intimidated state, Eliza knows the wretchedness of being nothing more than an experimental object in Higgins' scheme, to demonstrate the power of speech-training to bridge

the gap between class and class. She works out her own destiny and marries Freddy because the life force tells her that he would make a better father to her children.

Eliza was not a dunce. She was inherently intelligent. Higgins cannot claim to have made Eliza. All that he gave to Eliza is her language. Even before she met him, she possessed intelligence, dignity and individuality. After all the education she received from Higgins, she is able to express herself better. Higgins' contribution in the making of Eliza is not a bit more and not a bit less than this.

Thus, it is clear that Eliza's inherent quality of intelligence has been shaped by education that she acquired from Higgins.

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