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Transformations of Identity: Exploring the Analogy Between *Pygmalion* and the Medical Model of Disability

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Abstract:

This paper establishes a nuanced analogy between Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* and the Medical Model of Disability, a prominent framework in Disability Studies that conceptualizes disability as an individual deficit requiring correction. The Medical Model stands in contrast to the Social Model of Disability, which emphasizes the societal and cultural constructs that contribute to the marginalization of individuals with disabilities. By examining the thematic parallels between Eliza Doolittle's transformation from an ordinary flower girl to a "lady" and the expectations placed on individuals with disabilities to conform to societal norms, this analysis highlights the inherent demand for transformation within both narratives. It critiques the underlying ideologies of the Medical Model while advocating for a broader understanding of identity and capability. Ultimately, this paper argues that both *Pygmalion* and the Medical Model reflect societal pressures to redefine and normalize individuals, urging a re-examination of how we perceive and respond to disability in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Normalization, Analogy, Medical Model, Transformation.

"Pygmalion's Paradox: The Medical Model and the Limitations of Expectation"

Introduction

The protagonist Eliza's journey in Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* offers a compelling lens through which to examine the Medical Model of Disability. This model, prevalent in many societies, conceptualizes disability as an individual defect or impairment that requires correction or treatment. Eliza's transformation from a flower girl to a lady mirrors this perspective, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of the medical model.

By analyzing Eliza's experience, we can explore how the medical model views disability as an individual problem to be solved while also recognizing the broader social and cultural factors that influence perceptions of disability.

In this paper, I would like to establish an analogy between Pygmalion and the Medical Model of Disability. The medical model of disability is one of the models of disability in disability studies. Among them, the medical model, social model, charity model, etc., are famous. The medical model of disability is opposite to the social model of disability, and both have two different foundational ideologies as bases. The academic discipline of Disability Studies stands against the Medical model and in support of the social model.

Bernard Shaw is an Irish playwright and critic known for his witty dialogue, social commentary, and unconventional characters. Shaw's contributions to literature and social thought earned him widespread recognition and numerous awards. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925. His plays continue to be performed and studied around the world; his works, such as Pygmalion, Man and Superman, and Saint Joan, continue to be celebrated for their intellectual depth and enduring relevance.

Among these, Pygmalion stands out as a classic play that delves into themes of social class, personal transformation, and the transformative power of education, showcasing Shaw's keen insight into societal norms and individual identity.

Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* centres on the transformation of Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower seller with a strong accent. Professor Henry Higgins, a renowned phonetician, bets that he can transform Eliza into a lady of society by teaching her proper speech and manners.

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Initially, Eliza is a rough, uneducated girl with a distinct Cockney accent. She is often mocked and ridiculed for her speech. Her life is marked by poverty and hardship. When Higgins takes her under his wing, he subjects her to rigorous language training, forcing her to practice speaking with proper pronunciation and intonation. Eliza initially resists, but gradually, she begins to adapt to her new life. She learns to dress elegantly, dance gracefully, and converse politely.

Eliza's transformation is not without its challenges. She struggles to reconcile her old life with her new one, often feeling out of place and insecure. However, she perseveres, driven by her desire to escape her past and achieve a better life.

The play reaches its climax at a grand ball, where Eliza is presented to society. She impresses everyone with her refined appearance and impeccable manners. However, Higgins's arrogance leads him to believe that he has completely transformed Eliza, ignoring her feelings and individuality. Eliza ultimately asserts her independence and refuses to be treated as a mere experiment. She leaves Higgins, proving that she has not only learned proper speech but also gained self-respect and confidence.

The play ends with Eliza's future uncertain, but the audience is left with the hope that she will find happiness and fulfilment on her terms.

Pygmalion remains relevant today due to its exploration of timeless themes such as social class, personal transformation, the power of education, and the dangers of arrogance. The play's powerful message of personal growth, social justice, and the importance of individuality continues to resonate with audiences of all ages, making it a classic that transcends time.

Studying *Pygmalion* through the lens of Disability Studies highlights two central themes: the concept of ideal or “normalcy” and the process of metamorphosis or transformation. Within the play, "normalcy" is represented by Eliza's transformation into a woman who speaks refined English and displays upper-class attire and behaviour, essentially mimicking the traits of the upper class. This standard mirrors societal expectations to conform to idealized norms, much like the Medical Model of Disability, which prescribes treatments to transform individuals to fit into what is considered “able-bodied” or typical.

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Exploring *Pygmalion* alongside the Medical Model in this way reveals how each narrative imposes a strict definition of normalcy, underscoring the pressures to align with socially constructed ideals rather than embracing individual differences. This analogy provides valuable insight into how societal standards impact identity and inclusion.

Title-Pygmalion and the Pursuit of the Ideal Body and Beauty

Pygmalion takes its name from the renowned tale found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this story, Pygmalion, disheartened by the immoral and disgraceful behaviour of the women of his time, opts to live a solitary and celibate life. Through his remarkable artistry, he crafts a stunning statue that surpasses the beauty of any living woman. His affection for the statue deepens as he gazes at her more frequently, leading him to wish for her to be more than just a sculpture. This statue is known as Galatea. Overcome with yearning, Pygmalion visits the temple of the goddess Venus and implores her to grant him a partner like his creation; moved by his devotion, Venus animates Galatea. Upon returning from the temple and kissing the statue, Pygmalion overjoy to discover that she feels warm and soft.

Pygmalion has been pass down from the popular myth in Ovid's literary text to George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. Even after many ages, the concept of transformation continues to be pass down through generations. Today, the term "Pygmalion" is closely linked to the idea of transformation or the need for transformation.

In the original myth attributed to Ovid, Pygmalion is a sculptor who creates a statue named Galatea, which he falls in love with. This statue is eventually brought to life by the goddess Aphrodite, showcasing themes of idealization and transformation from an inanimate to a living entity(“Pygmalion”)

Shaw acknowledged through his chosen title for the play that the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea was, of course, found most readily in Book X of Ovid’s Metamorphose. As Ovid put it, Pygmalion, 'horrified/At all his countless vice nature gives/To womankind', decided to sculpt his ideal female out of ivory, and promptly fell in love with it. He caressed the statue, kissed it , dressed it ,spoke to it and gave it gigrts finally praying Venus that it be given life. His prayer granted, Pygmalion’s lips ‘ pressed real lips, and she,his girl,/Felt every kiss, and blushed,and shyly raised/Her eyes to his and saw the world and him'. Venus further ‘graced the union she had made,/ And when nine times the crescent moon had filled/Her silver orb,an infant girl was born…’

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Shaw wanted the readers and the audiences to make the obvious connection with the myth; his aim was then to subvert rather than to fulfil their expectations; what he discovered, however, is that they preferred fulfilment to subversion and interpreted the play accordingly, ie. Higgins(Pygmalion) wins hisGalatea (Eliza)
("Introduction, Pygmalion" 33)

So, Shaw purposefully gives this Intertextual reference to make the connection between Pygmalion and Higgins, Galtea and Eliza.

The myth underpinning the title suggests a search for ideal human beauty—one that embodies perfection. The concept of ideal beauty, as often portrayed in mythology and art, perpetuates a notion of perfection that is unattainable and, arguably, undesirable. This ideal, characterized by flawless features, perfect proportions, and divine attributes, has been the subject of fascination and aspiration throughout history. However, it is essential to recognize that such perfection is a mere myth, a construct of the human imagination. Lennard Davis aligns with this perspective, arguing that the concept of an ideal suggests that the human body, as depicted in art or imagined, must be crafted from idealized parts of actual models. However, these models, individually, cannot embody this ideal because, by its nature, an ideal cannot exist in the real world—only within mythology. For example, figures like Venus or Helen of Troy embody this mythical perfection. Classical painting and sculpture also perpetuate this idealization of the human body. In *The Beautiful Women of Crotona* by François-André Vincent, the artist assembles a range of women to select each one's most beautiful feature, aiming to combine these into a singular, idealized form representing Aphrodite. By definition, however, a truly "ideal" body remains an impossibility, a concept that serves more as a mythic or artistic pursuit rather than a real human attribute.

Transformation and the Pursuit of Normalcy

Transformation is pervasive theme in fairy tales, fantasy stories, and other popular narratives. This transformation often involves a shift from an "abnormal" or marginalized state to a more socially accepted or "normal" one. In essence, these stories chronicle journeys from social exclusion to inclusion.

A prime example is the classic tale of *Beauty and the Beast*. The Beast, initially perceived as monstrous and repulsive, undergoes a profound transformation. However, this transformation is not merely physical but primarily a shift in his character. The Beast evolves from a solitary,

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fearsome creature to a compassionate, loving individual. This journey mirrors the broader narrative of overcoming societal prejudices and embracing acceptance.

Interestingly, many protagonists in such stories receive assistance from supporting characters. These figures often play crucial roles in facilitating the transformation, offering guidance, companionship, or even magical aid. This collaborative aspect underscores the idea that personal growth and transformation are often facilitated by social connections and support.

In *Pygmalion*, Bernard Shaw explores the theme of transformation and the societal pressure to conform to an idealized standard of appearance and behaviour. The play's protagonist, Eliza Doolittle, undergoes a transformation that emphasizes and enforces the concept of a "perfect" body and refined social conduct, showcasing the pressures of normalization. Dr Henry Higgins, who leads Eliza's transformation, views her in her original state as flawed or "in need of improvement," pushing her toward an upper-class appearance and demeanour that society deems acceptable.

Analogy of Medical Model and Pygmalion

An analogy is a literary technique that compares two unrelated objects based on shared qualities. By drawing parallels between different things, an analogy helps to clarify ideas or strengthen arguments through relatable comparisons. Unlike similes or metaphors, which are figures of speech, analogies are potent rhetorical devices that provide more extensive reasoning, creating deeper connections between seemingly unrelated concepts.

Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, a classic drama, serves as an analogy for transformation, telling the story of an ordinary flower girl who becomes a "lady" through changes in attire, social behaviour, phonetics, and language. This metamorphosis not only reflects societal expectations but also parallels concepts within the Medical Model of Disability, highlighting how identity is shaped by external perceptions and norms. Just as Eliza Doolittle's outward changes lead to her redefinition, the play prompts us to consider the implications of societal constructs on individual identity and the broader understanding of disability.

The Medical Model of Disability similarly emphasizes transformation, seeking to "normalize" disabled individuals by advocating for treatment or a "cure" to make them more aligned with non-disabled standards. This model views disability as an individual flaw that must be corrected rather than as a condition shaped by social or environmental factors. In this sense,

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the Medical Model of Disability demands transformation, seeking to “cure” or adapt individuals to fit within typical standards of ability.

The theme of transformation in *Pygmalion* aligns with the core premise of the Medical Model of Disability, establishing an analogy between both: each advocate for conformity to an idealized version of "normal" through transformation. Both push individuals toward an imposed standard, illuminating the societal tendency to value uniformity over individual diversity.

People with physical disabilities started referring to their medical treatments as part of the medical model of disability because the typical goal of these treatments was normalization of their torsos and limbs (Zola 1983).

Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that examines disability as a complex social, cultural, political, and historical phenomenon rather than solely as a medical or biological condition. Emerging in the late 20th century, Disability Studies challenges traditional perspectives by focusing on how societies construct disability and shape the experiences of disabled individuals. Scholars in this field analyze how social structures, policies, media, and language contribute to the stigmatization, marginalization, and exclusion of disabled people.

Disability Studies is an emerging academic discipline that focuses on the concept of disability as a social and cultural construct rather than as a purely medical issue. According to Disability Studies, disability is shaped by societal and cultural factors, challenging the notion that disability is solely an individual's medical problem.

Central to Disability Studies is the distinction between the *medical model* and the *social model* of disability. The Medical Model treats disability as a deficiency or medical issue that needs to be "fixed" or cured, while the Social Model views disability as a social construct shaped by barriers in the environment, attitudes, and systemic factors. This shift from individual "impairment" to societal responsibility has been transformative, emphasizing access, inclusion, and the rights of disabled individuals.

The field encompasses diverse areas such as literature, sociology, education, law, and health studies, often intersecting with other social justice disciplines like gender studies, critical race

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studies, and queer theory. Disability Studies encourages rethinking societal norms, advocating for policies and practices that promote accessibility, equity, and a broader understanding of human diversity.

The Medical Model of Disability, one of the earliest frameworks for understanding disability, emerged from traditional medical perspectives that define disability as an individual's physical or mental impairment. In this model, disability is viewed primarily as a problem within the person, requiring medical treatment, therapy, or rehabilitation to "fix" or "cure" the condition so the person can function within society's established norms.
The core aim of the medical model since at least the 1800s has been to sort people into abnormal and normal categories, with abnormal status denying access to societal resources, curtailing life opportunities, and stripping the individual of power and agency (Baynton 2013; Barton 2018; Drake 2018; Riddell 2018). Large-scale institutionalization of the disabled in decrepit and abusive facilities acted to remove the disabled from society and to reinforce their abnormality (Blatt and Kaplan 1966; Rivera 1972). (Zaks, Zosia,2023)

This approach focuses on individual diagnosis and often emphasizes deficits, viewing disability as a deviation from an assumed standard of normalcy.

"The medical model of disability is one rooted in an undue emphasis on clinical diagnosis, the very nature of which is destined to lead to a partial and inhibiting view of the disabled individual"(173)

In contrast, the Social Model of Disability, which emerged in the late 20th century through disability rights activism, shifts the focus from the individual to society. Rather than seeing disability as an inherent flaw, this model argues that disability is created by social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers that restrict people with impairments. The Social Model posits that societal structures, such as inaccessible architecture, discriminatory attitudes, and lack of support services, are the real disabling factors, not the physical or cognitive impairment itself.

These two models present fundamentally different understandings of disability. While the Medical Model centres on individual "correction" to conform to societal expectations, the Social Model advocates for societal adaptation to accommodate diverse bodies and minds, promoting inclusion and accessibility. The contrast between these models has been

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instrumental in Disability Studies, which generally supports the Social Model's perspective of disability as a social construct shaped by collective, rather than individual, responsibility.

The term 'medical model of disability' was coined by a psychiatrist, Dr Szasz, in the mid-1950s to critique the emerging psychiatric practice of defining mental conditions as illnesses and treating these new 'diseases' with medications (Hogan 2019a).

The demand for transformation advocated in the play *Pygmalion* and in the myth of Pygmalion aligns with the same expectation promoted by the Medical Model of Disability. Unlike the Social Model of Disability, which views disability as a product of social constructs, the Medical Model seeks to "cure" the individual, focusing on changing the person to fit societal norms rather than adapting society to accommodate diversity. Higgins's first impression of the flower girl portrayed in the first Act as :

> Note Taker: You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in gutter to the end of her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassodor's party. I could even get her a place as lady's maid or shop assistant, which requires better English —--
>
> The Flower Girl: what would you say?
>
> Note Taker: yes you, squashed Cabbage leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns you incarnate indult to the English language: I could pass you off as the Queen of Sheba.
> (Page 20, Act 1)

In this passage, *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins, referred to here as the Note Taker, addresses Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl, with dismissive and degrading language, calling her a "creature" and a "squashed cabbage leaf." Higgins' choice of words reflects his low opinion of Eliza's social standing and speech, which he views as unrefined and improper. By describing her English as "kerbstone English" that will "keep her in the gutter," Higgins suggests that her dialect and lack of polished language skills confine her to a life of poverty and limitation, defining her value and potential according to the standards of upper-class society.

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Simon Brisenden states that the 'facts' may lead only to distortion and misunderstanding and to a view of disabled people as a category of rejects, as people flawed in some aspect of their humanity. (Brisenden, 1986)

Higgins' bold claim that he could transform her from this "disgrace" to someone fit to attend an ambassador's party reflects his confidence in his abilities, but it also reveals his perception of transformation as a way of elevating her worth and social status. His comparison of Eliza to the "Queen of Sheba" exaggerates the potential he believes he can unlock in her through linguistic refinement, positioning himself as the architect of her social rebirth.

This language of transformation speaks to the play's central theme: the way society values individuals based on external factors like appearance, language, and behaviour rather than intrinsic worth. Higgins' remarks also mirror the ethos of the Medical Model of Disability, which prescribes conformity to socially accepted norms. Here, as in the Medical Model, Higgins believes that Eliza's value depends on her transformation to fit the upper-class ideal. This concept sets the stage to critique how rigid societal standards affect personal identity and autonomy.

In both instances of transformation, the primary objective is *normalization.* In *Pygmalion*, the shift involves the transformation of a lower-class girl into one who exhibits the behaviour and mannerisms of the upper class, moving from the Cockney dialect to refined English. This transformation pursue under the guidance of Dr. Higgins, who is fundamentally interested in the process of normalization. In the opening scene, as he stands in a public space observing the crowd, he pays particular attention to the girl not because she is one among many but because he perceives her as distinctly "other"—someone who stands out as "abnormal" and therefore in need of transformation. This initial recognition of her difference becomes the impetus for his project to reshape her into what he views as an ideal, normalized form.

Abnormality is viewed as an inferior state best avoided at all costs (Peters 2018). Training disabled people to move, speak, think, behave, and interact in ways deemed normal became the urgent goal of therapy, rehabilitation, and medical care (Hayes and Hannold 2007; Safilios-Rothschild 1970). Normalization in therapeutic and health care settings continues despite negative consequences for a disabled person's self-esteem and mental health (Kirkham 2017)

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The major part of Pygmalion is all about Eliza's transformation process, and by the end, after her change into something desirable,

> Liza: I know I am not blaming him. It is his way, isnt it? But it
> made such a difference to me that up didn't do it. You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick(the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on.) , the difference between a lady and flower girl is not 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, beacuse you always treat me as a lady , and always will.
> 115

Eliza's transformation in Pygmalion offers a compelling lens through which to examine the social model of disability. While her physical appearance changes dramatically, her ultimate understanding that perception holds greater significance than the transformation itself aligns with the core tenets of the social model.

The social model of disability posits that disability is not solely a medical condition but rather a product of societal barriers and attitudes. It emphasizes the importance of societal structures and norms in shaping the experiences of individuals with impairments. In Eliza's case, even after her physical transformation, she continues to encounter societal obstacles and prejudices, demonstrating that disability is not merely a matter of physical ability but also a social construct.

By the end of the play, Eliza recognizes that true acceptance and empowerment lie in challenging societal expectations and embracing her individuality. This realization underscores the significance of societal change in promoting inclusion and challenging ableist norms. Eliza's journey, therefore, serves as a powerful illustration of the social model of disability, highlighting the complex interplay between individual identity, societal perceptions, and the broader socio-political context.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the play also reflects elements of the medical model of disability. Professor Higgins's approach to Eliza's transformation echoes the medical model's focus on individual deficits and the need for correction or cure. His belief that he can "improve"

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Eliza through linguistic and behavioural training aligns with the medical model's emphasis on fixing impairments to achieve normalcy.

This juxtaposition of the social and medical models in *Pygmalion* invites us to consider the limitations of both approaches. While the social model rightly critiques societal barriers, it may sometimes overlook the impact of individual impairments. Conversely, the medical model, while acknowledging individual needs, can perpetuate a narrow focus on disability as a medical problem, neglecting the broader social context.

In Pygmalion, after Eliza's transformation, she reflects on how society defines "acceptable" identities, echoing Lennard J. Davis's argument that disability is socially constructed by the imposition of normalcy. Eliza recognizes that society only values her once she conforms to its standards, revealing how rigid social expectations define worth and capability.

In 'Constructing Normalcy,' *Enforcing Normalcy* by Lennard J. Davis focuses on how disability is constructed by constructing normalcy.

He says we should focus on the construction of Normalcy, not on the construction of disability. Because he propounds: "The 'Problem' is not the person with the disabilities, the problem is the way that normalcy constructed to create 'the problem of the disabled person' " (24)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Eliza Doolittle's journey in Pygmalion provides us with a profound lens through which to view the Medical Model of Disability. As we witness her transformation from a flower girl to a refined lady, we see how this model often reduces disability to a personal flaw that needs fixing. Yet, Eliza's story reveals much more—it highlights the societal pressures and cultural expectations that shape our perceptions of who is deemed "acceptable" or "normal."

By drawing parallels between Eliza's experiences and the Medical Model, we recognize that while it focuses on individual deficits, it often overlooks the broader social factors contributing to our understanding of disability. This contrasts sharply with the Social Model, which urges us to examine the barriers and prejudices that individuals face in society.

Through Eliza's transformation, we are invited to reflect on our views and assumptions about disability. Her story reminds us that everyone deserves the chance to define their identity on

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

their terms, free from the constraints imposed by societal norms. Ultimately, exploring these different models encourages us to advocate for a world that accepts diversity and celebrates it, fostering a more inclusive society for everyone.

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