

THE CREATION-CREATOR RELATIONSHIP IN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW’S *PYGMALION*

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ABSTRACT: LIKE MANY OF THE RETELLINGS OF THE PYGMALION MYTH, GEORGE BERNARD SHAW’S PLAY DEALS WITH THE SUBJECT OF THE RELATION BETWEEN THE CREATOR AND HIS CREATION AND IT SHOWS HOW THE RELATIONSHIP IS DIFFERENT, YET BASED ON THE SAME MYTH. THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW’S PLAY AND THE ORIGINAL MYTH IS THAT ELIZA IS ALREADY ALIVE FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, HIGGINS NOT CREATING LIFE BUT REMOLDING A WOMAN INTO A DIFFERENT SOCIAL CLASS. THUS, TRANSFORMATION IS PROBABLY THE MAIN THEME OF THE PLAY AND ELIZA’S TRANSFORMATION IS CENTRAL TO IT. WHAT ELIZA FINALLY GAINS IS NOT ONLY EDUCATION, A NEW SPEECH, NEW MANNERS, ELOQUENCE BUT ALSO FINAL INDEPENDENCE FROM HER MENTOR.

KEY-WORDS: CREATION, MYTH, CREATOR, TRANSFORMATION, SOCIAL CLASS

1. INTRODUCTION :MYTH AND PLAY

The story of Pygmalion and the Statue belongs to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book 10 and was written in A.D.10. According to Ovid’s version, a sculpture named Pygmalion, disgusted by the behavior of the local prostitutes creates a sculpture of the ideal woman with whom he falls in love. Because of his love for her he prays to Aphrodite (Venus) to give her life and his wish comes true. Pygmalion marries the woman and they have a daughter, Paphos. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the statue is nameless and it seems that it was The French writer Themiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe de Cordonnier the first to use the name Galatea. However, Galatea as the name of the statue became widely known in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s popular *Pygmalion*. (1762)

In the same period, Johan Jakob Bodmer wrote a poem entitled *Pygmalion und Elise* (1747) in which he referred to the statue as Elise and it is possible that Shaw inspired from him for the name Eliza in his play.

Geoffrey Miles states that “Ovid is the inevitable starting-point for any discussions of Pygmalion....Ovid’s is the oldest version we have, the only substantive ancient version, as the source of all subsequent versions. Indeed, the story as we have it may be essentially his invention- a literary creation rather than a genuine myth.” [1:332]

It is interesting to point out the extent to which Shaw’s *Pygmalion* is based on Ovid’s tale. For Joshua Essaka, “The links between the two are at once both obvious and tenuous: obvious, because they both share the theme of the transformation of a person; tenuous, because Shaw’s play does not contain, except metaphorically, any of the key

episodes of Ovid’s tale. Shaw has no statue, no sculptor, no island, no supernatural vivification, and no marriage between the two protagonists[2: 97]

Charles Berst invokes elements of the Cinderella tale arguing that”although Pygmalion absorbs much of the romantic nimbus of the Cinderella tale, it converts the legend to its own artistic ends. The incidents are jumbled chronologically, reapportioned, changed in context, and they involve variant emotions and significance.” [3:.201)

2. GEORGE BERNARD SHAW’S *PYGMALION* –A ROMANCE?

Shaw wrote the play in the spring of 1912 and it premiered at the Hofburg Theatre in Vienna on October 16, 1913 in a German translation by Siegfried Trebitsch. Its first New York production was in March 24, 1914 at Irving Place Theatre and it opened in London in April 11, 1914.

The play was subtitled “A Romance” and in a prose sequel to *Pygmalion* from 1916 Shaw clarified the term by saying that his play was a “romance” in the sense that “the transfiguration it records seems exceedingly improbable” [4:191]

As David Macey notes the term “romance” was defined as “describing improbable events in highly –blown language” in the late eighteenth century and was differentiated from the “broadly realist terms” that defined the novel but, as he goes on, “later usage has been strongly influenced by the shifting semantics of the word “romantic” once used to designate a poetic tradition but increasingly synonymous with “romantic Love”[5:334]

David Macey goes on to state that ”in contemporary usage ,”romance” can be defined as a subgenre of popular fiction written primarily for a female audience, dealing with the emotional tribulations of a heroine, usually beautiful and virginal, and ending with her marriage to a hero who initially spurns her. The classic romance plot traces the transformation of the hero from a distant, insensitive figure who is coldly superior to the heroine, into her tender lover...[The] goal of the narrative is always monogamous, heterosexual marriage[5:334]

But it is obvious that G.B.Shaw did not want his audience to think that *Pygmalion* was a “romance” in this usage of the term “Don’t talk to me of romances. I was sent into the world expressly to dance on them with thick boots-to shatter, stab and murder them “(As Lisa S.Starks observes, “Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, a parody of romance, deliberately refuses potential audience desire for a happy romantic ending in which Higgins is reunited with his “creation” .Such an ending contradicts Shaw’s logic in *Pygmalion*, primarily because his Eliza exceeds the role of Galatea in the myth”.[6:44-45]

3. CREATOR AND HIS CREATION

Shaw’s working title of the play was in fact *The Phonetic Play* and the subject of phonetics is relevant for the play as the plot itself shows: phonetician Henry Higgins teaches Cockney flower seller Eliza Doolittle to speak English like a duchess. But Shaw uses phonetics to address the wider issue of the relationship between speech and class, and Eliza as a fast learner of upper-class English accedes to a new “social milieu”.

Shaw mentioned that the character of Professor Henry Higgins was inspired by several British professor of phonetics: Alexander Melville Bell, Alexander J. Ellis, Tito Pagliardini, but above all, Henry Sweet. Henry Higgins sarcastically offers Eliza to “learn how to speak beautifully, like a lady in a florist’s shop at the end of six month you shall go to Buckingham Palace in a carriage, beautifully dressed. ”Colonel Pickering proposes a

bet: he will pay for Eliza’s new clothes and English lessons if Higgins can make a lady out of her in six months.

Like many of the retellings of the Pygmalion myth, George Bernard Shaw’s play deals with the subject of the relation between the creator and his creation and it shows how the relationship is different, yet based on the same myth. The main difference between George Bernard Shaw’s play and the original myth is that Eliza is already alive from the very beginning, Higgins not creating life but remolding a woman into a different social class. Another difference is that Eliza and Higgins do not have a romantic relationship in spite of the fact that Higgins has become “accustomed to her face”. Eliza becomes angry with Higgins for taking all of the credit because she feels she put a huge effort into becoming a lady.

Louis Crompton emphasized Higgins’s complexity: ”He is at once a tyrannical bully and a charmer, an impish schoolboy, and a flamboyant wooer of souls, a scientist with a wildly extravagant imagination and a man so blind to the nature of his own personality that he thinks of himself as timid, modest and difficult. Like Caesar in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, he is part god and part brute; but unlike Caesar, he cannot boast that he has “Nothing of man” in him.”[7: 146-147]

Higgins’ misogyny precludes any successful romantic relationship with a woman but his complexity does not overshadow Eliza. Her transformation is not only linguistical, it is also in terms of acquiring articulateness, confidence and sophistication.

If we consider Miriam Dixson’s definition of misogyny as [involving]...conscious and unconscious negative feelings about and attitudes towards women[and ranging] from a vague uneasiness and desire not to be with them more than absolutely necessary, through dislike, to contempt, hostility and hate(p300), Higgins’ misogyny is obvious. He idealises his mother: ”My idea of a lovable woman is something as like you as possible”, he tells Mrs. Higgins (p 143) but he considers all women under the age of forty-five “idiots”[8: 143]

4. ELIZA’S TRANSFORMATION

According to more recent criticism, there is a thematic richness in Shaw’s Pygmalion: its concerns with class distinctions, independence and transformation. As Jean Reynolds observes in her 1994 essay Eliza experiences “a powerful transformation that frees her from the prison of her former existence and[her] victory is only part of Shaw’s purpose...Shaw’s artistic intention is to unite Higgins and Eliza, although not in the wedding ceremony that many theatregoers have wished for. Having unwittingly declared war on the ‘old speech’ at the foundation of [British class structure, the two are co-conspirators in an assault upon the British establishment. [9:212]

Transformation is probably the main theme of the play and Eliza’s transformation is central to it. What Eliza gains is not only education, a new speech, new manners, eloquence but also final independence from her mentor. In terms of this transformation, Charles Berst argues that: ”Eliza’s soul grows by degrees, not just at the end. Ostensibly, the lessons and examples of the numerous mentors provide the basis for growth. These Eliza absorbs in terms of her vitality and talent, her own essential qualities without which the lessons would prove futile and the transformation hopeless. She emerges as a synthesis of her education, her environment and her special abilities, her incipient genius flowering

in the broader horizons which are offered her by the relative sophistication and freedom of the upper classes” [10:204)

Gibbs notes that “Shaw had written a play he thought was about, among other things, a young woman finally emancipating herself from the domination of her male mentor. In his view it was a play not about the growth of love between master and pupil, but about the pupil’s regaining, through struggle, her independent identity”[11: 332-333]

For a number of commentators Eliza’s transformation into an increasingly assertive human being is similar to that of Nora Helmer in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, her departure from Higgins at the end of the play resembling Nora’s slamming the door in her own transformation and independence from an oppressive husband.

Eliza started off as a common flower seller and ended up as a duchess because at the end, just because the way she spoke and the clothes she wore, she was automatically seen as upper class. It means that that Eliza’s status was affected by her birth, environment and speech and she was judged differently by other people just in the time of six months.

George Bernard Shaw’s play addresses the old idea of the individual’s capability to advance through society, Eliza being accompanied in her rise from their social class by her drunken father Alfred P.Doolittle. Shaw seems to use his characters to demonstrate the necessity of human evolution. The play also addresses “middle class morality” and upper-class superficiality, the social ills of nineteenth century England and induces the idea that all people are worthy of respect and dignity, from the wealthy nobleman to the beggar on the street corner. Eliza has a very strong character and she does her best to stand up to patronizing Higgins.

5. CONCLUSIONS:

In George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*, a modern variant of the myth, the flower girl is transformed into a lady by her “creator”. Education and language are the forces through which Shaw’s Galatea, Eliza Doolittle is animated. Throughout this process Eliza is constantly humiliated by her educator so there can be no affection between creator and his creation. In the end Pygmalion’s domination is overcome by his creation’s assertion of freedom and independence, Eliza’s metamorphosis being obvious.

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