

## “PYGMALION IN MYTH AND DRAMA”

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### ABSTRACT

Myth is an important branch of knowledge. Myths are untrue stories that include supernatural powers, extraordinary events, stories about the existence of the world, the creation of gods and goddesses, and the creation of Man. Greek myths represent an essential part of Greek civilization and Greek history. Despite the fact that these myths are imaginary and untrue, they portray the way of life, the religion, the history, and the culture of ancient Greeks. Greek mythology differs from other kinds of mythology, for it reveals the true value of Man as a supreme creature. It is also acknowledged for its humanization. Even Greek deities are humanized, given the shape and qualities, but not the abilities, of Man.

Mythology represents an important part of classical literature. It has been exploited in modern English drama. In his play **Pygmalion**, Bernard Shaw borrows the ancient Greek myth of the Greek sculptor Pygmalion, which appears in Ovid's book **Metamorphoses**. He makes use of the beautiful romance of Pygmalion and Galatea and turns the myth upside down, by using his distinctively ironic and witty style. His play transforms the myth into an anti-Romantic comedy, whose end shakes the audience's anticipations. In the Greek myth, Pygmalion, the Romantic artist of Cyprus, sculpts an ivory statue of a woman whom he calls Galatea. He falls in love with his creation, and prays to Venus, the goddess of love, to grant her life. Venus answers his prayers. In **Pygmalion**, Shaw turns the Romantic sculptor into a rude phonetician, Henry Higgins. The love story of Pygmalion and Galatea, blessed by the goddess of love herself, is transformed in Shaw's play into a casual experiment between Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle. By turning the myth upside down, Shaw fulfills his aim of belittling his characters by adding some realistic details. Moreover, he finds an opportunity to attack Romanticism and introduce his own ideas and beliefs. As **Pygmalion** is regarded one of the most popular among Shaw's plays, and as it includes some pleasant and entertaining events, it also presents an important lesson; namely, that one should not toy with the life of others. In this play, Shaw affirms that by Art only, one can attain one's aspirations and be immortalized. Pygmalion, or Higgins, or Shaw will be made immortal by their art.

Bernard Shaw was a dramatist, who aimed at criticizing society, for the purpose of reforming it. In this respect, he strongly believed that, through writing plays, he could criticize, teach, and reform. Thus, he employed the myth of Pygmalion, which appears in the tenth book of Ovid's **Metamorphoses** to fulfill his aim. (1)

In Ovid's book, Pygmalion was a Greek sculptor from Cyprus, who abhorred all women because of their loose behavior. Therefore, he refused to marry and concentrated only on his art. One day, he carved a statue of a woman from ivory in order to create his own ideal woman. His art was perfect, and the statue looked as a real and very beautiful woman. As a result, he fell in love with his statue, giving her the name of Galatea, and bringing her jewels, clothes, and birds:

Art hid with art, so well perform'd the cheat,  
It caught the carver with his own deceit:  
He knows 'tis madness, yet he must adore,  
And still the more he knows it, loves the more:  
The flesh, or what so seems, he touches oft,  
Which feels so smooth, that he believed it soft. (2)

At the feast of Venus (Aphrodite), the goddess of love, Pygmalion went to her temple and prayed in front of the altar: "Give me the likeness of my ivory maid."

(3) Fortunately, Venus was present at that moment and heard the prayers. So, she decided to answer them immediately, when she realized that he was a true lover.

She rewarded him by giving the divine spark of life to his statue. As a consequence, Pygmalion returned home to his Galatea and kissed her white lips.

Unexpectedly, her lips reddened, and she opened her eyes for the first time. The statue was transformed into a real woman, and he married her with the blessing of Venus. (4)

In the year (1912), Bernard Shaw wrote his play **Pygmalion**, which was first performed at the Hofburg Theatre, Vienna, in (1913), and then at His Majesty's Theatre, England, in (1914). He was not only the author of the play, but also the producer, giving the role of Eliza Doolittle to Mrs. Patrick Campbell. (5)

The structure of the play is elegant and well-organized, divided classically into five acts. The title of the play affirms the mythological background of the story.

However, the name of Pygmalion is a Greek name, probably going back to Phoenician roots. (6)

Bernard Shaw calls his play a 'romance', so he deceives the readers as well as the audience, and directs their expectations towards the wrong course. The word

‘romance’ suggests that the two protagonists of the play, i.e. Henry Higgins, a phonetician at Oxford University, and Eliza Doolittle, a flower-girl, will get married and live happily ever after. But the use of the word ‘romance’ here is misleading, as the play ends unexpectedly. In this respect, Shaw affirms his anti-Romanticism. By returning to Dublin, to the years of his childhood and boyhood, it is obvious that he was brought up in a house empty of love or human warmth, due to the critical relationship between his parents. Carl Gustav Jung (1875 – 1961) argued once: “Perhaps Shaw had never been in love?” (7) Of course, Shaw had several love relationships, especially with Mrs. Patrick Campbell, but he remained “a Peter Pan who had managed to evade real experiences”. (8) His art was the most important element in his life, an aspect that he assuredly admired in the character of Pygmalion, and helped him to create his own Pygmalion, i.e. Henry Higgins.

Shaw’s play begins when a group of people meet accidentally on a rainy night. Professor Henry Higgins, a phonetician, bets Colonel Pickering, a linguist of Indian dialects, that he can transform Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower-girl, into a duchess, by teaching her phonetics and grammar, in a matter of six months.

At Higgins’ house, Alfred Doolittle, Eliza’s father, does not accept the idea until he receives five pounds. While Higgins intends to teach Eliza how to speak English properly, Colonel Pickering offers financial support for the experiment. The act of transforming Eliza into a duchess is no more than an experiment or a scientific project for Higgins, as he illustrates to Mrs. Higgins, his mother, and to Pickering: “Yes, by George: it’s the most absorbing experiment I ever tackled”. (9)

Higgins is a rude bully. Thus, his character differs from Pygmalion’s personality. The former is a practical scientist, whereas the latter was a passionate artist. Mrs. Higgins frequently criticizes her son’s rude nature, as she addresses him:” But you mustn’t. I am serious, Henry. You often offend all my friends: they stopped coming whenever they meet.” (p.25) On the other hand, Pygmalion was a sculptor, who despised all women, and concentrated on the art of sculpture, which brought him happiness and satisfaction. The modern Pygmalion, Higgins, also treats women indifferently, and focuses on teaching phonetics. Higgins manifests his views on women to Pickering thus:

I find that the moment I let a woman make friends with me, she

becomes jealous, exacting, suspicious, and a damned nuisance.

Women upset everything. When you let them into your life,  
you find that the woman is driving at one thing and youre driving  
at another. (p.35)

To return to Eliza Doolittle, the poor, but honourable flower-girl, she is dressed and taught very well. After several months, she is introduced at a garden party, and looks like a real duchess, as Pickering tells Higgins:

Well, I feel a bit tired. It's been a long day. The garden party, a  
dinner party, and the reception! Rather too much of a good  
thing. But youve won your bet, Higgins. Eliza did the trick, and  
something to spare, eh? (p.73)

The theme of transformation prevails in Ovid's **Metamorphoses** as well as in Shaw's play. In this respect, Pygmalion sculpted an ivory statue. So, he was able to create the external form only, while Venus helped him by creating Galatea internally, by giving her the breath of life. Pygmalion's love for Galatea and his deep faith in Venus, enabled him to get the woman of his dreams. On the other hand, the transformation in Shaw's play is gradual, for Eliza passes through the first step of transformation when she begins to act like a doll, by following Higgins' orders. As a result, the latter succeeds in transforming Eliza externally, like Pygmalion. At this point precisely, Shaw begins twisting the ancient myth, as "[h]e delighted to take familiar situations and ideas and turn them upside down or back to front so that they might be seen from a different angle." (10)

The second step of Eliza's transformation happens when she rebels against Higgins, because she is fully aware of her perfect transformation from a flower-girl into a doll-like woman, and then into a perfectly independent woman. The moment of her rebellion represents a sharp climax in the play, when she assures Higgins: "But I can do without you: dont think I cant." (p.98) Eliza attains her freedom and independence only when she realizes, after the party, that Higgins treats her cruelly and indifferently, without any regard for her feelings, as he addresses her: "How

the devil do I know whats to become of you? What does it matter what becomes of you?” (p.75) Here Higgins affirms to Eliza that he cares for the success of his experiment only, a factor that increases her anger, and keeps her questioning about her future: “What I am fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? Whats to become of me?” (p.76) It seems that Higgins becomes like a statue, like Pygmalion’s statue, which does not feel or care about anything, as he “knows more, and cares more, about sounds than about people”. (11) While Higgins becomes a non-human statue, full of cruelty and indifference, Eliza is transformed into a perfect human being.

An important goal for Shaw was that he wanted his audience to recognize Eliza’s transformation into a woman, in addition to her change into a ‘duchess’: “It is easier to accept the myth which transforms the flower-girl into the reigning beauty and to concentrate on the scientific apparatus of phonetics, and ignore the other more difficult transformation – the creation of a free and independent spirit.” (12) The human being is important for Shaw, when proving Eliza as an active individual in society, and making her win the battle of life with an iron will, as she assures Higgins: “I’ll go and be a teacher. You cant take away the knowledge you gave me.” (p.103)

Colonel Pickering plays a significant role in the play and in Eliza’s life. Unlike Higgins, who treats her arrogantly, Pickering treats her kindly. He helps her in discovering herself as a free individual and, with kind treatment, he enables her to recognize her worth and self-esteem, as she declares to Pickering in Mrs. Higgins’ house:

You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the the difference between a lady and a flower-girl is not how she behaves, but how she is 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 you always treat me as a lady, and always will. (p.93)

Shaw skillfully turns the old myth upside down. By doing so, he intends to attack Romanticism. Thus, the beautiful romance of Pygmalion and Galatea is turned to be a 'down-to-earth' play: "Romances often deal with deeds of bravery in the pursuit of love and feature Knights, etc. Shaw calls **Pygmalion** a 'romance', but only in the sense that it is far-fetched and unlikely to happen." (13) The dramatist has done all he can to eliminate every Romantic notion from the play. He has driven the audience's anticipations in the wrong direction by using the term 'romance,' and the result was their dissatisfaction with the end of the play. Shaw has also belittled his characters, by adding 'every-day-life' details to his play, such as looking for a taxi on a rainy night, or fetching Higgins' slippers by Eliza. In this respect, he has shocked the audience, who excitedly waited for the union of Higgins and Eliza in marriage, and made them leave their seats wondering why Eliza did not marry Higgins.

Shaw had to clarify to his audience the reason behind Eliza's leaving Higgins and marrying Alfred Eynsford Hill, or Freddy, in his sequel to the play, stating that "an audience need only accept from an author what he has managed to dramatize and place on the stage in front of their eyes." (14) First of all, he clarifies why Higgins does not have an interest in women, when he affirms in his sequel: "When Higgins excused his indifference to young women on the ground that they had an irresistible rival in his mother, he gave the clue to his inveterate old-bachelordom." (p.106) Analyzing this matter psychologically leads to consider Higgins as having an Oedipus Complex. Thus, it is quite true that "[t]he world of romance has no room for heroes who are attached to their mothers in this way." (15) When his mother asks him about Eliza, Higgins answers her: "not at all, I do not mean a love affair." (p.52) This indicates that he rejects love all his life, unlike Pygmalion who sculpted his ideal woman, looking for love. Higgins truly refuses to marry anyone, even a woman of his creation, as he makes clear to his mother:

My idea of a lovable woman is somebody as like you as possible. I shall never get into the way of seriously liking young women: some habits lie too deep to be changed. Besides, they're all idiots. (Ibid.)

Thus, Higgins wants to marry a woman who resembles his mother. He is totally aware that he will never meet such a woman, and the result is to remain a bachelor.

He considers himself the creator of Eliza, and that his creation must submit to him. So, he cannot think of her as a suitable wife. On the other hand, Eliza is a beautiful young girl, and “feels free to pick and choose” (p.106) She does not choose Higgins for certain reasons. She is a clever girl, and she knows the bond between Higgins and his mother, and that “[Eliza] was instinctively aware that she could never obtain a complete grip of him, or come between him and his mother”. (p.107) In this respect, she knows that she does not have to marry a half man, a man who is submissive to another woman, not to her. She knows that she will lose the battle in front of Mrs. Higgins and she will lose another important battle, for “[h]ad Mrs. Higgins died there would still have been Milton and the Universal Alphabet.” (Ibid.)

Eliza decides to marry Freddy, whose family are friends with Mrs. Higgins, and whom Eliza meets, for the first time, on the rainy night at the beginning of the play. Freddy is a young man in his twenties, who plays a minor role in the play. He is a good-hearted man, but looks like a fool. He completely depends on his mother for his living. He falls in love with Eliza, and keeps writing letters to her. Although his family belongs to the gentility, they have some money to spend.

Freddy’s weak personality, his dependent nature, and his love for Eliza, make the latter choose him for a husband, because she knows that, if she marries him, she will be the leader of the household. Freddy, unlike Higgins, will not look upon her with superiority. Instead, she will dominate his life and reshape him. Eliza decides to become a new Pygmalion, and Freddy must fetch the slippers for her, as she once fetched them for Higgins.

Shaw’s play conveys several messages. It indicates that, teaching somebody is quite an important thing, but there should be an opportunity for the taught to live and work after the education. People should not be left in the middle of the way; on the contrary, they need to be shown how to end their way safely. Another important lesson is the concept of equality between men and women. As a supporter of women’s rights, Shaw implies in his play that men and women are equal, and that man and woman complement each other. Higgins has a strong personality, and Eliza, as a woman, has a strong character, too, and she is able to be a new Pygmalion. In addition, Shaw makes clear that the ‘Pygmalion Project’, which means the attempt to reshape the life of a man or a woman, is a difficult task. For

Professor Higgins succeeds as a phonetician, but fails as a man, because he has failed to recognize Eliza as a human being. Interfering with the life of another person is a difficult thing; sometimes it may be a risk. Trying to change the different or contradictory elements in a person's life will lead that person – if he/she is willing to change – to swing between the old and the new state. One may be lose identity on the way, like Eliza, who will neither be a Cockney flower-girl any more, nor live as a 'duchess', nor as a woman of the middle class.

In conclusion, in his play **Pygmalion**, Shaw makes use of the Greek myth of Pygmalion, which he finds in Ovid's **Metamorphoses**, of the beautiful romance between the Greek sculptor and Galatea, but he turns the myth upside down in his distinct style, full of ironic and witty language. His play is an anti-Romantic comedy, whose end shakes the audience's expectations. Pygmalion, the romantic artist and lover of Cyprus in the Greek myth is turned into the rude phonetician, Henry Higgins. The love story of Pygmalion and Galatea, blessed by Venus the goddess of love herself, is transformed into a casual experiment between Higgins and Eliza Doolittle. By turning the myth upside down, Shaw fulfills his aim of belittling his characters by adding some mundane realistic details. Moreover, he finds a good opportunity to attack Romanticism and introduce his own ideas and beliefs. As **Pygmalion** is considered one of Shaw's most popular plays, and as it includes some pleasant and entertaining events, it also presents an important message, that one should not toy with the life of others. Moreover, in this play, Shaw affirms that by only by Art can one attain one's ambitions and be immortalized. So, Pygmalion, or Higgins, or Shaw will be made immortal by their Art.

## NOTES

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10. A. C. Ward, "Introduction," in **Pygmalion** by Bernard Shaw, edited by A.C. Ward, p.128.
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15. Ibid., p. 69.

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