

SATIRE AND COMEDY AS TOOLS FOR CRITIQUE IN THE COMEDY “PYGMALION” BY B. SHOW

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Abstract

This article explores the social issues reflected in Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, a witty yet sharp social commentary wrapped in the form of a comedy. Through its portrayal of class mobility, gender roles, education, and linguistic discrimination, *Pygmalion* challenges Edwardian Britain's rigid societal structure. Shaw combines irony, satire, and the transformation myth to highlight injustices in class-based society and to advocate for progressive change through education and self-awareness.

Keywords: Playwright, comedy, social critic, myth, speech and manners, accent, women’s emancipation.

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw, a Nobel Prize-winning playwright and social critic, used his plays as a platform to confront contemporary social issues. *Pygmalion* (1913) is one of his most famous works, drawing from the Greek myth of Pygmalion, in which a sculptor falls in love with his own creation. Shaw reinvents this myth in a modern British setting, focusing not on romance but on language as a tool for social transformation. Shaw uses the character of Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl, to expose the artificiality of class distinctions and the limitations placed on individuals due to their social origins. The comedy addresses a number of pressing social issues with wit and critical insight.

Methodology

One of the central themes in *Pygmalion* is the rigidity of the British class system. Shaw critiques the idea that one’s birth determines one’s worth and opportunities in life. Professor Henry Higgins’s experiment—to pass off Eliza as a duchess by

teaching her proper English—reveals how class is performative and not innate. “You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days.” Shaw underscores the idea that speech and manners, rather than merit or morality, dictate one’s social position. Eliza’s transformation questions the fairness and logic of such a system, and exposes the fragility of social hierarchies. Language in *Pygmalion* is both a symbol of power and a means of oppression. Shaw illustrates how accents and dialects function as social markers. Eliza’s Cockney accent makes her invisible in the upper-class world, while learning Received Pronunciation opens doors to new opportunities. However, Shaw complicates the notion of transformation. Eliza’s new identity leaves her alienated from both her original and adopted worlds, leading her to ask:

Results

“What is to become of me?” This reveals a deeper issue: superficial change in speech does not equate to true social belonging or personal fulfillment. Shaw criticizes society’s obsession with appearances while neglecting deeper issues of dignity and autonomy. *Pygmalion* also challenges the patriarchal structure of early 20th-century society. Eliza is first treated as a project or experiment by Higgins and Pickering, without regard for her personal agency. She is objectified, trained, and molded into what society expects of a “lady.”

Yet Eliza resists these limitations. Her declaration of independence at the end of the play—refusing to return to Higgins—marks a significant feminist moment. She asserts her right to define herself, not be defined by male authority figures.

“I’m not an ignorant girl and I’m not going to be coaxed and tricked.”

Shaw uses Eliza to express his progressive views on women’s emancipation, suggesting that education and self-respect are essential for genuine empowerment.

Discussion

Education in *Pygmalion* is presented as a potential equalizer, yet Shaw critiques the way it is used merely to reinforce social decorum rather than critical thinking or moral development.

Higgins is the embodiment of the intellectual who values technical mastery over empathy. His lack of emotional intelligence contrasts with Eliza’s emotional and

moral growth. This raises questions about the true purpose of education—whether it should serve society’s power structures or challenge them.

Despite its serious themes, *Pygmalion* is a comedy, and Shaw masterfully uses satire to soften the blow of his social critique. Characters like Alfred Doolittle, Eliza’s father, offer humorous yet insightful commentary on societal hypocrisy. Doolittle’s rise to "middle-class morality" after inheriting money ironically criticizes how society treats the poor with disdain unless they have wealth:

“I was happy. I was free. Now I’m worried about being respectable!”

Through wit and irony, Shaw disarms the audience while making them reconsider deep-seated social norms.

Bernard Shaw masterfully blends **satire and comedy** in *Pygmalion* to expose and critique the entrenched social structures of Edwardian England. While the play is widely celebrated for its humour and wit, beneath the surface lies a potent indictment of classism, sexism, and linguistic prejudice. Shaw's use of **satirical comedy** allows him to deliver his social commentary in a way that is engaging, thought-provoking, and accessible to a broad audience.

One of Shaw’s most significant satirical targets is the British obsession with **social class and respectability**. He mocks the arbitrary nature of class distinctions through Eliza's transformation, which shows that proper speech and manners—not birth or morality—determine one's social acceptance.

“You see this creature with her kerbstone English... the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days.”

The quote reveals how superficial society's evaluation of individuals truly is. Shaw exposes how language becomes a gatekeeping tool, excluding the lower classes regardless of their intelligence or character. The **satirical exaggeration** of Eliza's training mimics a scientist experimenting on a specimen, thus critiquing dehumanizing attitudes of the upper class toward the poor.

Shaw’s comedy arises largely through **exaggerated character types**. Professor Higgins, while brilliant, is emotionally inept and egotistical. His outrageous remarks and obliviousness to Eliza’s feelings render him both humorous and problematic. “You might marry Eliza, young man, but don't you dare try to make a pet of her.” Similarly, Alfred Doolittle is used as a comic vehicle to critique **“middle-class morality.”** His character—a dustman who inadvertently becomes wealthy—ironically highlights how **money, not virtue, dictates societal status**. Doolittle's sardonic observations lampoon the hypocrisies of both the upper and

working classes. “I’m one of the undeserving poor: that’s what I am... I mean to go on being undeserving.” Through Doolittle, Shaw critiques **institutional charity**, which, rather than liberating the poor, imposes unwanted “moral obligations” on them.

While Eliza’s journey is at the heart of the comedy, Shaw satirizes the way men like Higgins and Pickering objectify her. Eliza is treated as a project, an object of transformation, rather than a human being with agency.

“You won my bet. You made me a lady. But what’s to become of me?”

This line encapsulates Shaw’s criticism of **male authority** and the **limited roles available to women**. Comedy and satire are thus not used to belittle Eliza but to empower her voice against condescension and manipulation.

Shaw frequently uses **dramatic irony** to highlight societal absurdities. The audience is in on the joke, especially when upper-class characters take themselves too seriously or fail to see their own contradictions.

- Higgins, a supposed expert in phonetics and human behaviour, is ironically the least socially aware character.
- Mrs. Higgins, his mother, acts as a voice of reason, subtly mocking the childishness of her son and his companion.

The **ending of the play** also subverts traditional romantic comedy tropes. Instead of resolving in marriage, as audiences might expect, Eliza asserts her independence and refuses to return to Higgins. This twist serves as a final satirical blow to both romantic and class conventions.

Conclusion

Shaw’s use of satire and comedy in *Pygmalion* is not simply for entertainment; it is a strategic artistic choice that allows him to critique society while keeping his audience engaged. By laughing at the absurdities of language-based discrimination, rigid class hierarchies, and gender roles, viewers are led to reconsider their own assumptions and values. Comedy becomes a mirror reflecting the flaws of the real world, urging reform without preaching. In this way, *Pygmalion* is both a delightful play and a deeply subversive one.

Pygmalion is more than a romantic comedy—it is a profound exploration of the social injustices embedded in class, language, gender, and education. Shaw’s genius lies in his ability to use humour and theatrical convention to question the

status quo and propose a vision of society that values human dignity over inherited privilege.

The play remains relevant in contemporary discussions about identity, class mobility, and the role of education in social change. Shaw's *Pygmalion* continues to speak to audiences as a timeless reflection of the enduring human struggle for recognition and equality.

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