

Pygmalion Essay
How Does Shaw Use the Ovid Myth and Cinderella Story to Tell a Modern Story?

Ovid wrote his tale of Pygmalion in AD8. It told the story of how the King of Cyprus sculptor, vowed never to marry a woman because in his eyes, they were all flawed. He carved an ivory statue of his ideal woman and it was so beautiful that he fell in love with it. He doted on it and pleaded to Venus, Goddess of Love, to find him a woman just like the statue. One day he returned home to dote on the statue, having returned from the feast of Aphrodite, and before his eyes it transformed into a living woman. He was overjoyed with the love she showed to him. He called her Galatea and together they bore a son called Paphos, whose name is given to the sacred city in Cyprus.

Ovid wrote a collection of poems about love and metamorphosis. Included in these were often stories about tormented lovers and their irrational desires. His Metamorphosis of Galatea shows that he isolates love as the sole agent of change. His poetry is still being read today because people are still interested in the way he expresses fundamental truths about human passions. He demonstrates that love is not subject to the rational laws that govern most of nature and that human behaviour is subjected to extreme irrationality where love is concerned.

Shaw is basing his 1900 play on Ovid's Pygmalion and as a result of this we see many similarities between various characters and plots. Pygmalion shuns all women and dreams of creating a perfect woman. In Ted Hughes' translation of Ovid, it says that Pygmalion was "*shunning living women*". It states that he "*he still dreamed of women, of a perfect woman.*" In Shaw's version, Professor Higgins is the Pygmalion figure. He is a "*confirmed bachelor*" and prior to the transformation, like Pygmalion, has a low opinion of women, believing them to be fundamentally flawed. He has a strong opinion of women and feels that they "they only upset and ruin everything". He says,

"The moment I let myself become friends with a woman, I become selfish and tyrannical."

Higgins would much prefer to get on with his life alone as he feels women are simply "*a damned nuisance.*"

His achievement parallels that of Pygmalion, the sculptor, as he tries to create a real woman from unpromising material. He aims to create the perfect middle class woman out of Eliza, who is a mere common flower girl, just as Pygmalion sculpted his ideal, flawless woman out of ivory. Ted Hughes states in his translation that Pygmalion "*began to sculpt a perfect woman*". Higgins also

creates Eliza's veneer by sculpting and developing her surface. The parallels between Ovid and Shaw's version are that both men are sculpting things that seem unlikely to fulfil their expectations of perfection. However, both the statue and Eliza metamorphose successfully to meet their maker's idea of perfection or in the case of Eliza, society's image of a "lady". Higgins shapes and alters by elocution, re-education and etiquette. He decks Eliza in jewels and expensive clothes for the ambassador's party, where she convinces Nepommuck that she is a genuine princess.

"Eliza dressed in opera cloak, evening dress, diamonds, fans, flowers and all the accessories."

In Ted Hughes translation it says that Pygmalion also bought Galatea gifts, "*he bought her love-gifts and knickknacks*" and "*dressed her in the fashion of the moment*"

Shaw forms the basis of his modernised play on Ovid's play but there are some clear differences between the two. Ovid's classical legend is a love story. Pygmalion falls in love with his creation and marries her whereas Higgins refuses any romantic connection with Eliza and she with him. The striking difference between Pygmalion and Higgins is that Pygmalion creates Galatea, a woman who was supposed to be bound to him forever. However, Eliza learns to become entirely independent of Higgins. In Shaw's version Eliza is the initiator of her transformation. She is unlike Galatea who is solely influenced by Pygmalion and does not change as a result of her own choice. Eliza is an independent woman who herself goes to Higgins home in Winpole street, asking him to teach her phonetics and transform her into society's image of "*a lady*". Eliza's motive for being transformed is to satisfy her own desires. Galatea was as Ted Hughes describes her, "*after all only ivory.*" She had no character and was made real by Aphrodite to satisfy Pygmalion's desire. Pygmalion's motivation that makes him plead to Aphrodite for a woman just like the ivory statue was his desire for love from a perfect woman, that he felt he could not find in reality. However, unlike Pygmalion, Higgins does not transform Eliza for these reasons. Higgins' incentive comes from Pickering's challenge. He takes on the challenge through "arrogance" and "pride" and his desire to win the bet. The bet involves him successfully transforming Eliza from a gutter girl to society's stereotypical image of a lady, "*You shall go to Buckingham palace as a lady.*"

Pygmalion believes that Galatea is perfect, "her perfect figure lay in his studio." However Higgins does not feel this is true about Eliza. Eliza is transformed into society's image of a perfect middle class woman but Higgins believes that a perfect woman is, as he tells his mother, "someone as like you as possible." Even when his mother declares that he, "will never fall in love", he coldly replies, "I can't be bothered with women." Higgins does not want to create his idea of a perfect woman for he doesn't believe that one exists. However, even though he does not believe in the perfect middle class woman, he understands that society does. He strongly opposes the English society's

superficial idiosyncrasies, but the fact that he recognises Pickering's challenge shows us that he does not ignore the fact that these stereotypes exist.

In Ovid's version the focus very much lies on Pygmalion and his fantasies. However Shaw is more interested in Eliza and her rebellious nature rather than in the character of Higgins. This is because through Eliza's character he is able to express his criticisms of the English society, one being the way women tended to be unfairly forced to conform to an ideal.

Eliza's character is a vast contrast to Galatea's. Mrs Higgins accuses Pickering and Higgins of treating Eliza like a "life-sized doll." Higgins frequently disregards Eliza's feelings and when Pickering reminds him that "the girl has feelings", he coldly replies, "I very much doubt that." Galatea readily accepts her makers' desire for her to love him unconditionally and in doing this Pygmalion succeeds in turning his doll into a reality. However, unlike Galatea, Eliza has her own personality and refuses to be a possession to Higgins. Eliza does not satisfy her maker and instead of showing him thanks for his help, she utterly rejects him.

She throws the slippers in his face because she refuses to be a servant or a slipper carrier to him. She does not care for his authoritative ways and his desire to empower women; "she disliked his domineering superiority." This rebellion is the climax in Shaw's play, however in the original myth the climax was the transformation was when Galatea changed from statue to reality. Shaw delays the climax until the rebellion of Eliza so that he could illustrate his views on class, gender and conventional stage romance to the audience. Eliza's determination and independent nature requires her to be in control, and in her rebellion she makes this evident to Higgins,

"I don't care how you treat mebut I won't be passed over."

This is the main reason that she marries Freddie and rejects Higgins. Freddie does not have a very strong personality and Higgins describes him as a "no hopper." Because of this, Eliza can be the domineering master in the marriage. Had she married Higgins she would have had to be a slave to him rather than a wife. In this way it ends up that Freddie resembles Galatea far more than Eliza because they both end up being the submissive partners in the relationship. With Eliza marrying Freddie, there would be, "a lifetime of Freddie fetching hers", referring to slippers, instead of Eliza being the slipper carrier to Higgins had she married him.

Pygmalion is able to dominate Galatea because she has no personality of her own and has been created to meet his ideal. The reason Shaw changes this and portrays Eliza as an independent person is because he downright rejected the notion of the 19th century, that women liked men to dominate them. He felt that it was a romantic cliché and that women's desire should not just be assumed and standardised to meet an ideal. He did not agree with the way society had a tendency to treat women as inferiors and believed that all people should be treated equally.

In Ovid and Cinderella there are no particular moments that indicate views about class. However Shaw changes this so that many different social classes are represented and there are various incidents that express Shaw's views on class-consciousness. In Shaw's Pygmalion, money is linked to social position in each case and Eliza is at first among the lowest of the lowest on a social scale. Both Eliza and her father, Mr Doolittle become disclassed in Shaw's play. After the transformation, Eliza feels that she cannot possibly go back to the way she used to live,

"You know I can't go back to the gutter."

However, she knows that she will never fully fit in with the upper class because of her poverty-stricken background.

Mr Doolittle, Eliza's father was also disclassed. When he received some money he was immediately accepted into the middle class, having once been a man with no social respect whatsoever. The main reason that Shaw alters the original myth is to express his condemnation of the English society. Shaw, being a social reformer, felt that the English society was inherently unfair. He believed that society was riddled with problems due to their class-consciousness. By showing how quickly Eliza and Doolittle were excepted into the middle class, he is displaying the superficiality of society. Without money and the right appearance, Eliza and her father were disregarded and shown no recognition. But at the first sign of money and an appropriate accent, society is quick to change their mind and allow them to step up to the next level of the social scale. This shows how frivolous the 19th century English society were and is Shaw's way of preaching his views.

Shaw purposely writes about how Freddie, coming from a prestigious middle class family, becomes a shopkeeper. In the 19th century it would have been virtually unheard of for a man to disgrace his family's name in this way. By Freddie doing this he would have also quite possibly ruined Clara's matrimonial chances. However, Clara herself undergoes a radical change and shockingly, she too begins work as a shopkeeper for one of her political friends. By doing this she does not make Freddie's job look so disgraceful. Clara's spontaneous change of heart regarding class is Shaw's way of telling the audience to be less judgmental.

Eliza's refuses the offer for her and Freddie to live at Winpole Street because it would essentially mean that they would be living off somebody else. From the very beginning, Eliza's objective was to become independent and respected. She decided to take Higgins offer, not because she thought money was involved, but because she genuinely believed that Higgin's could make her a "somebody."

Higgins, to a certain degree is a mouthpiece for Shaw and stands for many of his beliefs. Shaw does not believe that society should be in any way judgmental. This view is also shared by Higgins, whose talent in phonetics enables him to change the way people are treated by society. The fact that he transforms Eliza into a princess and helps her to successfully convince

Nepomuk that she is authentic, is a way of making a mockery of society's shallowness. Through the successful transformation, Shaw is able to illustrate just how ignorant and easily fooled society can be as a result of their class-consciousness. He believes society has false standards and rejects class discrimination at all levels.

Pygmalion believes that Galatea is perfect, "*her perfect figure lay in his studio.*" However Higgins does not feel this is true about Eliza. Eliza is transformed into society's image of a perfect woman, Higgins believes that a perfect woman is, as he tells his mother, "*someone as like you as possible.*" As we read Shaw's version of Pygmalion we not only see similarities to Ovid's myth, but also to the fairy-tale, Cinderella.

Like Eliza, Cinderella is transformed so that she is fit for a ball. Eliza is transformed from a common flower girl into a princess. Both Cinderella and Eliza go to the ball in their new guises. Eliza goes to the ambassador's party and Cinderella to the Prince's ball. Both Eliza's and Cinderella's metamorphosis occur from the help of their makers. Higgins acts like the fairy Godmother that transforms Cinderella from wearing rags to riches. Once at the ball, Cinderella loses her slipper in the panic of the twelfth hour. Eliza too loses her slipper when she throws it into the face of Higgins. Prior to the transformation both girls had experienced hardships. Cinderella was subjected to abuse and torment from her stepfamily and Eliza lived in poverty, also with an unloving family. Cinderella's stepmother despised her and Eliza's own father attempted to sell her for £5 to Higgins, showing the obvious neglect of his daughter.

Yet although we evidently see elements of the Cinderella myth in Shaw's play, Shaw makes some obvious alterations. The character of the prince in Cinderella resembles Higgins. In Cinderella, the Prince is her saviour. He rescues her from a life of hardship and from a family who clearly resent her. It is by Higgins teaching Eliza the art of phonetics and by allowing her into his home, that essentially enables Eliza to better her position in society and lead a better quality of life. With Higgins' help she is accepted into the middle class and even she admits that she could never go back to the way she used to live. As a result of the transformation, she goes from being a flower girl in the dirty streets of Covent Garden to owning her own flower shop with Freddie, thus proving that without the help of Higgins she would never have bettered her life. However, unlike in Cinderella, Shaw does not allow Eliza to **marry** her Prince. Eliza and Higgins are destined not to be together and through Eliza's refusal to marry Higgins, Shaw is able to put his views across about the inequality of women in the English society. Higgins' aim is to transform Eliza into a middle class "lady". In the process of this transformation he creates a more feminine Eliza. Femininity was one of the requirements of a respectable lady in the 19th century and Shaw did not agree with this. Eliza's new-found femininity is yet another way of Shaw criticising the way society pressured women to conform to a stereotype.

The story of Cinderella is a fairy tale. However, the main point of Shaw's play is to preach the criticisms of the English society and to point out to society that however much people coax themselves into thinking that their society is idyllic, life is simple **not** a fairy-tale. This is one of the reasons that Shaw

changes the sugar sweet ending seen in the stories of Cinderella and Ovid's Pygmalion- in order to force the audience to see the reality of their unfair society. Cinderella is swept off her feet by a charming, handsome prince and coincidentally claims to live, "happily ever after." However he believed that this was not reality and he wanted to tell a realistic story, a story not of romance, but of poverty and hardships. If anything Shaw's play is studiously unromantic. He desperately wanted a degree of reality to be employed in his play and this is one of the reasons that we see Eliza struggling with her business and having to be constantly bailed out of financial trouble by Pickering. She does not receive any money from her father and has to go to polytechnic classes in order to improve her book keeping skills. He tries to ensure that the message about the 19th century English society being inequitable is clearly expressed to the audience.

With the influence of tales such as Ovid's Pygmalion and Cinderella, Shaw manages to produce a captivating and modernised play. His version of Pygmalion still contains the basic messages and controversies of both tales but also thoroughly illustrates Shaw's strong views regarding the English society.