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Sculpting Theatre, Sculpting Self: The Construction of Form and Identity in George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion"

George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" was received with controversy when first produced in 1914 due to the ambiguity of its ending and Shaw's refusal to play to audience expectations (Gainor 406). However, Shaw's innovative staging and ambivalence toward convention are largely responsible for the play's enduring popularity. By withholding the expected climactic scenes (such as Eliza's training or the ball), he forces his audience to focus on the relationships, ethical dilemmas, and questions of identity within the play. Moreover, the exclusion of key events makes the audience aware of the workings of the play itself, as when the audience must notice the actor playing Eliza transition abruptly from a lower-class accent to an upper-class accent. We might draw connections, then, between the visible workings of theatrical form and the obvious creation of social roles. In other words, human performance on a day-to-day level is revealed through Eliza, whom we would not view in the same way if it were not for Shaw's omissions. This suggests that Shaw's seemingly faulty construction of plot mirrors the inherent flaws in self-identity, as identity is socially constructed, mutable, and thus filled with contradiction.

The play's first large shift in time occurs between Act 2 and Act 3. When Higgins informs his mother that she need not worry about Eliza's arrival because he has "taught her to speak properly" (435), we are immediately aware that the anticipated scenes pertaining to Eliza's speech lessons are missing. In terms of conventional plot development, it would seem logical for the language lessons to act as one of the play's main trials; we would then see Eliza challenged and ultimately triumphant, in preparation for the other assumed climax, the ball. Instead, we see Eliza put to a more subtle test—that of social acceptance. The play seems to suggest that speech and outward appearance are simple and that social awareness and decorum are the real challenges. Thus, Eliza's elocution training is of little importance when compared with the true cultural lessons she must learn.

The non-existent ball scene is probably the most shocking of excluded events. Until the jump in time to Act 4, the characters seem entirely preoccupied by their anticipation of the ball. Thus, Shaw plays a trick on his audience: he builds up our expectations for the climax and surprises us instead with an anticlimax. But to assume that the ball will be Eliza's greatest challenge is to make the same mistake that Higgins and Pickering make: it ignores Eliza's true emotional depth. By omitting the ball scene, Shaw allows his audience to see Eliza as a person rather than a wondrous trick or object. Indeed, if Shaw were to include the ball scene, his audience might view

Eliza in terms of her impressive capability rather than focus on her motivations or the aftermath of such an event. Since we can only infer that the ball occurs in the middle of the play, the most important struggle becomes that between Eliza and Higgins after she proves herself a duchess. This omission, then, denies us the fairy tale romance and instead invites dialogue on the possible consequences of vast social change. By subverting her previously fixed classification as a flower seller, Eliza embodies the human capacity to shift between different social roles.

This focus on the blurring between class positions brings us to the question of identity construction and how it functions within the play. As discussed, Shaw's exclusions adjust our focus from the plot to the characters. However, the omission of key scenes also works on a metatheatrical level: if the actor playing Eliza jumps straight from one dialect (cockney) to another (upper-class English) without revealing the process in between, the audience must marvel more at the actor's skill than at Eliza's miraculous transformation. Thus, we are made aware of role-playing both as a piece of theatre and because the characters represent real people playing social roles. In this sense, the contradictory scene progression—that is, contrary to our expectations—subtly enlightens us on questions of identity and identity formation.

Certainly identity is a combination of both unconscious enculturation and our own conscious creation of self. Yet, as Act 3 shows us, how we are perceived by others is an equally important part of the equation. Thus, Higgins cannot “[invent] new Elizas” (441), but merely act as catalyst in her transformation, which is even then not a true transformation until acknowledged by others. This matter is doubly complicated by the fact that a single person can have multiple identities in relation to other people. While Clara and Freddy Eynsford Hill might take Eliza's odd behaviour as trendsetting, Mrs. Higgins's knowledge of Eliza's past taints her opinion of the girl:

HIGGINS: [eagerly] Well? Is Eliza presentable? ...

MRS. HIGGINS: You silly boy, of course shes not presentable. Shes a triumph of her art and of her dressmaker's; but if you suppose for a moment that she doesnt give herself away in every sentence she utters, you must be perfectly cracked about her¹ (440).

Thus, Eliza appears to be two completely different people at once: she is both an aristocrat and an unfortunate flower girl. Eliza remains unaware of her own dual identity in this scene, since she cannot know how the other guests perceive her.

Mrs. Higgins fails to recognize that Eliza's presentability or lack thereof relies on the self-perceived status of those around her. In other words, the Eynsford Hills' self-depreciation results in their acceptance of Eliza's higher status. In Clara's case, anxiety about her own social position makes her susceptible to manipulation. Shaw describes her as having the “the bravado of genteel poverty” (435), and rather than viewing Eliza's speech as lacking decorum she becomes

determined to update her own language. Indeed, when Eliza almost gives herself away by using the word “bloody” (439), Clara quickly defends her: “[o]h, it’s all right, mamma, quite right. People will think we never go anywhere or see anybody if you are so old-fashioned” (439).

Mrs. Higgins’s earlier quoted line is contradicted once more: Eliza’s “dressmaker” (440) does make a difference to identity. Eliza’s clothing, confidence, and body language all speak for themselves. In fact, Eliza’s speech says far more than she intends it to. When she regales the other guests with the story of how her relations “done her [aunt] in” (438), she means it literally; her accent and perceived status, however, say something quite different. Whenever Eliza says the wrong thing (by social standards), she charms and amuses the Eynsford Hills. Eliza speaks her assumed social status into existence, and yet, despite the importance of speech, her words retain semantic ambiguity. Even Eliza, who believes herself in control of her own language, is unaware of the multitudinous meanings of her words. Indeed, her words alone carry no consequence in the deception. The other guests read every sign except her words in order to determine her social status; her words are then interpreted in relation to her deemed social ranking.

The possible interpretations for performativity are vast. Essentially, Eliza’s self-performance reifies her social status. Yet, this can only be true for those who are unaware of her personal-historical context. Higgins, for example, regards Eliza as a beggar in costume despite real changes in her knowledge and maturity, simply because he witnessed her full transformation. Painfully aware of her liminal social position, Eliza remains trapped between old and new self: neither “guttersnipe” (420) nor duchess, she must negotiate her own social role in a world that seems largely unwelcoming to someone of uncertain social status. If aristocratic society frowns upon “new money,” how might they treat a person who possesses the manners and education of a lady without even the justification of wealth? Moreover, as a woman, Eliza is at a gross disadvantage. It would be improper for her to live in a house with Higgins and Pickering, but it would also be improper for her to live alone and work to support herself. Indeed, marriage seems to be her only option. In a moment of anger, Eliza says, “I sold flowers. I didnt sell myself. Now youve made a lady of me I’m not fit to sell anything else” (447). This is a moment of great insight: with social status comes the commodification of sex through the guise of marriage. Before her transformation, she retained economic and physical independence—two things that are no longer available to her.

So who, then, creates Eliza? “Pygmalion” shows us that multiple variables create a person’s identity. More intriguingly, it shows us that identity itself is slippery: it can be broken down, recreated, misread, and widely interpreted. Eliza creates her own definition of identity when she says, “the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how shes treated” (455). But this statement also seems reductive. To say that outside perception alone shapes identity is to ignore the play’s ending. Eliza only gains Higgins’s respect after proving

that she can think and act for herself, without the prompting of others. How, then, can we define identity? While Shaw chooses not to give us simple answers to such questions, he clearly means to incite discussion on the topic. He structures the play so that these questions must be brought to our attention: from temporal gaps in the plot to the metatheatrical commentary on role-playing, “Pygmalion” prompts us to reconsider our assumptions of the characters, the actors, ourselves, and human identity in general.

Works Cited

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