

Text

Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw Part-1

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on 26 July 1856, in a family of three children. His father, George Carr Shaw, was a drunkard and a drifter, and his mother was a talented opera singer. Bernard Shaw drifted from one job to another, till in April 1876, he left for London. There, the musical skill he had acquired from his mother helped him, as he took up the job of a music critic on 'The Star'. Later on, he also began writing essays for 'The Saturday Review'.

After settling in London, Bernard Shaw found it very difficult to live by writing, in the first ten years. Shaw's first forays into creative literary works were not in the form of plays, but as novels. Between 1879 and 1883, he wrote five unsuccessful and, and quite amateurish novels. His first play, *Widowers' Houses*, which he completed in 1892, was also unsuccessful.

From 1905, when *Man and Superman*, was first performed, he began to be considered as the world's most famous living playwright, though he long remained unpopular with those who disliked his advanced views and his wish to reform the society. Nevertheless, it was at length widely recognised that he stood second only to Shakespeare among British playwrights, and his writings were known and valued in all countries long before he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1925.

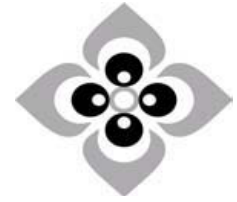
In a career spanning over 60 years, he wrote some fifty odd plays. *Back to Methuselah*, written in 1922, is considered by himself as his masterpiece, whereas, most critics rate *Man and Superman* (1902-3), *St. Joan* (1923), and *The Devil's Disciple* (1897) as his best. *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Fanny's* first play (1911), and *Pygmalion* (1912) are his most humorous plays.

'*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*', written in 1894 is another important play of Shaw's. The influence of Ibsen, Socialism and music can be found in Shaw's plays.

Shaw died in 1950, having produced his last important play, *The Apple Cart*, some twenty years previously, in 1929. *Pygmalion*, published in 1912, is one of his most important plays.

Summary

Mr. Higgins, a professor of phonetics, is seen making notes of a flower girl's speech. He remarks to Colonel Pickering, an expert on Sanskrit, whom he



encounters there, that he can improve the speech of the girl.

The flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, arrives at Higgins' house the next day, to learn proper spoken English in order to run a flower shop. Higgins challenges Pickering that he would make a duchess out of the girl in six months, to which Pickering replies that he would then bear all expenditure of the education of the girl. Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, a dustman, sells his daughter off to Higgins. Eliza's first lesson in cleanliness begins when she is scrubbed clean by the housekeeper.

A tough taskmaster, Higgins begins training Eliza in accent and pronunciation. Although finding the training difficult initially, Eliza is a quick learner and soon can speak in a refined way. She also has a good memory and can replicate not just other human voices, but also music, which she plays well on the piano. She becomes indispensable around the house, and to Higgins.

Eliza is taken to Mrs. Higgins house, after three months to test her learning. She gives a pretty good performance and Freddy Hill falls in love with her.

At the end of the six month period, Eliza is presented at a party, where everyone regards her as a princess. Eliza is happy and expects complements from Higgins. His feelings, however, are of relief at the experiment being over. Eliza is angry. At the moment when Higgins shouts for his slippers, she throws them and the jewellery he had given her and walks out of the house, meets Freddy and then goes to Mrs. Higgins's house.

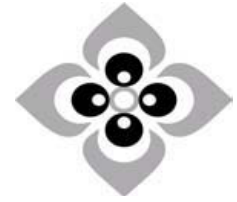
Meanwhile, Alfred Doolittle is unhappy at his restrained life due to becoming rich for his moralising. Eliza accuses Higgins of not treating her with kindness, and leaving her adrift.

The rest of the story, narrated in a postscript, is about how Eliza runs a flower shop with Freddy (whom she marries) that she finally manages well, how she also learns to write beautifully and also how she looks after Freddy as well as the two bachelors.

Importance of Sequel

The original play of Pygmalion ends with the fifth act, where Eliza declares her intention of marrying Freddy Hill and Higgins laughs it off as ridiculous. This ending was understood by some as indicative of a future marriage between Higgins and Eliza. This prompted Shaw to write a prose sequel to the play.

This sequel not just explains the reasons for the ending, but also further narrates the doings of the characters. Shaw says that explanation would have not been necessary if not for romances that make people believe that the characters marry at the end. Shaw explains that Higgins spends almost all his time in studying the



subject he is genuinely interested in and has no other interest in life. His lack of interest in women stems from another cause. He has as a role model, his mother, who is a paragon of dignity and virtue. His Oedipal complex makes it impossible for him to marry anyone. Eliza, who understands that Higgins is above the charms of women, decides to marry Freddy. Shaw explains that the marriage between a strong character such as Eliza and a weak character such as Freddy might seem incongruous, but Freddy was a gentleman, which was all Eliza wanted. Eliza preferred a mild mannered husband to a roaring tyrant like Higgins.

Eliza and Freddy, who marry, are penniless for some time, before being helped by Pickering. While this money too runs out, they start to live in Higgins' residence. Finally, they keep a flower shop, which, after a few days of deficit, began to run well. Eliza loved her husband, but was great friends with Higgins and Pickering all her life, even bullying Higgins.

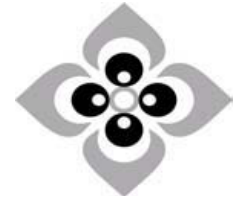
Shaw thought that writing the sequel was necessary to avoid unnecessary interpretations. But critics are of the opinion that the sequel is unnecessary. The prose nature of the sequel is problematic, in the context of the play. Also, instead of leaving some things to the imagination of the audience/reader, Shaw explains every thing. This is considered as undesirable.

Structure

Shaw gives *Pygmalion* a unique structure. The standard Victorian structure of plays consisted of Exposition, Situation and Unravelling. However, under the influence of Ibsen, Shaw does away with this and replaces it with Exposition, Situation and Discussion. Thus, there are three well-marked stages of plot development.

'Exposition' is a process of putting forward of events; something like an introduction. This is the stage where the principal characters are introduced. This happens in Act I and II. Higgins, the professor of phonetics is introduced, while doing his job, i.e. studying accents. The readers get their first glimpse of Eliza, the child-like and uncultured flower girl. The central challenge of the play is also made in this section. Higgins challenges Pickering that he would make a duchess out of Eliza in six months. By the end of Act II, Eliza has started her education.

The Second stage of 'Situation' can be found in Act III where the results of Eliza's education are presented. Eliza's training is tested in two 'situations', i.e. Mrs. Higgins' house and the ambassador's party. Her education is not quite complete by the time she goes to Mrs. Higgins' house; she seems artificial. But she fulfils the expectations of her mentor at the ambassador's party because she no longer wears a mask, but has become a refined person.



The Third Stage of 'Discussion' is in Act IV and V. In this stage, there is introspection on the part of the characters. The grand event is over, only discussion on its repercussions is to be made. Eliza realises that her education has made her into a different person, unable to carry on with her new life. She walks out of Higgins' house, as she feels she needs to be given more respect. Later, she has a discussion with Higgins regarding her status. But as Higgins continues to think of her as a successful experiment, Eliza decides to marry Freddy. The explanation by Shaw says she continues to be on good terms with Higgins and the Professor.

We can thus see the division of the play into exposition, situation and discussion.

Characters

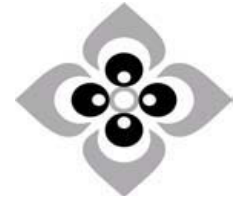
Higgins: The main character, or rather the hero, of the play is Professor Henry Higgins, a phonetics expert. He is based largely on the real-life character, Prof. Henry Sweet. A rather complex character, he is a combination of contrasting qualities—self-confident, but boastful; shrewd, but impractical; vain, but not envious; imaginative, but sublimely unconscious of his deeds; child-like, yet consistent; a cynic, yet Freddy; not an idealist, yet firm and sincere; temperamental, but not devoid of humanity; boastful, yet brave, thus, being beyond the comprehension of the other characters, at least initially. His wit also comes through in the novel

He considers almost everything from the perspective of his work, including Eliza, on whom he is dependent. He suffers from Oedipus complex and remains a bachelor to the end.

Colonel Pickering: He is to Professor Higgins, what Dr. Watson is to Sherlock Holmes. Generous, principled, cultured, mild, sociable, he acts as a perfect foil to Higgins. Shaw tried to present through him the traditional English man—honest, slightly stupid, yet, amiable. Eliza emulates him in terms of manners.

Eliza: As Higgins is a take-off on Pygmalion, Eliza is comparable to 'Cinderella.' Crude, vulnerable and unromantic before the conversion, she changes into a highly intellectual and charming, yet defiant figure. She is an independent and complex character. She is modest, yet a show-off; pathetic, yet a comic figure. Her achievements as a student show her talent. Her dignity is hurt when she realises that Higgins considered her just as a project, and not a person. She promptly leaves.

Alfred Doolittle: He serves as a mouth-piece to Shaw and is a comic figure. A blackmailer, undeserving poor; he has a windfall late in his life. This highly improbable event occurs due to his gift of the gab, and this 'original moralist' is set off on a career in public speaking. His role in the play is essential for Shaw to



show his hostility towards middle-class morality. A man of the world, in every sense of the word, he serves as a satire on the nouveau rich.

Freddy, a weak character and his family and Mrs. Higgins are also important.

Title

George Bernard Shaw takes the title of his play from the ancient Greek legend of Pygmalion. According to this legend, Pygmalion was the king of Cyprus who falls in love with the statue of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Shaw's direct inspiration, however, is Ovid's redoing of the myth in *Metamorphosis*. Here, Pygmalion is a Greek sculptor who shows no interest towards women. But he falls in love with Galatea, a beautiful statue that he creates. He pines away for the stone sculpture and prays to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to make his statue come to life. The goddess takes pity on him and transforms Galatea into a living woman. Pygmalion and Galatea marry and have a happy life. Ovid's interpretation of Pygmalion has been the subject of many literary works, Shaw's play no exception.

In the play *Pygmalion*, Professor Higgins is Pygmalion. By portraying Higgins in this manner, Shaw seems to suggest that Higgins' moulding of Eliza from a flower girl to a duchess is nothing short of moulding a sculpture. Eliza, then, is Galatea. But the similarity between the myth and the play ends here. Shaw does not follow the myth by getting Higgins and Eliza married. It is true that they are the protagonists of the play, but that does not make them lovers. The author deliberately debunks the myth by not making Higgins fall in love with Eliza. In fact, Higgins is portrayed as being indifferent to Eliza's feelings. Also, unlike the myth, Galatea is not a mute statue without any feelings of her own. Eliza has an independent mind and self-respect and uses these to walk out of the house.

Developing a love angle between Higgins and Eliza would have been the romantic way of writing the play. The myth is romantic, and so would have been the interpretation of the play, but Shaw, being an anti-romantic, differed in his account of the myth. He went out of his way to show that the myth would not work in the present context.
