

Your Name

Instructor Name

Course Number

Date

### *Pygmalion's Unfair Sequel*

*Pygmalion* is a hard criticism of a society that values money and social status the most. In *Pygmalion*, Eliza is a character that symbolizes that one cannot merely learn to act in ways that commiserate with the standards of an acceptable social status. Still, one has to acquire wealth to be truly respected. The 1964 film titled, *My Fair Lady* departs from Shaw's script to make the story acquire the form of a romantic musical instead of a social commentary (Bauschatz). This change does not appear to align with Shaw's play and the aims of the original piece. The original piece was created to highlight the hypocrisy of a society that appears to value etiquette but, in fact, only respects money and monetary gain. Bernard Shaw has conceptualized a story that goes deep into the human psyche and allows the audience to be perturbed as they question the true nature of "nobility." *My Fair Lady* does not convey the same messages that Bernard Shaw does, despite the storyline remaining mostly the same (Bauschatz). The film portrays the original story in a way that becomes more palatable and less disturbing for the audience, taking away from the effect of Shaw's work.

*Pygmalion* presents Eliza as the perfect example of a woman who exists on the fringes of society. She does not belong to a respected status and can barely scrape a living as she tries to sell flowers on the street. She has been deprived of the education and literacy that her society claims to prize. When the characters Higgins and Pickering wager that they can pass Eliza off as a duchess by training her to speak like an affluent young lady of the high London society, she

becomes interested because she aspires to hold a more respectful place in society (Shaw). Her ambitions of establishing a flower shop instead of being a flower girl lead her to become a part of the wager that involves an experiment. During the experiment, Eliza learns to behave as a high society woman. She knows to dress the part of such a woman, speak like her, and eat like a woman of such stature. The end of the designated time period sees the wager become successful. This success speaks volumes about how Eliza's society has associated certain "genteel" manners with literacy (Bauschatz). If someone were to internalize the manners, they would be accepted by society, no matter how morally depraved they remained from the inside.

*My Fair Lady* fails to establish such a connection when Eliza's father is portrayed as a man who wants to do little and acquire the most he can, regardless of the means he adopts to do so. In the story, he does not express a desire to be affluent as he believes too much riches can make one callous. This trait of Doolittle's character serves as a foreshadow of Eliza and Higgin's characters. Higgins looks down upon Doolittle and Eliza because he thinks he can elevate them to a higher social status than they currently possess (Bauschatz). He mistreats Eliza throughout the period of six months, during which the experiment continues because he does not respect her as a human being and considers her to be an object. Eliza, to him, is not a person with complicated human emotions. He takes pleasure in humiliating her. This behavior, in part, is due to the fact that he has met her father. To his surprise, the father agrees to receive five pounds as compensation for her daughter. Doolittle's character is morally questionable but not deprived as he is seen from Higgin's eyes. In *My Fair Lady*, such nuances of Doolittle's character have been eliminated (Bauschatz). He is a one-dimensional character who wishes to acquire as much money as he can. The oversimplification of the character takes away from the complexity of the storyline and does not let Shaw's complicated social commentary shine through.

In *My Fair Lady*, the ending has been altered to have Eliza and Higgins reconcile, while no reconciliation takes place at the end of *Pygmalion*. When Eliza understands that Higgins and Pickering are no longer interested in her, but she is left to her own devices after she has been used as the object of an experiment, she becomes frustrated. The frustration is of the essence, as the ire between her and Higgins represents a class divide that can never be bridged. Higgin's character in Shaw's story is supposed to be callous and careless towards those of lower social stature than he is (Bauschatz). He has been conditioned to expect gratitude from Eliza for his generosity, which has taught her all the etiquette she needed to be accepted into the most affluent of society. He remains ignorant of the fact that Eliza does not have anything other than the etiquette that she has acquired. The etiquettes have not provided her with a change in fortune she had been looking for. She cannot return to her life on the streets because she is too polished for such a society. She can also not acquire the status she now seems to represent because she does not own the wealth needed to retain such a status (Ray). Higgins' role as someone who remains callous highlights the gap between the rich and the poor that cannot be bridged by learning etiquettes.

The reconciliation depicted in the film does not retain the complexity that comes with Shaw's narrative of a lack of reconciliation. In the universe Shaw has depicted, Eliza and Higgins are not supposed to reconcile because they belong to two different parts of that world. The fact that the film has romanticized the ending speaks volumes about the message that the film conveys and the message George Bernard Shaw wanted to convey (Ray). For him, the story is more than a collection of moments that chronicle Eliza's experiences of being the object of an experiment. To Higgins, Eliza needs to remain an object if the story is to retain its role as a social commentary highlighting the class divide. Just as *Doolittle* does not need to be oversimplified,

Higgins and Eliza do not need to reconcile (Ray). Although *My Fair Lady* claims to be an adaptation of Shaw's work, the story seems to have a different impact and appears to cater to different subject matters altogether.

To conclude, the depiction of *My Fair Lady* in the film seems to have been purposely altered to make it more palatable and less disturbing for the audience, taking away from the effect of Shaw's work. Though, it is a romantic musical that uses the same characters but takes a different route, it oversimplifies Doolittle's character. The decision to do so results in the story becoming less intricate because the nuances in Doolittle's character are to serve as a point of reference for Higgins and Eliza. The fact that he reluctantly becomes the owner of a fortune is supposed to present the irony of the play's events: Eliza has learned to appear rich, but she has not acquired wealth. On the other hand, her father can afford a fortune despite being the same dustman he had been when the play began. In addition, the reconciliation between Higgins and Eliza has also made the story lose the depth it had attained as a social commentary.

Works Cited

Bauschatz, Paul. *The uneasy evolution of "My Fair Lady" from "Pygmalion."* 2021, p. 19.

Ray, Marcie. "My Fair Lady: A Voice for Change." *American Music*, vol. 32, no. 3, University of Illinois Press, 2014, pp. 292–316. *JSTOR*,  
<https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.32.3.0292>.

Shaw, Bernard. *Pygmalion*. Prabhat Prakashan, 2021.